

A BRIEF HISTORY of THE RICHARDSON HISTORICAL & GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

From 1970 to 2022

By Steven R. Butler, Ph.D.

The roots of the Richardson Historical & Genealogical Society can be traced to a remark made by J. W. Campbell, Jr., a descendant of two pioneer Richardson-area families—the Campbells and the Rouths—in January 1957, at a local Rotary Club meeting: “We need to organize a Richardson Historical Society to conserve memories, documents and other data of bygone days.”¹ Later that same year, *The Richardson Echo* reported that Mrs. E. L. Roberts, a Huffines family descendant who was “interested in the historical material being shared with our readers,” was invited by some of the town’s “old-timers” to “visit their homes soon to enable many historical clippings, letters and other keepsakes to be resurrected and made available to a Richardson Historical Association.” The next step, opined *The Echo*, is for “some good friend to present a building wherein historical material can be adequately kept preserved and available for viewing.”²

Whether or not Mrs. Roberts ever accepted the invitations she received, no local historical society was formed in the 1950s, nor in the 1960s either, even though in 1963, a “good friend,” Mr. Cliff Cassidy, offered a two-story late-nineteenth century home on S. Sherman Street to “house the museum of a proposed Richardson Historical Assn.”³ Used throughout the 1950s as an antique store, in 1979 the house, known today as “Miss Belle’s Place,” was finally donated by its then-owners, Jean and Arthur Lowe, not to the historical society, but rather to the City of Richardson, which removed it from its original location at the corner of Kaufman and Sherman streets and moved it to Owens Spring Creek Farm, where it remained until 2021. In 2022, the Richardson City Council voted to place it permanently in Huffines Park.

For reasons that have been lost to history, it was not until slightly more than thirteen years after Mr. Campbell spoke about the need for a group to preserve the area’s history, that concrete steps were finally taken to form a Richardson Historical Society.

¹ *Richardson Echo* (hereafter *RE*), February 2, 1957.

² *RE*, December 5, 1957.

³ *RE*, November 13, 1963.

In 1970, inspired by stories that he heard Richardson “old-timers” tell, and worried that the city’s early history might be lost, longtime resident Clifford Huffhines, descendant of another pioneer family, took steps to turn the long-discussed idea of a local historical society into reality.⁴ After enlisting the help of J. W. Campbell, Jr. and other interested parties, a meeting for the purpose of forming a historical society was held on Sunday, March 1, 1970, in the auditorium of the old red brick school on Greenville Avenue. Approximately 300 persons attended, including Richardson Mayor Raymond Noah and R.I.S.D. Superintendent J. J. Pearce, both of who addressed the gathering. The Richardson High School Choir provided entertainment.⁵

The meeting, at which a great deal of interest was expressed, was a success. Nearly everyone in attendance was enrolled as a charter member of the society and a steering committee consisting of Clifford Huffhines, J. W. Campbell, Jr., Lee Halford, Mrs. W. H. Kendall, Barbara Braithwaite, Mrs. George Murphy, and Mrs. V. K. Vance was formed.⁶

A follow-up meeting, at which a constitution and bylaws were adopted and officers elected, along with a board of directors, was held on Sunday, April 12, 1970, in the chapel of the First Baptist Church. At this meeting, Clifford Huffhines was chosen Chairman of the Board with J. W. Campbell, Jr., President. Other officers included: Lee Halford, Vice-President; Barbara Braithwaite, Executive Secretary; Roy Chick, Treasurer, and Mrs. Billye Meyer, temporary Assistant Treasurer—all to serve for a three-year term. Seven committee chairmen or chairwomen were also chosen.⁷

The purpose of the society, as set forth in its bylaws, was: “To discover and collect any material which may help to establish or illustrate the history of the Richardson area, its exploration, settlement, development and activities, and material objects illustrative of life, conditions, events and activities of the past and present in Richardson.”⁸

Membership dues were also established: \$10 for students (soon after changed to only \$1), \$3 for other single persons, \$5 for a couple, \$10 for a family, \$15 for clubs,

⁴ Gwyn Gillespie, *Historic Richardson: An Illustrated History* (Historical Publishing Network, 2002), 51.

⁵ *Richardson Daily News* (hereafter *RDN*), February 18 & 25 and March 1, 1970.

⁶ *RDN*, March 18, 1970.

⁷ *RDN*, April 15, 1970.

⁸ *Ibid.*

and \$25 for businesses. Lifetime membership was available for anyone willing to pay \$100 up front.⁹

One of the first groups to show tangible support for the historical society was Girl Scout Troop 922, which donated copies of Richardson's 1873 dedication and an 1878 map. The girls also donated family history stories.¹⁰

During its first year-and-a-half of existence, the principal activities of the Richardson Historical Society consisted primarily of holding regular monthly meetings and also soliciting the donation of photographs and other historical materials, an endeavor that enjoyed some success. The society was also successful in persuading the Richardson Chamber of Commerce to plan and coordinate the city's centennial celebration events to take place in 1973.¹¹

In 1971, the group decided to try something a little different by offering citizens a two-hour bus tour of historical sites in Richardson on Sunday, October 10. From all accounts, the tour, which was guided by J. W. Campbell and included stops at "Miss Catherine Coit's teacherage, Spring Creek Baptist Church, Big Spring Baptist Church Cemetery, and the stage coach stop, blacksmith shop and post office of old Breckenridge," was enjoyed by all sixty-three people (including the Mayor of Richardson) who participated.¹²

In 1973, the Richardson Historical Society helped celebrate the city's one-hundredth birthday by publishing a hardcover book, *A History of Richardson*, a team effort coordinated by Barbara Braithwaite, which was made possible by the sponsorship of several local businesses. The group also participated in the Centennial Parade, which took place in old downtown Richardson on June 26, 1973, the city's official birthday.

In the immediate wake of the Centennial, the Richardson Historical Society continued to hold regular monthly meetings, usually at 3 p.m. on a Sunday, at which regular business was conducted and an invited speaker gave a presentation. The group also got a new president, Raymond Floyd, descendant of yet another Richardson area pioneer family, who served until 1976. Under his leadership, the R.H.S. undertook to restore the old Campbell homestead at 406 W. Campbell Road and also sponsor a Texas Historical Commission marker at the Floyd Pioneer

⁹ Ibid.; *RDN*, April 19, 1970.

¹⁰ *RDN*, April 21, 1970.

¹¹ *RDN*, November 9, 1971.

¹² *RDN*, October 12 & 13, 1970.

Cemetery, located on the grounds of Restland Memorial Park. In 1976, the R.H.S. took part in the city's American Bicentennial celebrations. The following year, attorney Wade Campbell, another pioneer family descendant, began a three-year-term as president of the society.

From 1980 to 1983, under the leadership of President Barbara Braithwaite, the R.H.S. began participating in the city's annual Christmas parade, called for restoration of old downtown Richardson—something it was never able to undertake owing to lack of funds—and successfully completed an oral history project in partnership with the University of Texas at Dallas and the Junior League of Richardson, the purpose of which was to record on film and audio tape, as well as in print, the recollections of Richardson “old-timers.” The result was the publication of *And the Telling Takes Us Back*, a large two-part, six-volume work that consists of “21 interviews with representatives of families who settled in and helped in the development of the city. It covers the time period of early settlement to 1940. Part 2 begins with 1940 and continues to 1985.”¹³

In addition to the oral history project, in May 1982 the R.H.&G.S. put out an annual publication called *The Richardson Recorder*. Its purpose was to “collect, preserve and make available to the public information about Richardson history and related areas.”¹⁴ It appears, however, that there were no subsequent issues other than the first.

From 1983 to 1986, Sue Thompson served as president of the society. She was succeeded by Frances Long, who served from 1986 to 1989. Long, in turn, was succeeded by Frances Bell, who served only one year before being replaced by Long, who served out the remainder of Bell's term of office.

In 1990, assisted by the Richardson Public Library, the R.H.S. established a local history room in the basement of the library, open once-a-week to researchers and other interested parties. In 1993, Mindy Rabalais was elected president. The following year, the group changed its name to the Richardson Historical and Genealogical Society, to reflect members' interest in family as well as local history. It also continued to meet monthly for nine months of the year (September through May).¹⁵

¹³ Richardson Public Library catalog description.

¹⁴ *The Richardson Recorder*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1982, preface.

¹⁵ Gillespie, 51.

From the beginning of the twenty-first century until 2019, the Richardson Historical & Genealogical Society continued to try to meet its avowed purpose and to hold regular meetings, largely under the leadership of Mindy Rabalais, who has been “credited with leading the drive to include Richardson material in the Old Red Museum of Dallas County History and Culture, and initiating the effort to create the city marker that stands in Fountain Plaza.”¹⁶

In 2001, a society member, Mary Gwyn Gillespie, wrote a book, *Historic Richardson: An Illustrated History*, which was published by the Historical Publishing Network of San Antonio, Texas, under the auspices of the R.H.&G.S. and the Friends of the Richardson Public Library.

Only seven years later, Mrs. Gillespie, a graduate of the University of Texas and a former journalist, died at the age of seventy-six. Barbara Braithwaite, author of *A History of Richardson*, the book that preceded Mrs. Gillespie’s and was apparently a model for it, passed away in 2021.

During the second decade of the twenty-first century, despite the approaching sesquicentennial of Richardson, membership in the R.H.&G.S. declined and meetings were lightly attended. Finally, in 2019, after serving as president of the Richardson Historical & Genealogical for most of the past two decades, Mrs. Rabalais retired. With no one to replace her, the society became inactive. The last meeting of the R.H.&G.S. under the leadership of Mrs. Rabalais took place at the Richardson Public Library in May 2019.

On Sunday afternoon, October 2, 2022, following a more-than-three-years-long period of inactivity, the Richardson Historical and Genealogical Society was revived by a concerned group of citizens who gathered at the Richardson Public Library’s basement meeting room to hear Dr. Steven R. Butler, author of *A Sesquicentennial History of Richardson, Texas* (2 vols.), who called the meeting, present a list of reasons why he thought the organization should be reactivated, not the least of which was the city’s anticipated Sesquicentennial in 2023. Approximately twenty persons attended the meeting, including Richardson City Councilman (Place 4) Joe Corcoran, library liaison Stacey Davis, and former RHGS president Frances Long. At the conclusion of Dr. Butler’s remarks, a resolution to reactivate the society was passed by acclamation and signed by sixteen of those present, who also elected, by acclamation, the following new officers: President, Steven R. Butler; Vice-President, Kim Emig; Executive Secretary Ginger Mayo, Assistant Secretary, Elaine Zweig, and Treasurer, Sue Roberts.

¹⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, November 20, 2003.