



The Cafe Texan, seen in *Walker County History* (1986)



The Cafe Texan, 2023

## The Cafe on the Corner

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Christina Ellison

The Cafe Texan has been a beloved landmark and staple of Huntsville since the restaurant's inception in 1936. The following piece presents a brief history of the cafe, outlined by “timestamps” of important events that took place in or concerned Huntsville, to the present day. Information regarding the cafe was curated from newspaper articles from *The Huntsville Item* and *Walker County History* (1986)—found in the Sam Houston State University Archives—as well as the cafe's website.

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One hundred years after Texas won its independence, a restaurant was born in Huntsville on the ground floor of the Eastham Building. On the corner of Avenue L and Twelfth Street (later renamed Sam Houston Avenue), The Cafe Texan filled the bones of what used to be the United Gas Company.

Two weeks before the neon sign brightened for the first time, an article appeared in *The Huntsville Item*: “New Cafe to Open for Business Soon.” This new cafe, owned by Fred Morris, would bear decor and designs of the most modernistic style. What those features would be, the Huntsvillians would have to wait to see.

One week before the Texan opened her doors, another announcement emerged in the *Item*: “You are Invited to the Opening of The Cafe Texan.” Come for music, come for fun, come for refreshments, come for community. It's easy to find—the cafe on the corner, across from the courthouse.

On May 13, 1936, the Cafe Texan welcomed all creatures great and small into her dining rooms. Baskets of flowers filled every tabletop, every counterspace. The tunes from Doc Bradley's Ravens filled every crevice, every ear. The brick and stone exterior granted shade from the relentless Southern heat and large windows allowed patrons to people-watch as they enjoyed their meal.

As the evening progressed, Mr. and Mrs. Morris greeted every visitor, placed cups of punch in their hands, and welcomed them into the solace of their restaurant. The opening was a success, the red-and-blue neon sign burning the cafe's name into the night sky.

In the *Item's* next printing, a front-page article, top of the left-hand column, reported the events of this burgeoning new business. Even in the midst of the Great Depression, there was no doubt that the Texan would maintain this success.

That is, perhaps, until the reader looked at the top article two columns over: "Cafe Raven to Have Opening Fri."

Ninety-four years after Texas won its independence, a restaurant opened in Huntsville on the corner of University and Twelfth. It was called the Cafe Raven, after Sam Houston's Cherokee sobriquet, and was founded by Abe Dabaghi, Stuart Nemir, Sr., and Fred Morris—the latter of which would, six years later, start his own establishment down the street on a particular corner.

Why was there an opening for the Raven, which had been in business since 1930? Put simply: it wasn't. The event wasn't an opening, per se, but an invitation for public inspection to celebrate their newly remodeled French Renaissance interior. Unlike the Texan, with its checkerboard floor, steel- and white-colored fixtures, and domed ceiling lights attached to a pressed-tin ceiling, the Raven would be showing off pastel shades and flower designs, silk drapes, coffee percolators, new barstools. Their dining room, coincidentally, was given a modern update: the floor displayed a pattern of five-colored curves; the ceiling allowed indirect light to beam through, creating variegated shades of light; a hat check room and powder room were found off to the side for convenience.

Most importantly, an air conditioning plant would be installed—not only the first cafe to have one, but the first business in all of Huntsville—which cooled and cleaned the air to a refreshing seventy-eight degrees.

On May 22, 1936, one day later, the Cafe Raven welcomed all creatures great and small into her dining rooms. Baskets of peonies, carnations, and other summer flowers filled every tabletop, every counterspace. The tunes from a Houstonian orchestra, the Aristocrats, filled every crevice, every ear, from dinnertime through the dancing hours. Pink carnations were given as party favors.

Thus spurred a restaurant rivalry.

The Raven lit the first neon sign; obviously, the Texan followed suit.

The Raven was the first to have air conditioning; the Texan was the first to have an automatic dishwasher.

The Raven advertised twenty-four-hour service on matchbooks; the Texan advertised twenty-four-hour service—as well as a newly acquired air conditioning plant—on the same.

The Raven hired a new patissier, offering French pastries, wedding cakes, birthday cakes, and took orders for parties in private homes; the Texan hired a new head chef and offered French pastries, wedding cakes, and birthday cakes that could be ordered at any time.

The Raven was frequented by service and garden clubs, by politicians and businessmen and journalists, even by a county judge and county clerk; the Texan was frequented by cattle ranchers and cowboys, by servicemen and veterans and laypeople, even by students attending the nearby Sam Houston State Teachers College.

But rivalries couldn't last forever. In 1969, ten years after Mr. Hamburger fried his first beef patty across from the Walls Unit, the Cafe Raven closed its doors permanently. The Texan remained open, the smell of steak—both peppered and chicken fried—wafted victoriously throughout the square.

Thirty-five years after the first Battle of the Piney Woods—which SHSU won—Fred Morris turned ownership to Paul Morris, who in turn leased the cafe to the manager at the time, Vernon Todd, as well as Joe Burns.

Fifty-eight years after Huntsville's Juneteenth celebrations moved to Emancipation Park, Todd turned ownership to a woman known as Mrs. Miller, who turned ownership to Thomas Renfro one year later.

One-hundred-and-one years after Sam Houston Normal Institute opened, Renfro—credited for revamping the barbershop next door into a second dining room and adding a bar that made a brief appearance in the '70s—bequeathed the cafe to Doug Bertling, known locally as Mr. B, with Vernon Todd as the manager once again.

Ten years after the last Texas Prison Rodeo—and after the momentary ownership of a couple who remains unnamed—John Strickland grabbed ahold of the reins of the Cafe Texan.

Throughout these changes in proprietors, the decor of the cafe only grew. Monochrome pictures hung on the cedar and stucco walls depicting the history of Huntsville: children milling about the lawn of the Huntsville Elementary School; the Daughters of the American Revolution cruising in a patriotically decorated parade float; Old Main, with its pointed, gothic-style roofs. Cowboy-esque ornamentation also found itself on the walls of the Texan—a sign stating *Cowboy Parking Only*, a list of Ten Commandments for Country Folks, and numerous paintings of the cafe's regulars, along with obituaries of regulars who had passed.

Everything seemed to be running smoothly until the latter half of the fateful year most today will never forget: 2020, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the year the world shut down. At the behest of the CDC, Americans locked themselves behind closed doors, schools cleared of their students, and businesses were left emptied—local businesses especially so.

While the streets remained vacant, Strickland continued to pay his employees so the employees could pay their bills, which totaled around \$40,000. In an effort to relieve some financial stress, Strickland asked the City of Huntsville to remove a dumpster outside of the cafe, as it was costing him four hundred dollars extra per month to keep on the premises.

The City proposed a deal: they would remove the dumpster if Strickland turned off the water to the building. Of course, Strickland did so.

But, because the water was now off, the City considered the building officially closed, and opening the cafe up again meant paying over \$80,000, which Strickland did not have.

One-hundred-fifty years after the Huntsville yellow fever epidemic killed ten percent of Huntsville's population, an announcement popped up from the cafe on Facebook:

*We will miss everyone. Thank you for all the years!*

Ten words to signal to the world that the Cafe Texan would be closed permanently. Ten words to herald the end of an eighty-three-year-long reign.

Then, two years later, new hands took control of the wheel. In the midst of developers waiting to jump at the chance to convert the cafe into a retail shop or to rent the space out, Vance Howard stepped forward and purchased the cafe, intending to keep it as the cafe it had always been—with a few twists.

Though Howard was not a restaurateur at heart, he did want to honor the roots of the lower floor of the Eastham Building. His decision was thus: cut the space in half. One half would remain a cafe; the other half would become a museum.

Now the owner of the Texan, Howard thought a little facelift couldn't hurt. Red banquettes now border one side of the cafe; the rest of the space holds circular tables and chairs, always filled to the brim with eager eaters. The black-and-white pictures remain hung on the walls, now joined by other historic Huntsville pictures, as well as one of only six geological maps of Texas from 1936 to exist.

In what used to be the barbershop next door now houses The Cafe Texan History Museum. Observers can walk through centuries of history in mere minutes. Original letters written by Founding Fathers are reflected in the glass displaying the military uniforms of Marcus and Morgan Luttrell, and a thirty-one-starred American flag adorns a wall for all to see. Samurai swords stand proudly across from the pistols of Napoleon. Luristan swords gaze longingly at Graecian urns, the likes of which Keats could write a thousand odes.

And still, the square windows remain, letting patrons people-watch as they enjoy their meal. And still, the marbled brown brickwork decorates the exterior. And still, the neon sign illuminates the square with the colors of the Lone-Star State.

Two-hundred-forty years after the birth of Sam Houston, a restaurant was reborn in Huntsville on the ground floor of the Eastham Building. On the corner of Avenue L and Sam Houston Avenue, The Cafe Texan History Museum and Library opened for business. ■

## Biography

Christina Ellison is an MFA candidate in the Creative Writing, Editing, and Publishing program at Sam Houston State University. When she learned she had the opportunity to write a piece for *The Measure*, Christina was excited at the prospect of putting a creative nonfiction twist on the editor contribution. She recalled seeing the “Now Open” sign hanging outside the Cafe Texan over the course of the previous year, and knew exactly what to highlight for this year’s volume. She hopes her story offers a look at not only the cafe, but important moments in the history of Huntsville as well. Should you stop at the Cafe Texan for a bite to eat, Christina recommends ordering the Texan Club!