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by Lewis E. Fisher
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"LET'S TALK SAN ANTONIO"
1. Homesites in the Hills

As Spanish explorer Bernardo de Miranda y Flores left San Antonio for the Hill Country in 1736, the stair-stepped line of hills he encountered seemed to him a rising series of balconies. He named the escarpment, which separates the grassy plain from wooded uplands, Los Balcones.1

Nearly two centuries later, when homebuilders set their sights on a southern crest of the escarpment, the name for the subdivision was obvious—Balcones Heights.

Even before Miranda y Flores made his journey, the future location of Balcones Heights was tied to San Antonio. The path of Hillcrest Road, which forms the northern boundary of Balcones Heights, also was the northern boundary of the royal land grant in 1733 from the King of Spain to settlers from the Canary Islands.

Spanish travelers through the area followed a trail parallel to the future route of the Southern Pacific Railroad east of Balcones Heights. By the time of the Republic of Texas, however, stagecoach transportation required a higher, straighter route. In the 1840s Fredericksburg Road was surveyed past the town along its present course through Balcones Heights.2

In addition to being a stagecoach route, Fredericksburg Road became a major military roadway when the U.S. Army's Camp Verde was established in southern Kerr County in 1855. It provided a route for camels headquartered there in a transportation experiment before the Civil War. From 1908 until after World War I, Fredericksburg Road echoed with the cadence of troops marching from Fort Sam Houston out to the Leon Springs Military Reservation and camps Stanley and Bulis.

Hostile Indians delayed the countryside's settlement well into the nineteenth century. As late as 1914 Ellen Maury Slayden, wife of Congressman James L. Slayden, described awakening at dawn at the Albert Mavericks' Sunshine Ranch, which overlapped the future Balcones Heights on the west, "to new joy in the widespread valley, the wastes of green mesquite and yellow stubble, and the distant town half drowned in purple mist, the few high buildings very white and stately, suggesting Venice."3

In the wake of Indians, Spaniards and soldiers came the automobile, and the brushy ranchlands of Fredericksburg Road were changed forever.

Early automobiles could not deal with the nation's narrow cross-country dirt roads, which rains made impassable and the
sun dried into rutted canyons. With no federal agencies to call on, private associations formed to build hard-surfaced roads. Funds came locally through chambers of commerce and nationally from the automobile and road-building industries. One association funded the Lincoln Highway from Boston to San Francisco, another the Jefferson Highway from Winnipeg to New Orleans.

In 1919, a group called the Old Spanish Trail Association set up headquarters in San Antonio to plan the first transcontinental highway across the southern United States, from San Diego, California, to St. Augustine, Florida. The route approached San Antonio from the northwest down Fredericksburg Road, its two lanes paved with concrete through “the wastes of green mesquite and yellow stubble.”

To celebrate the opening of the Old Spanish Trail Highway, on March 23, 1929, a motorcade of nine “machines” left San Diego headed east. Two soon broke down. But five days later the remaining seven made it down Fredericksburg Road through the future Balcones Heights. A mile to the south, at the Babcock Road intersection, a welcoming party and motorcycle escort joined them for the drive into San Antonio. The motorcade passed through again seven months later on the return trip from St. Augustine.

By this time, the automobile’s mobility was helping San Antonio, then the largest city in the largest state, spread rapidly in all directions—especially toward the hills to the northwest. There, off Fredericksburg Road at the edge of city limits, the Spanish theme was being tapped by such subdivisions as Spanish Acres and Jefferson Manor in Woodlawn Hills. Their signature Spanish Colonial Revival design was picked up for the magnificent Jefferson High School, completed in 1932. Its baroque ornamentation, domed towers and landscaped courtyards became a magnet for families seeking a prestigious address among shaded homes, green lawns, spacious schools and quiet streets.

Ever-optimistic developers saw opportunity even in the darkening economic clouds approaching San Antonio from the east, where stock markets had collapsed in 1929.

If people had started hoarding money due to economic fears and construction costs were down due to less building, then the Jefferson Manor Company had the solution. “Now is really the time to build a home,” its sales manager declared. Lots west of the nearly completed high school went on the market in November 1931. Fifty-foot-wide homesites were priced from $675 to $975. “Some More—A Few Less.”

Other developers sensed an untapped market niche among families unable to afford those prices but still yearning for upward social and geographic mobility. Four months later, on March 27, 1932, developer L. J. Hart’s new Balcones Heights Company offered an alternative to the glitzy development around Jefferson High School.

“Let Last It Has Been Made Possible,” trumpeted advertising of the Modern Development Company, the Balcones Heights Company’s sales arm: “A Homesite in the Hills at a Price Within
Roach of All—Balcones Heights. The city's "Newest Big Development" was 40 acres of a 117-acre tract bounded by Fredericksburg, Balcones Heights, Balcock and Hillcrest roads, one mile northwest of Jefferson High School. One selling point was that the Ursuline Academy planned to move from its historic downtown buildings to the corner of Fredericksburg and Balcones Heights roads, a move that ultimately did not occur.

Balcones Heights lots were priced far below those around Jefferson High School—a. ($250 to $500). "Fredericksburg Road Business Corners Slightly Higher." No matter that prospective buyers arrived to find lots only half as wide as the Jefferson area's 30-foot lotsites. Buy two adjoining lots and you still paid less.

Too, Balcones Heights was outside city limits and had fewer restrictions. Here you could "build your bungalow of moderate cost and yet be assured of no 'shacks,'" still be within walking distance of Jefferson High School, have shade trees and "command a beautiful view," at least on "practically every lot."

Summed up the sales company's president, J. C. Head: "We are making it possible for the person with moderate means to own a homesite in the hills overlooking the city."

Developers based prospects out to Balcones Heights. At the end of the first week they reported sales of 72 homesites, adding that 60 percent were purchased by "persons from out of the city," At the end of one month, reported sales approached the 200 mark. Names of buyers were not revealed. Nor was it told how...
The magnificent Jefferson High School, opened in 1931, was a magnet for homebuyers and triggered the first subdivision in nearby Balcones Heights. But as this view indicates, actual building around Jefferson was slow during the Depression, delaying spread of new homes to Balcones Heights until after World War II.
many sales were multiple lots to single buyers, nor how many purchasers were individual homeowners actually planning to build and not speculators intending to resell the land. 16

J. G. Head, who said his Balcones Heights sales force numbered 50 men and women, did state that lots were "being offered at the smallest margin on which his concern had ever worked." He expected "the volume of sales to make up for the small margin of profit." 17

By now, promoters did not lack imagination in countering Depression fears. In March, the Jefferson Manor Company sought to draw prospects from the Balcones Heights grand opening by throwing a citywide Easter egg hunt next to the new high school. To keep prospects coming to Balcones Heights, on Sunday, May 1, its developers offered free pocketbooks containing from 5 cents to $50 to the first 250 cars driving out.

Not to be outdone, Jefferson Manor promoters the next Sunday promised "Free Ice Cream For Everybody." Jefferson Manor also offered low terms of $3 down and $3 per week, with no interest or taxes for one year—an important concession, since the San Antonio School District had just announced that 60 percent of its anticipated tax revenues were probably uncollectible and taxes had to be raised to cover the difference. 18

Although slow to reach San Antonio, the Great Depression, alas, was now striking with full force. Deep citywide cuts in employment and revenues plus such associated disasters as bank failures were not abating. Both the city and its school district announced major cutbacks.

It was now painfully apparent that not Easter eggs or free cash or ice cream would turn beleaguered houseseekers into buyers anytime soon. Optimistic sales pitches for Jefferson and Balcones Heights developments and those elsewhere abruptly stopped. 19

The onset of World War II spurred economic recovery. But for wistful prospective homeowners there was little relief. Building permits for new housing were strictly limited to quotas supporting the war effort. Materials to extend utilities and streets were diverted to the same purpose—which was just as well since gasoline for cars that would drive to the distant new homes was severely rationed.

By 1943, national surveys estimated that postwar demand for homes would exceed four million, and that within six months after the end of the war at least one million families would build or buy new homes. 20

In May 1943, new blocks north of the original Balcones Heights subdivision were surveyed as Country Gentleman Estates by developer Frank W. Wick, who sat back and waited for the war to end.
This pastoral scene, looking west, was unrecognizable scarcely a decade after this photo was taken in 1947. Loop 410 was built across Fredericksburg Road in the foreground, with Green Pastures Restaurant becoming the site of Citizens Frost Bank at the new intersection's northwest corner. Hillcrest Road, angling into view at the left, became the northwestern boundary ofSalome's Higgins. The new home of soon-to-be-mayor Clyde Greer is visible down the road to its left.
2. The Incorporation 'War' with San Antonio

For a moment in time, at the end of World War II, the Balcones Heights area was a middle ground for residents of the ranch country to the north and those of the city to the south. Its few buildings included a rock wellhouse built to supply water to the still empty homesteads hawksed to absentee buyers a decade before.

Along the future northeast boundary of Balcones Heights was the Strozyk-Wood Arena with its log wooden grandstand. From 1946 to 1952, when it was superseded by events at the new Freeman Coliseum, a three-night rodeo each summer drew city dwellers up to watch combating cowboys from the outlands. A mile away, out Fredericksburg Road near to Callaghan Road, the country place of sometime San Antonio Postmaster John J. Stevens was being transformed by five partners, among them inventor, oilman and Southwest Research Institute founder Tom Stick and a young Dallas native named Clyde C. Crews. It was to be a showcase for San Antonians to view crossbred cattle from distant ranches.

But instead of a cattle showplace, the old home and new quartering barns were opened by Crews in May 1947 as a Western-style restaurant called Green Pastures. On part of the six nearby acres he bought from Frank Wick, Crews built the first home in Country Gentleman Estates.

'Nothing of my land to others, with deed restrictions requiring new construction to cost a minimum amount,' Crews later recalled. 'But thanks to inflation, one buyer who said he was going to build a garage apartment instead spent the same amount to build a small two-story house that didn't fit the neighborhood. I knew we had to get some zoning regulations very quickly.'

Zoning, however, was not done in unincorporated areas of Bexar County. Even W. Crews's neighborhood were annexed by San Antonio the likelihood of prompt zoning action was slim, given the municipal situation to San Antonio's newly annexed territories. The solution, as Crews and some of his new neighbors saw it, was to form a separate, incorporated city.

Considering San Antonio politics at the time, it was a highly volatile notion.

The sudden incorporation of Balcones Heights sparked a free-for-all. Charges and counter charges flew as San Antonio City
“real city government” and should, with their prime residential tax base, be made part of San Antonio as well.5
San Antonio lost those suits. But even as tax revenue poured in from new areas San Antonio city government was falling short in expanding water and sewage services and fire and police protection. Early in 1947, 75 vote residents of one area in the Hillandale school district to the south, long notified of their impending annexation and of city services to follow, got tired of waiting. They revolted and held an election to incorporate as the City of Ferrell Wells. A year later the matter was winning its way to the Texas Supreme Court.6
The lesson of Ferrell Wells, ultimately unsuccessful in its quest for independence, was not lost on residents moving into the fast-growing Balcones Heights community, boosted by its developers in the mode of suburban developments mushrooming nationwide—as a tranquil haven free of urban hazards.

In 1948, Balcones Heights residents decided to incorporate before San Antonio tried to annex them first.

Throughout Balcones Heights, sewer service was on your own—septic tanks fitted nicely beneath the lawns—and butane gas was delivered in small tanks, in lieu of gas mains.

If San Antonio unilaterally annexed Balcones Heights, would there be sufficient zoning laws or gas or sewer lines—or any other useful services anytime soon—to compensate for the new tax bill? Few believed so. Moreover, the area had more than 70 homes and more than the minimum 200 residents required for a separate corporate identity. Led by Clyde Crews, from Maddox, Carl Kiefer and Samuel Mershon, residents meeting in Maddox's mattress factory—later Grady's Bar-B-Q—on Fredericksburg Road decided to incorporate before San Antonio got to them first.7

A surveyor, Reynolds Andricks, was hired to come up with boundaries for the city. Rather than taking in a vast open expanse into which the city could grow, he outlined a wedge-shaped area of approximately one square mile based on where people were actually living. Hes were defined by existing roads with one exception, the open land past the point where Hillcrest Road ended at Fredericksburg Road.

“I was standing there with Andricks,” Crews recalled, “and he just projected an imaginary line to the northeast out to the Stoney Wood Area.”8 The area fell just outside the new city limits, as the basement cut east, then south to encompass Henry Hammsch’s Hillside Tourist Court and Mobile Home Park, set up in 1942.

The vote occurred on Saturday, November 15, 1948, at Jack Cooper’s Light House Courts at 4220 Fredericksburg Road. By the time polls closed that night, 35 of the 38 voters had approved in-

The Incorporation "War" with San Antonio
S.A. Declares War on New Suburb

The City of San Antonio Thursday declared war on the infant neighborhood on Fredericksburg Road, Balcones Heights.

In a unanimous action, city officials voted to withdraw all city services from the suburb, condemning it to an existence in the wilderness.

The resolution passed by councilmen specifically prohibits street lighting to the suburb by fire and police departments, sanitation department, garbage department and the city engineer.

NO OTHERS HIT

The move is said to affect apparently all other suburban town.

Commissioner Raymond South announced he would continue to supply the dried-up people in the tower of Goliath Park and Territorial Trail. He was not in his seat when he made another appeal to his neighbors to keep the town clean.

South's appeal was not answered in an appreciative manner, but there was a great deal of support for his talk.

Balcones Heights was incorporated in an emergency Saturday, which voted $5,000 to build a new sewer line in the town.

The proposal was defeated by one vote, and the city council declared that Balcones Heights must provide its own water and sewer lines.

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Pape's Food Store—in June 1949 the new city set up a corporation court and adopted health, police and fire regulations.

This took place in the now permanent meeting place for the council and the new court— the rock wellhouse at Gentleman Street and Altgelt Avenue, cleaned up for the additional use when developer John Novak turned the building and the water system over to an association of its users.

Council meetings previously were held in members' homes or on Fredericksburg Road at the Tee Pee Indian Village Restaurant or the mayor's Green Pastures Restaurant. But Green Pastures was a quarter-mile beyond city limits. After opponents of the city's incorporation charged that this made the deliberations here illegal, an ordinance was passed ratifying all actions taken in meetings outside Balcones Heights. 15

When Novak turned over his wellhouse and water system he also donated to Balcones Heights its first park, a triangular tract along Balcones Heights Road. Early in 1950 the grateful city named it Colin Novak Park in honor of the developer's wife. 16

Nevertheless, after a year of independence, other amenities along the idyllically named streets were sorely lacking. True, the number of homes had doubled to 150 and population was up to nearly 370. There were 15 businesses, the newest being Sierra Motor Court midway down Fredericksburg Road, where R. L. Lindsey had to clear off mesquite trees and kill rattlesnakes to make way for the tile-roofed units surrounding the latest tourist court innovation in highway hospitality—a private swimming
In 1949, all males aged 21 to 45 were required to spend five days a year working on public streets—except for "ministers of the gospel actually engaged in the discharge of their duties."

But San Antonio steadfastly denied Balcones Heights all utilities except electricity, though the city still provided them to other suburbs. Without taxes, Balcones Heights revenues came only from building permits, fees, licenses, a few court cases and donations. At the end of 1949 the city treasury stood at $900. That was not enough to repair the streets, much less pave them.\(^{18}\)

So Balcones Heights came up with a sort of Depression-era public works program all its own.

In the fall of 1949, the council adopted an ordinance requiring all male inhabitants between the ages of 21 and 45, "except ministers of the gospel actually engaged in the discharge of their duties," to spend a total of five days each year—from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with one hour for lunch—working on public streets and alleys. Exemptions could be purchased at one dollar per day. Those not showing up or paying the assessment would be guilty of a misdemeanor and liable for a fine of up to $100 per day. Each day was considered a separate offense.\(^{19}\)

A group of Alltell Avenue residents in the summer of 1951 proposed collecting 30 cents per foot of street frontage to cover the cost of paving their street and made an advance deposit.

Other residents got a bonus when the San Antonio City Water Board began building a water tank for the adjacent Delview subdivision without realizing the tank site was in Balcones Heights. Faced with having to take the tank down and rebuild it elsewhere, the Water Board chose the alternative offered by the Balcones Heights council and provided water to surrounding Balcones Heights residents once the tank was finished.\(^{20}\)

While the bloom was wearing off the rose of incorporation for some, warmer winds were blowing from San Antonio once its suburb-baiting mayor was swept out of office by a reform ticket. That made it easier, in the fall of 1952, for beleaguered Balcones Heights Mayor Carl Kiefer to outline the city’s perilous situation to a meeting of nearly 100 residents. Each got a chance to express an opinion on whether enough was enough. After three hours, one-third favored continuing as a separate city, one-third favored annexation by San Antonio and one-third was undecided.\(^{21}\)
Built as a wellhouse for homes in the first Balcones Heights subdivision, this building became the Balcones Heights city hall in mid-1949. Meetings had to be interrupted to turn on the pump and send water into the tank, which stood past the far end of the building.

Kiefer felt the inconclusive results justified exploring the possibility of surrender with San Antonio’s new city manager, Charles A. Harrell. Councilman Clyde Crews, the former mayor, met with San Antonio reformer Walter W. McAllister and secured a promise that if Balcones Heights allowed itself to be annexed, taxes would not exceed the amount Balcones Heights residents were currently paying for school taxes.22

Four months later, on February 2, 1953, residents met in the city hall/wellhouse to hear Mayor Kiefer’s report.

It was a “boisterous” meeting, newspapers reported the next day. Some 200 residents showed up, overflowing the old building. The city’s makeshift nature was brought home as the meeting, nearly four hours long, was interrupted five times so an engineer could run the pump to resupply the strained water system.

Mayor Kiefer opened by reading a letter from Harrell. Should Balcones Heights agree to be annexed, the San Antonio city manager wrote, there would be immediate fire and police protection, garbage collection, street maintenance and park service. Bus service and street lights might be added, and sewer connections, too, depending on results of an upcoming bond issue. In return, Balcones Heights homeowners would pay taxes equivalent to $112.50 on a $5,000 home.

Kiefer made no recommendation to the audience but indicated he favored annexation, as did Councilman Crews—who said Balcones Heights could not be run on nothing—and Ralph Hindelang, who calculated that even 100 percent of the maximum legal tax levy would be insufficient for Balcones Heights to operate on its own.

The Incorporation ‘War’ with San Antonio  13
The northeast corner of Balcones Heights was extended to include Henry Hannasch's citrus courts, shown looking east in 1940. Dewhurst Road deadlegs at right as Beryl Road angles from lower left. Above the mobile homes at left is the fenced Storey-Wood Arena, to its right the dairy farms of George Delavan, whose fields at right he bought San Antonio's Delfield subdivision. Hannasch soon razed the courts for his own subdivision.

Two of the other three councilmen, Neil Ferry and J. D. Kalafat, favored continued incorporation. So did an apparent majority of those present, who scorned the chance of San Antonio providing timely services while acknowledging that some sort of taxation needed to be implemented by Balcones Heights quite soon.

Then, in a subplot, residents split north and south over water. Regardless of whether or not Balcones Heights dissolved itself, San Antonio's new mood was still to give a hand to users of the obviously inadequate water system in southern Balcones Heights and allow them to connect to San Antonio water.

This news brought cries from northern residents, who insisted their privately operated Country Gentleman Estates system also be included. San Antonio's City Water Board would not agree to that, thought Balcones Heights City Attorney W. W. Folkes. Finally, councilmen passed a compromise measure, permitting connection of the southern system while seeking addition of the northern system.23
The next week councilmen accepted the assets of the Balcones Heights Water Association in preparation for turning the system over to San Antonio. Then they appointed a committee to come up with some sort of tax plan to finance municipal operations. The four-year-old City of Balcones Heights would stay the course.
3. Hard Times in a Tax-Free City

An official committee might be studying a tax plan, but a vocal group of Balcones Heights residents was going to have nothing of it. The tax issue erupted as the focal point of a ferocious election campaign in 1965. The Citizens' Ticket of mayoral candidate Clarence A. Jones and four others variously disaffected by strong-armed Mayor Franklin S. Gaskins and his administration sought to throw out the incumbents by vowing there would never be taxes in Balcones Heights. More than two-thirds of the voters turned out—214 of an eligible 300—and all incumbents were returned to office, Gaskins leading his slate by a margin of 64 percent.

Despite that mandate, the council kept taxation on hold while running the growing city on a hand-to-mouth basis. Utility problems were dealt with, fire protection was addressed and the law was enforced, even if Balcones Heights had to endure being pilloried as a speed trap. Adequate street maintenance was the biggest puzzle. But residents held on, hoping that somewhere down the road there would come a break that would make the burdens bearable.

And eventually, there did.

Eight years after Balcones Heights incorporated with some 300 residents in 75 homes, its population had quadrupled to 1,224 persons in 347 dwellings. A dozen more were under construction. Apartment construction began with zoning approval for duplexes and designation of a zone for multi-family units east of Gentleman Drive between Hillcrest and Glenmar drives in 1953. Old landmarks passed: Green Pastures Restaurant burned in mid-1951 and the Storey-Wood Arena closed the next year, a victim of the popularity of rodeos at the new Freeman Coliseum east of San Antonio.

As new San Antonio subdivisions swept up to and past Balcones Heights city limits, they would be served in part by two churches and a school at the northeastern corner of Balcones Heights. In 1953, as Henry Hamash cleared away his tourist courts for a subdivision, he donated a site on Dewhurst Road for St. Gregory the Great Catholic Church and School. Sponsored by St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Church to the southeast, its first pastor was Father Michael J. Holdman.
By 1955, Balcones Heights had been met by the suburban growth of San Antonio, its downtown skyline barely visible on the right horizon. This view looking southeast shows San Antonio's Delview subdivision, its western edge on land dammed by Balcones Heights in return for paving of Balcones Heights streets by developers.

In 1957 the Unitarian-Universalist Association began planning a church a few blocks to the west. Another church was born in Balcones Heights the same year, when the congregation of Hope Lutheran Church, which located permanently on Callaghan Road, moved into the city, held its organizational meeting in the Indian Village Restaurant on Fredericksburg Road. 1

Residents of southern Balcones Heights had been enjoying dependable water from San Antonio mains since their system was donated to Balcones Heights and turned over to San Antonio in 1953. But northern residents continued to complain about low pressure and high rates from the still independent Country Gentleman Estates system.

San Antonio sewer connections came in 1957, two years after Mayor Gaskins made front-page headlines for being charged with assault by a San Antonio city plumbing inspector looking for illegal connections to sewer lines that ran through Balcones Heights. Charges were later dismissed. 4

After its initial posturing about denying fire department services to Balcones Heights, San Antonio provided the new suburb with fire protection on a fee basis. When the fee was raised, rather than renewing the agreement, Balcones Heights relied on Bexar County fire protection until the county reported, in the fall of 1954, that under state law it was not required to serve municipalities on an ongoing basis. Thus on November 12, Balcones Heights,
under the leadership of John Caron, organized its own 25-member volunteer fire department, many of them Kelly Air Force Base firefighters who lived nearby. Fund-raising and public donations financed a concrete-block building for the fire department at 107 Glenarm Place in 1955.

As Kelly the city found a surplus 300-gallon pumper, which it bought for $500. The pump was adapted and the truck housed the equipment and housed the truck at Schaefer's Garage at 4219 Fredericksburg Road. This cost for residents would be less "for a number of years' protection than they would have paid the City of San Antonio for one year's protection," noted Mayor Gaskins.

Two years later the frugal council paid off the $502 owed on the fire department's first-used car, refinanced it for $1,312 and used the balance toward the $2,600 cost of a new 750-gallon pump to aid the young department.

Then there was the matter of law enforcement.

"Are they running a speed trap in Balcones Heights, the pint-sized town in north San Antonio?" wondered acerbic Evening News writer Paul Thompson in his front-page column on May 1, 1955.

"They sure are," came the answering quote from a local builder, who claimed he got a ticket for driving 20 miles an hour in a school zone. "This laying for motorists has been going on for two years in Balcones Heights, and it's about time someone fought it."

Thompson said the county sheriff's office told of "a steady run of squawks about wholesale ticketing of motorists in Balcones Heights." Then he reported how Mayor Frank Gaskins "sprang to the defense" of his two-man police force.

"We enforce the speed laws out here and we'll continue to do it," Thompson quoted Gaskins as saying. Noting that the accused later allowed that he "might have been going 21 or 22 mph," Gaskins marveled that the accused "admits he broke the law a little bit. Can you rob a bank a little bit? Can you murder your wife a little bit? We take the view that a little bit is the same as a whole lot."

San Antonio's three daily newspapers, locked in an irresistible circulation war, were hungry for headlines. A "speed trap" made perfect fodder.

Nine days later the press was out in force to cover a council meeting that drew 50 residents. Seven-year veteran constable Jack Casper had resigned the previous month over the department's operation by his former deputy, Chief Robert C. Pryor Jr., described by Thompson as "the fellow who hands out most traffic tickets." Reporters expected speeding issues to take center stage.

One headline the next day did lead off: "Citizens in Uproar." However, the big fuss turned out instead to be over zoning complaints. Opponents of Gaskins confronted him with charges of "authoritative control," but then came a 26-4 vote of confidence in his administration from the crowd.

Gaskins defended his refusal to let one reporter see court records of arrests, saying the request had been made under "false
Columns may have been heaped upon Police Chief Bob Drye for his department’s rigorous enforcement of traffic laws, but he would point with pride to the accomplishment of one traffic fatality-free year. He did it on January 21, 1964—to an enviable traffic fatality-free record within Balcones Heights.

Frazier also pointed out that Fredericksburg Road was the only major highway entering San Antonio that had not been the scene of at least one traffic fatality that year.

From a sister suburb came the editorializing of Clyde Wantland, in his Alamo Heights News: “It’s no credit to the critics that a law enforcement officer who enforces the law comes in for so much criticism from someone who fails to obey it. If there be an inferior motive for enforcement of the traffic laws in Balcones Heights, similar motive is needed in San Antonio for enforcement of the laws against gambling, dope-dealing and yellow-puckering.”

Fredericksburg Road, after all, was still the main highway from West Texas to New Mexico and even going south, inspiring early motel owners to catch tourists by promoting Balcones Heights as “The Gateway to Mexico.” A state highway department survey in 1954 showed some 700 cars traveling the thoroughfare in one 12-hour period. It did not take a large proportion of these to park along the curb because of the low cost of space at the Balcones Heights city hall at an early premium on court days or alternate Saturdays.

As a reporter described the scene in 1955, an hour before court began cars had already “rolled onto the city hall lawn, parked in driveways and lined up in the ditches of Balcones’ unpaved and unscrubbed streets.” Inside, “informality was the key word,” as Mayor Frank Gaskins, “in house slippers and tee shirt, lined up miscellaneous and accepted payment of fines.”

By the time of arrival of the judge—Emmott J. Rhom, who once did similar duty for San Antonio—a line of speeders—snaked in front of the bench and cut a side door. The accused paused as Judge Rhom “stopped several times to answer the telephone on his bench and asked callers how they wished to plead.” In the crowded courtroom, “sweating” in mid-May, “Spectators inched through front and back doors to watch proceedings.”

Traffic tickets would be the most sensitive subject for Balcones Heights officials for some time to come. Rather than spend $1,500 for a radar unit that had to be operated by three patrolmen—more than Balcones Heights had—in 1958 the city bought a $500 “Speed Watch.” The 11-jewel affair registered speeds transmitted from two rubber tubes 22 1/2 feet apart on the highway onto the dial of a box beside the road, with an advertised accuracy of within a hundredth of a second.

Shortly after he was elected mayor in 1960, J. C. Frazier wrote, “The tax is being made continually about the percentage of our revenue derived from fines. Let me just say this. We not only can get along without this revenue, we had much rather get along without it. We do not like to issue traffic tickets.”

Frazier could get by with his comments since Balcones Heights was at last implementing property taxation, approved two years earlier. Otherwise it is hard to imagine how the city could have managed without revenue from traffic tickets. Totals for 10 months in the late 1950s show the only regular sources of income as corporation court—$19,320—and building permits, a mere
In the 1950s, clouds of dust from the unpaved Dewhurst Road were blamed or everything from dirty furniture to sore throats.

$664. Salaries came to $12,198 and operational expenses to $7,746, leaving a razor-thin surplus for the period of $40.14.

Perhaps the ultimate justification came in 1962. That summer the Greater San Antonio Safety Council pressured Mayor Frazier with an award for 10 consecutive years without a single traffic fatality on the streets of Balcones Heights.1

But if it wasn’t over traffic tickets, Balcones Heights in the 1950s was getting bad press about the condition of its residential streets, unpaved and washed out by heavy rains. Fredericksburg Road was maintained by the state, which in 1957 put traffic signals and blinking lights at the awkward intersection with Balcones Heights and Dewhurst roads and Spencer Lane. Balcones Heights residents wanting their own streets improved, however, were on their own.10

Rather than trying again to pay residents to be street workers, in the late 1950s Mayor Vernon LaBauve sought to improve chronic problems in the southern sector through a plan to buy 10 tons of asphalt and two 50-gallon barrels of oil for residents to use in repairing streets in front of their homes. Seven months later, eight residents of Pleasant Drive instead donated $335.50 to the city, which matched the amount required to repair their street.12

The biggest burst of bad publicity over streets came from Dewhurst Road residents in the northeastern corner. Those Balcones Heights had deannexed to San Antonio some 20 acres along Dewhurst to the east in 1951—and would again, in 1964—to allow the sprawling Delview subdivision to extend to Dewhurst Road. The road itself however, remained within Balcones Heights.

In the mid-1950s, Dewhurst residents—most of them living within San Antonio city limits—complained to the media of water runoff and blamed clouds of caliche dust from its surface for everything from dirty furniture to their children’s sore throats.18

Mayor Gaskins countered that much of the runoff was coming from Delview itself, and that the City of San Antonio was refusing to help. Gaskins pleaded municipal powers due to no tax rev-
enue, then asked why any repairs should be done at the moment anyway, since new highway construction nearby might eventually correct the problem. The matter was resolved for good three years after the 1964 deannexation, when Balcones Heights agreed to purchase the paving materials and San Antonio agreed to furnish the labor and equipment.  

All told, in the two Dewhurst Road deannexations and in two others of 10 acres each—one in 1950 south of Balcones Heights Road and one in 1954 north of Hillcrest Drive—the City of Balcones shrank its territory by nearly 10 percent, to an ultimate size of 7 square mile. Losing the empty area freed cash-poor Balcones Heights of having to make improvements for the new developments which in the 1950s would not pay property taxes to cover costs since the city levied no taxes.  

More than that, cash-poor Balcones Heights was able to leverage free benefits from developers wishing to promote their new homes as having San Antonio services, as in the 1950 deannexation south of Balcones Heights Road. In that case, H. B. Zachry Properties agreed in return to lay water and sewer lines accessible to residents along the Balcones Heights side, connect adjacent Balcones Heights streets through the new subdivision to Babcock Road, make zoning restrictions, improve area drainage and, in addition, give unpaved Balcones Heights Road “a two-course penetration of oil.”  

But paving-for-land exchanges included only oil and gravel, not a new base, thus simply circling the basic problem.

It was not deannexation, however, but another territorial move that would ultimately transform the future of Balcones Heights.

To improve access to a central business district isolated from a fast-expanding metropolis, San Antonio planners in the early 1950s began outlining a system of expressways radiating from downtown. The designation of U.S. 87 was changed from Fredericksburg Road to a new expressway that would parallel the Southern Pacific Railroad to the north and west. But state engineers would not approve San Antonio planners' recommended route north past Magnolia Avenue to meet Loop 410 at Vance...
Jackson Road. The route was seen as too winding for a high-speed highway.

The best route was seen as veering west and then roughly paralleling Fredericksburg Road through eastern Balcones Heights.

Incorporated cities had to approve such thoroughfare routes through their territory. The City of Olmos Park several years later refused to let the preferred route of U.S. 281 pass through its already-developed suburb, causing a decade of disputes and concern until the expressway was finally rerouted around Olmos Park through the Olmos Creek basin.

The City of Balcones Heights, however, had a different outlook. Only scattered homes and open land were in this proposed highway's path. Moreover, the revenue-starved city fathers saw this as an opportunity for drivers to get off and shop in the parallel business district along Fredericksburg Road, and for new commercial construction on either side of the highway itself.

Balcones Heights Mayor Frank Gaskins declared, "We think it is the best route they could pick."

After only "a short discussion," the Balcones Heights council approved the right-of-way on June 14, 1954.22

As the federal government began pouring more than $100 billion into the national interstate highway program, this new expressway was designated part of Interstate 35. In 1958, the old Loop 13 that curved just beyond the boundary of Balcones Heights was widened into four-lane Interstate 410. A major in-
Without property taxes to cover basic municipal improvements, Balcones Heights suffered chronic street repair problems. Vivien Lane and connecting driveways, above, were washing out as late as 1962. Clumps of cactus dust from Dewhurst Road so distressed adjoining residents that two of them, R. L. Bell and Mrs. T. A. Duffy, right, took to watering down the dust with a garden hose one January morning in 1956.

Interchange between the two would nick the northern edge of Balcones Heights.

Two years earlier, Handy Andy supermarket magnate A. L. Becker's Community Realty Company had figured out what was going to happen. It put together some 50 acres at Fredericksburg and Gill roads, within sight of the anticipated interchange, and asked Balcones Heights to rezone it for commercial development. A Handy Andy opened at the edge of the site in May 1959.23 Hard times for Balcones Heights were about to end.
Economic salvation for Balcones Heights was imminent in the view looking north in 1989, as Interstate 10 construction workers, already making great progress beyond Loop 410, were about to begin the southern section through Balcones Heights. This would sever Goll Road, the segment angling off to the lower left to be known as Wonderland Drive and then Crossroads Boulevard after the mall that would arise at the intersection’s southwest corner.
The new crossroads of two interstate highways at Balcones Heights vaulted the struggling suburb's location into a prime spot in the region. A sampling of honors to come occurred in 1960 when a party for The Alamo movie's world premiere was held outside Randy Andy's new Balcones Heights supermarket. John Wayne himself, the movie's star, cut the cake.
4. The World Rushes In

When freeways were built, the landscape changed. The older residents were surprised to see how their neighborhood had changed. The new highways intersected at Balcones Heights, the world's busiest intersection. This change was unexpected and had to be adapted to. Freeways became a way to connect with the outside world, but also brought in new residents and businesses. The once quiet neighborhood became a hub of activity.

A preview of how dramatically things would change came on October 24, 1960, as celebrities flocked to San Antonio for the world premiere of the movie "The Alamo" at the Woodlawn Theater. Packed for the public celebration was the mall site up Freericksburg Road beside the year-old Handy Andy supermarket in Balcones Heights. Its bakery produced what was billed as "The World's Largest Bottle of the Alamo Cake." Movie stars descended on the suddenly dazzling suburb. John Wayne himself cut the cake. Television crews also struggled to keep up with the likes of Richard Boone, Chill Will and Linda Cristal.

Not long after Wonderland Shopping City was up and running the next year Balcones Heights scrambled to spend the become pouring in from the new state retail sales tax. Freeways went in residential neighborhoods, new polemeters were added and 11 freeways were hired to replace the volunteers. Everybody got free garbage pick-up. The fast-growing staff dealing with all moved from the old post office into a magnificent new brick-city hall with a second story no one yet knew what to do with.

Burgeoning mall merchants, seeming to morph from the tail into the dog itself, soon tried to wag the voters into changing the very name of Balcones Heights to Wonderland, Texas. But despite the sudden prosperity, Balcones Heights residents remembered where they came from and held on to their identity. The transition seemed to happen a bit too quickly for comfort. Help still had to be found to overhaul the fire truck, a second police car was needed and unfrozen runoff from the new Handy...
Parking Page: All the酚merns Imaging of the
regional mall in Bakum Heights on
September 14, 1981, were, from left:
Montgomery Ward Corp. Vice President
Russell Boyd, Wonderland Merchants
Association President E. B. Bond;
Bakum Heights Mayor I. C. Tryne;
Kretowich Corp. Vice President W. L.
Sanders; Alice of Wonderland; & Odina
Hansen, Container Realty Co.
President A. J. Bacon; and Gannett
Great Southern Life Insurance Co.
President Pat O'Connor and San
Antonio Mayor Pat F. Woodard Parker
and newly hired development
supervisor David Wright at Wonderland
at the site of expansion of Interstate
410, for letters upper right, and 13.3
Amos Hines/ko Garage Road from the
mall approach later to be the old San
Antonio Indian Village Restaurant.

Andie parking lot kept washing out Gill Road. Once mall con-
struction got under way, city officials permitted efforts for a tax
program and financed a bond issue for improvements needed by
the mall, to say nothing of basic services for residents, themselves.

Sewer connections with San Antonio were completed in
the spring of 1981, but city bus service to Bakum Heights had to
wait until the opening. Bluff Drive through the site was renamed
Wonderland Drive, which got the mall's name on Interstate 10
directional signs.

The name "Wonderland" was picked by Jack Nicholson, the
Denver-based development manager hired by the proposed mall's
developer in mid-1980. "Since as much as three-quarters of mall
sales occur at Christmastime," Nicholson recalled, "the name was
to set up the mall to be a Winter Wonderland." But we never got
the budget to carry out the winter theme." Still, the novelty of
covered malls nationwide justified the name.

Wonderland moved off the drawing boards when Mont-
gomery Ward signed up as the first anchor store, leading to the
grand opening of the mall's first phase on September 14, 1981.
Some 20,000 shoppers flocked there on opening day.

Those lost at the maze of Wonderland's indoor plazas and
ascend could get help from—who else?—"Alice of Wonderland," in
her own information booth on the main concourse, garbed in an
unusual costume designed with a shocking pink, all-cotton suede
cloth jumper and pale pink cotton blouse, jeweled headband and
be shoes."
To the rescue of harried shopper-parents came the Balcones Heights Volunteer Fire Department Auxiliary, which ran a 100-seat “Cinemopped Theater” on the lower level under the direction of auxiliary president—and later Balcones Heights mayor—Lucille Wehlforth and of the auxiliary’s theater operations director, Gertrude Conkle. In a free babysitting service for shoppers, children’s movies were shown five times on afternoons and evenings and twice more on Saturday mornings. Compensation from mall management to the auxiliary benefited firefighters.4  

The real “makings of a regional mall” came in 1964, when Rhodes Department Store signed up as a second anchor tenant. That was followed the next year by several companies of Dallas entrepreneur Charles Tandy taking 50,000 square feet on Wonderland’s lower level. The multilevel facility covered 17 acres of floor space on a 60-acre site, with 62 stores employing 1,200 people and drawing a daily average of 15,000.5  

As Wonderland prospered, familiar retail names began appearing on the new buildings along Fredericksburg Road, replacing smaller ones that had marked Balcones Heights as an almost-rural community. Jorrie’s Furniture—later Lack’s—nailed a prime site at Fredericksburg Road and Hillcrest Drive in 1962.  

Daniel Webster, a former Arkansas state legislator elected to his first term as Balcones Heights mayor in 1964, became a familiar figure at the many groundbreaking. There he was in the newspapers wielding a shovel to bring Wonderland Plaza and its Western Auto, Bonanza Shoe Fit and Denny’s to 4575 Fredericksburg Road next to North Point Plaza, which obliterated the site of the old Indian Village Restaurant. In 1966 Webster was cutting the ribbon at the opening of the 115,000 square-foot Woolco Department Store south of the mall and of Wonder Theater in the parking lot to its north. The next year he was snapped across the street at a new Jim’s Coffee Shop and, in another shovel shot, at the site of a new Luby’s Cafeteria.  

Unlike those who ran the original restaurants, motels and stores along Fredericksburg Road, the ever-rotating personnel of the new retail mecca probably belonged more to the cultures of their particular chain than to the long term fabric of life in Balcones Heights. Likewise, tenants of apartment buildings lining Gentleman Drive and in buildings along nearby streets also generally lacked the roots of homeowners nearby. The job of making the transformed city work would fall mainly to its permanent residents.  

Accordingly, it was Councilman Vernon LaBlanc, the San Antonio College administrator and recent mayor, who in 1961 chaired the committee backing a bond issue to finance, at last, a respectable base of municipal services. And it was Mayor J. C. Frazier who the next year had to take in hand the local banks for a $5,000 loan—that had to be renewed—to keep the city running until the tax money came in. For of the $46,000 needed to run the city in 1963, property taxes had to provide more than half. Revenue from traffic fines alone could not carry Balcones Heights into the new world.6

As Wonderland prospered, familiar retail names began appearing along adjacent Fredericksburg Road.
The need for tax revenue was brought home yet again in the fall of 1962, when clouds of dust from drought-dried gravel streets led to bids for an oiling project to keep the dust down. Street work was a major part—40 percent—of the $230,000 capital improvements bond issue approved by the voters that winter. The rest was earmarked for sewer lines, storm sewers and drainage projects, all executed under a master plan prepared by the engineering firm of Willard E. Simpson.7

And still there was the issue of water. Residents of southern Balcones Heights had enjoyed dependable service since 1953, when their old system was given to the City of Balcones Heights and, in turn, to San Antonio. The old Country Gentleman Estates system, however, continued to operate independently. Its owner in 1960, Charles T. Smith, had answered complaints of low pressure by giving Balcones Heights the chance to buy the system before he had to raise rates to improve it. The city could not afford to accept.8

Higher rates, however, did not make the problems go away. Fortunately, the city could soon afford to pay $6,000 for the water system through a second bond issue—approved in 1964—totaling $100,000 and also including more sewer and street improvements. The obsolete system was shut down.

Once new San Antonio water mains were finished, Balcones Heights capped the old well. San Antonio’s City Public Service Board installed natural gas lines throughout Balcones Heights the same year.9

Soon an unexpected bonanza seemed to make the need for bond issues a thing of the past. In 1967 the State of Texas permitted municipalities to add a surcharge to state sales taxes for their own use. At the end of the year, 93 percent of the voters in a special Balcones Heights approved, not surprisingly, adding 1 percent to the sales tax for use within Balcones Heights.10

The World Rushes In
In 1964 Daniel Webster, far left, began 38 years as mayor during a pivotal era. Also being sworn in by Municipal Judge Joe Staurocz, right, are, from Webster’s left, councilmen Wallace Beck, Henry Hanouch Jr., Vernon LaBarbera, J. D. Kalafat and George Black. The notice thumbnailed to the front of the table, “Please, No cigarette butts or matches on floor. Use ash trays. Thanks.”

Thanks to healthy sales at Wonderland, by 1971 an additional $175,000 was pouring into the city treasury annually. In the last quarter of 1971 alone, Christmas sales provided Balcones Heights with nearly $150,000. Improvements could now be funded not by raising taxes to finance bond issues, but directly from operating income. Balcones Heights property tax rates became among the lowest in Bexar County.1

In the wake of the new revenues, the Balcones Heights annual budget quadrupled from $80,000 in 1967 to $300,000 three years later. Residents’ annual garbage pick-up fees were eliminated, 30 new street lights were added, the police force was increased to seven full-time patrolmen, volunteers were replaced by 11 fully salaried firemen and the awkward intersection of Fredericksburg, Balcones Heights and Dwehurst roads and Spencer Lane was realigned for good.12

Then some Wonderland merchants, sensing a chance for a payback for putting Balcones Heights on its feet, had an idea. In 1963 they had come up with the thoughtful suggestion that the mayor and council members pay themselves salaries. Now, six years and a sales tax windfall later, mall merchants thought it appropriate that the city change its name to Wonderland, Texas. The Texas Highway Department estimated the cost of changing signs at $2,700. Given a “favorable business climate,” the mall promised to spend $100,000 to promote the renamed city.13

A petition for an election was presented and a vote was set for December 6, 1969. Backers mailed a flurry of cards urging residents to “Give Yourself a Wonderful Holiday Gift” and “Vote YES FOR WONDERLAND...you’ll be glad you did.” Columnist
Paul Thompson front-paged the grump of a Balcones Heights resident that the change was bound to pass since the “council wants it.” But whether the council wanted it or not, the proposal failed by a vote of 97 to 78.14

Balcones Heights might still be Balcones Heights but there was no question that its fiber had changed forever. In 1963, municipal business had grown so that the council had to nearly double the number of meetings held the previous year, to 23. Increasing the operational workload was everything from zoning matters to a steady stream of permit requests from the new mall—fireworks displays, cat shows, elephant rides. As the population of Balcones Heights reached 2,500 in 1970, the crowded old wellhouse could no longer handle its role as city hall.

So it was that on May 1, 1971, a crowd gathered a block away to host Congressman O. C. Fisher speak at the dedication of a splendid two-story brick city hall to house the city’s administrative staff, municipal court and police department. The $124,000 structure was designed by Balcones Heights resident Bruce Johnson of the firm of Johnson, Dempsey and Associates and built under chief contractor Wendell Oggs.

“We don’t have any immediate use for the second floor,” explained retired Army Lt. Col. Elmer C. Newman, in his seventh year as the city’s secretary-treasurer, “but the architect suggested we could save money by adding it now instead of later.”15

Rapid-fire improvements may have been occurring without any new taxation, and without the need of bond issues required in cities with a lower proportion of commercial-to-residential development. The fate of Balcones Heights, however, was now inextricably tied to the ups and downs of the larger world, forcing the small suburb to face the problems and challenges of cities many times its physical size.
5. New Realities

Over the course of merely one decade, the turnaround in Balcones Heights was nothing short of astonishing. At the beginning of the 1960s it was a community with so few resources that if residents wanted the streets in front of their houses patched they had to pick up the asphalt and spread it themselves.

Ten years later the city had so much revenue it could lay pavement on its own without raising taxes a cent, all while upgrading elsewhere and planning a municipal services complex.

There came, however, a dark side to the coin.

The sudden prosperity of Balcones Heights was due to its location at a new crossroads of San Antonio. This is what drew the shoppers to the megamall, filled the new apartment complexes and more than paid the bills. But as development nearly filled its territory of less than one square mile, the exaggerated levels of traffic and commerce forced Balcones Heights and its 2,500 residents to deal with the problems of a city of 30,000.

By the 1980s, Balcones Heights may have been among the smallest of the dozen Bexar County suburbs, but its crime rate was the highest. It may have had the most sales tax revenue, but it was also most vulnerable to competitive forces from new, distant malls and was most affected by national retailing cycles.

Balcones Heights may have been a suburb in name, but its population density was higher than most urban areas of similar size in Texas. As apartment and commercial properties slipped into absentee ownerships and began to decay, Balcones Heights also had to deal with the unfamiliar headaches of urban renewal. Crime became an issue in the 1972 city election, when a slate of five candidates sought to overthrow the incumbents by campaigning for stricter law enforcement, better fire protection and improved recreation facilities. Incumbents led by veteran mayor Daniel Webster won handily but did not ignore the problems.

In October 1974, Balcones Heights marked its twenty-fifth anniversary with the dedication of a handsome four-story brick fire station of a design similar to the city hall it stood beside. The old concrete block fire station on Glenarm Place was dedicated in 1983 as the Balcones Heights Community Service Center. Five years later it was remodeled. Also in 1983, the old rock city hall, used for storage but surrounded by tall grass, was filled up under leadership of the new Balcones Heights Senior Citizens Organization.
Dedication of a new fire station in 1974 occurred during the twenty-fifth anniversary of the incorporation of Balcones Heights. The former fire station was remodeled as the Balcones Heights Community Center.

But despite increasing its police force to 13 patrolmen, Balcones Heights maintained the highest crime rate among Bexar County's incorporated suburbs. In 1979, as its population neared 3,500, there were 505 reported crime incidents in Balcones Heights, compared with 473 in the second-place suburb, Universal City, with its population of nearly 11,000.2

The figures look bad," admitted then Assistant Balcones Heights Police Chief Kenneth Mann, "but there's another side to this." Of the reported incidents, he said, 383—or three-fourths—were larceny cases, most of which were shoplifters nabbed by
Wonderland Shopping City security workers. The mall parking area's Park and Ride bus terminal was convenient, but it also provided a target for auto battery thieves. And burglars, provided easy access by major traffic arteries through Balcones Heights, were drawn to the city's hard-to-patrol apartment complexes.¹

Then, during an early morning robbery in May 1983, the manager of a local franchise restaurant was fatally stabbed. It was the first Balcones Heights homicide in memory. As crime awareness rose, some 70 residents crowding city council chambers that fall agreed that a Neighborhood Crime Watch Program was in order. "We're all going to look out for each other," said Councilwoman Mary Louise Evans.² A year later, a Balcones Heights policeman caught a robbery suspect following a shootout outside a home improvement warehouse.

In March 1989 came two shootings in as many weeks. In one, Deputy Marshal Richard Scott Rogers, age 29, in his sixth year on the force, was shot to death by a motorist he had stopped for a traffic violation. More than 300 lawmen from throughout South Texas attended his funeral services in his hometown of Castroville, joining in a procession led by a police motorcycle escort and more than 50 patrol cars, their sirens flashing.

Eleven days later, Sgt. Steve Fuchs, 30, was wounded in the neck during a shootout at an apartment complex. The assailants were apprehended.³

Continued vandalism caused Cillie Novak Park to be closed in the fall of 1984. Residents rose up to see that the long-time park, with its coveted softball diamond, was renovated and reopened the following spring. A second park, opened with tennis and volleyball courts on Pleasant Drive in 1974, was also refurbished and was named Richard Scott Rogers Park in memory of the slain police officer.⁴

By 1988, the traffic count through the city rose to 171,000 vehicles per day, nearly two-thirds of them on Interstate 10, reported crime incidents rose to 962. In 1992 the Police Department
The "Grand Re-creation of Wonderland Mall" brought high-fashion Frost Bros. to Balcones Heights in 1981.

opened a storefront annex on the upper level of Crossroads mall. As new technology, new police department efficiencies and increased citizen awareness took effect, Balcones Heights saw its relative criminal incidents ranking among Bexar County's suburbs drop to fourth.  

Even as Balcones Heights residents adjusted to the same fears and dangers their neighbors dealt with in adjoining San Antonio, there was still much to celebrate. The city held its first Christmas parade the day after Thanksgiving in 1977, its fire trucks leading the procession through the streets from Wonderland and back.

Two-term Mayor Kirk Colyer, who at age 27 succeeded Daniel Webster, boasted commerce-rich Balcones Heights as a "Free Enterprise City." In 1983 he gained headlines by connecting "The World's Largest Free Enterprise Parade and Run," with Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez as grand marshal. The event ended with a festival and 20 food booths at Wonderland.

By 1982, the fortunes of Wonderland Shopping City, by far the largest producer of retail sales in Balcones Heights caused sales tax receipts—$82,000 in 1969—to soar to $944,300, making up 90 percent of the municipal budget. That kept property taxes at a low 20 cents per $100 valuation, one-quarter of the rate in San Antonio. No other Bexar County community was as dependent on the sales tax. Should there be a sudden slip in sales, the effect on Balcones Heights could be traumatic.

Thus alarms went off in the fall of 1982 when sales taxes were lagging by nearly 18 percent. Until then, sales tax revenues for Balcones Heights had increased every year but two—in 1971, when they dropped by 9 percent, and 1979, when they were down one percent. Revenues caught up by the end of 1982, but four years later Mayor Emil Deike had to deal with a more serious problem.
Part of the trouble was due to the city's aging population; the number of senior citizens was as high as 60 percent. A doubling of senior citizen homestead exemptions in 1986 meant a large loss of property tax revenues.

More ominously, the beginning of a statewide economic collapse sent retail sales plummeting. Balcones Heights, scrambling, had to lay off all five civilian police dispatchers and shift the work to fire department dispatchers, saving $40,000 in salaries and benefits. Property taxes, down to 7.55 cents per $100 valuation, had to increase by 35 percent to support even a reduced municipal budget, pared down 10 percent to $1.65 million for 1987.10

By the fall of 1988 the tax rate had to be more than doubled just to get the annual budget to the necessary level and add $10,000 to complete a $150,000 plan for badly needed street repairs, without the benefit of higher sales tax revenues. Outraged residents, led by senior citizens, revolted.

In January 1989, residents voted 184 to 199 to roll back taxes close to the previous level. The action sent refunds totaling $127,000 to taxpayers. The dismayed Mayor Deke pointed out to the insurgents that due to tax breaks in place for senior citizens, he, as a senior citizen himself, got back barely four dollars. A $2 million bond issue was suggested to fund badly needed street projects. Instead, that fall the city council raised taxes again—by a more modest 41 percent—to cover a $2.2 million operating...
VIA, San Antonio's metropolitan transit system, maintains a regional passenger terminal and Park and Ride in Balcones Heights, at Crossroads Boulevard and Interstate 10.

budget for the coming year. This time, rollback proponents did not stir.

Driving the roller-coaster fortunes of Balcones Heights were decisions made and actions taken not just in Bexar County, but in distant parts of the nation and even Europe, where the new owners of Wonderland were headquartered. In 1977, Community Realty Company had sold two-thirds of its interest in Wonderland Shopping City to the Lehnderolf Group of Hamburg, West Germany, for an estimated $12 million. Lehnderolf purchased the balance two years later.

The new owners, operating the mall through a subsidiary company in Dallas, were dealing with a newly competitive situation in the fast-growing suburban areas of northern San Antonio around the arc of Loop 410. The market shares of 15-year-old Wonderland along with North Star and Central Park malls nearly four miles to the east were being threatened by new competition from three regional malls built or about to be built on three flanks: Ingram Park, on Loop 410 four miles southwest of Wonderland; Windsor Park, six miles east of North Star and Central Park; and Rivercenter, with easy interstate access six miles south in downtown San Antonio.

The old equilibrium was about to be upset.

Quick improvements at Wonderland did not lag behind those occurring at North Star and Central Park. A $7 million renovation at Wonderland added fountains, skylights, new floors and restaurant groupings. The number of stores rose from 70 to 85. High-fashion Frost Bros. spent $3 million to create a new branch in the empty wing first occupied by Rhodes and then by Liberty House.

"The Grand Re-Creation of Wonderland Mall" was celebrated in mid-1981 with a 7,000-invitation gala featuring food, entertainment and an address by San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros.

As the economy soared in the early 1980s, Wonderland's owners capitalized on the mall's location at two interstate highways and renamed the mall Crossroads of San Antonio. The renaming heralded a $300 million redevelopment that was to nearly double retail space in the mall and add, nearby, a 200-
room hotel plus six office towers as high as 18 stories with a million square feet of space.

One anachronism was handled in the process—the Handy Andy supermarket where John Wayne had cut the Alamo cake. Grocery stores had once been welcome anchors at covered malls. But the concept of such one-stop shopping was out of style, and Handy Andy still had 30 years left on its lease. In exchange for seven acres of adjacent land on Fredericksburg Road, Handy Andy surrendered its lease and built a 34,000-square-foot store in a center with twice as much additional space for others, including former mall tenants Eckerd Drugs and Winn's.14

Crossroads of San Antonio unveiled its completed $30 million first phase in time for the Christmas shopping season in 1987. The grand opening centered on the Palm Pavilion, an indoor area with a dozen 35-foot palm trees from Florida, plus an outdoor plaza surrounded by waterfalls beside a stairway, grassy banks, a reflecting pool and a large fountain. The area was also the entrance for the six-screen theater that replaced the old two-screen Wonder Theater in the far corner of the parking area.15

But as the drop in sales tax revenues had warned those at Balcones Heights city hall, hard times were ahead. The state's major banking institutions began to fall like dominoes. Much-touted Frost Bros. went bankrupt, and Crossroads Mall lost other large tenants as well.

An Indiana research firm called in to explain things decided that having upscale Frost Bros. with such lower-priced retailers as Montgomery Ward and Stein Mart had created "an inconsistent tenant mix," one the researchers found "not at all common." The recommendation was that Crossroads fill an open niche in the San Antonio market and become not a "discount center," but a "value center," to appeal to thrifty shoppers.16

Crossroads owners wasted little time filling the niche. As the economy improved in mid-1990, the mall signed up Burlington Coat Factory for the yawning Frost Bros. space. Also added were such stores targeting value-oriented, fashion-conscious consumers as Lerner New York and County Seat Outlet, plus Phar-Mor, a large-volume drugstore.17

The new strategy combined with a reinvigorated economy to restore vitality to Crossroads and thus to Balcones Heights. The
Midland, Texas-based MRO Properties Inc. assumed ownership of Crossroads in 1996, the year the 112-room Summer Suites opened at the northwest corner of the mall’s property.

Past the mall parking area’s northeast corner, within a loop created by a highway interchange, rose a different structure, a futuristic three-story center housing TransGuide, one of the nation’s first computer-controlled traffic management systems.

TransGuide’s computer operators in Balcones Heights direct traffic movements throughout the San Antonio area, using fiber optics, sensors and remote cameras to detect changes in traffic flow and, within 15 seconds, to transmit new directional messages to overhead highway signs in the affected area. The completed system is to cover nearly 200 miles of highways in the region. It is already credited with a 15 percent reduction in overall interstate highway traffic accidents and with a 30 percent reduction in emergency response time.
TransGuide computer operators in Balcones Heights monitor traffic flow along interstate highways in the San Antonio area.
6. Balcones Heights at 50

A half-century after its tumultuous founding, Balcones Heights remains distinct among Bexar County’s 20 incorporated suburbs.

In territory, the pear-shaped city of 7 square miles is among the smallest, its density by far the highest. More than half of its land is a commercial district dominated by aptly named Crossroads, one of the largest shopping malls in South Texas, nestled between the intersection of interstate highways 10 and 410 and Fredericksburg Road, which diagonally bisects Balcones Heights. Approximately 80 percent of its residents live in apartments.

Feeding retail outlets in the mall and elsewhere in Balcones Heights is a daily average of 205,000 vehicles carrying some 307,000 people. Sixty percent of the vehicles travel Interstate 10 from downtown San Antonio into fast-developing affluent suburbia areas to the northeast. An average of 100,000 vehicles travel daily nearby on Loop 410.

Such an unusually high volume of traffic and commerce produces retail sales taxes that provide one of the highest proportions of any municipal budget in the state—fully half of the Balcones Heights city budget of $3.5 million in 1999. This reliance, on the other hand, requires Balcones Heights city hall to be particularly alert in times of economic slowdown.

All this activity also gives Balcones Heights—population 3,200—the problems of a city many times its size. Balcones Heights municipal court handles some 9,000 cases each year, comparable to the load of a city of 50,000. Full-time police department personnel number half of all full-time municipal employees—24 out of 50, plus 13 of the city’s 18 part-time employees. There are 19 uniformed personnel and seven full-time and five part-time general administrative personnel.

Overseeing city operations is, in general, a remarkably small percentage of residents who maintain a municipal government notable for its stability.

Although there are two dozen homes at the northeastern tip bordering San Antonio’s Del Rio subdivision, the main residential area of Balcones Heights is southwest of Fredericksburg Road. This is separated, in turn, into a northern area of apartment complexes above traditional suburban streets lined with single-family homes—all of which Balcones Heights has fewer than 300, compared with more than 1,400 apartment units.

While Balcones Heights has had its share of highly contested elections, its government has an enviable record of stability. During one period of critical growth, the tenure of Mayor Daniel Webster lasted 18 years, and makeup of the city council at one point remained unchanged for six years.

At the time of the city's fiftieth anniversary celebration in 1999, Lucille Wohlforth, a Balcones Heights resident since 1947, had already served as mayor for five years, following 16 years as a councilwoman—six of them in the 1970s.

Of top city administrators, Roy L. Miller, who joined the city in 1973, had served as chief administrative officer for 17 years. Charles W. Mathies, a fireman since 1969, had been fire chief for 21 years. Kenneth R. Menn, a policeman since 1973, had been police chief for seven years. Bobby de la Garza, inspired as a neighborhood child during visits with veteran-chief Bob Pryor, first joined the police force in 1972, returned in 1986 and became assistant chief 10 years later. A half dozen other employees had equally impressive tenures. Ann Fry, city secretary for six years, was a relative newcomer.

At the close of the century, city government found itself dealing with the complex issues of urban renewal in a mature city. Median Balcones Heights home values in 1990 were similar to those in adjoining areas of San Antonio—$59,000—as was the median annual family income of $18,290, skewed downward by the large number of lower-income senior citizens.

Homes were occupied by a largely aging population, with half of the 200 homestead exemptions claimed by residents over age 65.
While most of the 28 apartment complexes were well maintained, others, owned by absentee landlords, showed signs of their age. Many, built in the 1960s for adult tenants, lacked the open spaces required for children of the many young families moving in.

Balcones Heights residents, in the mid-1990s, decided to turn things around.

By stressing congestion caused by the city’s unusually high population density, perhaps the highest in Texas, after lengthy negotiations Balcones Heights in 1995 obtained federal urban renewal funds to purchase the decaying four-acre Alta Villa apartment complex in the 3200 block of Hillcrest Drive. The structures were torn down in part to create new open space that would meet the needs of the younger families, who by the late 1990s were bringing the city’s proportion of senior citizens down to some 40 percent.

While some commercial land was still open to new development, the strip-center ambience of much of pedestrian-unfriendly Fredericksburg Road did not encourage upgrading of existing older sites. City hall saw opportunity.

In 1996, the city council authorized a Southwest Texas State University report on uses for the year-old 7 percent hotel-motel tax. The next year, a wide-ranging street design seminar was conducted under Steve Tillotson by the San Antonio Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. In 1998 the University of Texas at San Antonio’s Institute for Studies in Business completed a two-volume economic development study for the city.

In 1999, a master plan steering committee headed by Pamela Hodges was synthesizing the material and making recommendations for new urban design elements in Balcones Heights. Distinctive markers were being considered along with improved directional signage, walkways and thoughtful plantings of shade.
As businesses continued to be drawn to strategically located Balcones Heights, workmen early in 1999 finish the Dave & Buster's entertainment complex at Interstate 10 and Loop 410. Trees and landscaping, not only along Fredericksburg Road but throughout Balcones Heights.

The new directions coincided with a milestone event, a gala Balcones Heights Fiftieth Anniversary celebration planned for March 23, 1999. Among those to be recognized were incorporation activists Clyde C. Crews, Ivan Martinez and W. W. Fowlkes. One highlight would be a fiesta and jazz festival on the grounds of Crossroads Mall.

Another event, on the shaded streets in the southern part of the city, would be placement of a historical marker on the old rock city hall, built as a wellhouse in the earliest days of an isolated subdivision to help transform a "wasteland of green mesquite" into the unique community of Balcones Heights.
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Balcones Heights at 50 47
As Balcones Heights planners took a new look at their city, a seminar led by the San Antonio Chapter of the American Institute of Architects demonstrated how Fredericksburg Road could be upgraded from its longtime appearance, shown with the San Antonio skyline in the distance, by adding landscaping, sidewalks and bicycle lanes.
City Councils since 1949

1949-51
Clyde C. Crews, Mayor
Mrs. N. B. LaRue
Clyde Crews
Ralph J. Hinsebring
J. D. Kaliafat
Edward A. Meredith

1951-52
Carl Kiefer, Mayor
Clyde C. Crews
Ralph J. Hinsebring
J. D. Kaliafat
E. F. Keaysley
Clyde Legace

1952-53
Carl Kiefer, Mayor
Clyde C. Crews
Neil Perry
Ralph J. Hinsebring
J. D. Kaliafat
Walter Kutschensreiter

1953-54
Carl Kiefer, Mayor
Clyde C. Crews
Neil Perry
Ralph J. Hinsebring
J. D. Kaliafat
Walter Kutschensreiter

1954-55
Franklin S. Gaskins, Mayor
Ray E. Corby, Vice Mayor
T. J. Howard
Henry J. Hannibal
J. D. Kaliafat
Irene A. Pape

1956-57
Franklin S. Gaskins, Mayor
Henry Hannibal
T. J. Howard
J. D. Kaliafat
Irene Pape
Irma Nordler

1957-58
Franklin S. Gaskins, Mayor
Henry Hannibal
J. D. Kaliafat
Walter Kutschensreiter
Irene Pape
Irma Nordler

1958-60
Vernon B. LaRue, Mayor
Henry Hannibal
J. D. Kaliafat
Walter Kutschensreiter
Irene Pape
Daniel Webster

1960-62
J. A. Franzer, Mayor
Ray Corby
J. D. Kaliafat
Peter A. Montgomery
Gerald Striker
Daniel Webster

1962-64
J. C. Frasner, Mayor
Henry Hannibal Jr.
J. D. Kaliafat
Vernon V. LaRue
I. Murphy
Daniel Webster

1964-68
Daniel Webster, Mayor
Wallace Beal
Gene A. Black
Henry Hannibal Jr.
J. D. Kaliafat
Vernon V. LaRue

1966-71
Daniel Webster, Mayor
Gene A. Black
Samuel P. Boyd
Vernon V. LaRue
John C. Shaver
Melvin Stone

1974-76
Daniel Webster, Mayor
Vernon V. LaRue
Harold F. Matthies
Michael R. Pryor
John C. Shaver
Lucille M. Woldorth

1976-78
Daniel Webster, Mayor
Kirk K. Colyer
Vernon V. LaRue
Michael R. Pryor
John C. Shaver
Lucille M. Woldorth

1978-80
Daniel Webster, Mayor
Kirk K. Colyer
Charles E. Cox
Emil L. Delee
Vernon V. LaRue
Lucille M. Woldorth

1980-82
Daniel Webster, Mayor
Kirk K. Colyer
Charles E. Cox
Emil L. Delee
Richard Jimenez
Vernon V. LaRue

1982-83
Kirk K. Colyer, Mayor
Emil L. Delee
Mary L. Evans
Richard Jimenez
Vernon V. LaRue
Daniel Webster

1983-84
Kirk K. Colyer, Mayor
Emil L. Delee
Mary L. Evans
W. T. Bill Hall
Richard Jimenez
Daniel Webster

1984-86
Kirk K. Colyer, Mayor
Emil E. Deike
Mary Louise Evans
W. F. (Bill) Hill
Richard Jimenez
Dixie Lindsey

1986-87
Emil E. Deike, Mayor
Dominic Crescuelo
LeMoyne Dorsey
W. F. (Bill) Hill
Richard Jimenez
Cathy Shelton

1987-88
Emil E. Deike, Mayor
LeMoyne Dorsey
W. F. (Bill) Hill
Richard Jimenez
William L. Johnson
Cathy Shelton

1988-89
Emil E. Deike, Mayor
LeMoyne Dorsey
W. F. (Bill) Hill
William L. Johnson
Cathy Shelton
Lucille M. Wohlforth

1989-90
Emil E. Deike, Mayor
Charles Baetz
LeMoyne Dorsey
William L. Johnson
Jesse M. Pacheco
Lucille M. Wohlforth

1990-91
Emil E. Deike, Mayor
LeMoyne Dorsey
R. C. Gainer
William L. Johnson
Jesse M. Pacheco
Lucille M. Wohlforth

1991-92
Emil E. Deike, Mayor
LeMoyne Dorsey
George Moellerling
William L. Johnson
Johnny Rodriguez Jr.
Lucille M. Wohlforth

1992-93
Lucille M. Wohlforth, Mayor
Richard Jimenez
William L. Johnson
George Moellerling
Jesse M. Pacheco
Johnny Rodriguez Jr.

1993-94
Lucille M. Wohlforth, Mayor
Richard C. Brooke
Richard Jimenez
William L. Johnson
George Moellerling
Jesse M. Pacheco

1994-97
Lucille M. Wohlforth, Mayor
Rusty K. Armstrong
Richard C. Brooke
William L. Johnson
Jesse M. Pacheco
George Moellerling

1997-98
Lucille M. Wohlforth, Mayor
George Moellerling
Jesse M. Pacheco
Clemente Rocha Jr.
Steve Walker
LaNelle B. Winn

1998-99
Lucille M. Wohlforth, Mayor
George Moellerling
Robert A. Ortega
Clemente Rocha Jr.
Steve Walker
LaNelle B. Winn
Notes

1. Homesteads in the Hills

8. "At Last It Has Been Made Possible," Express, Mar. 27, 1932, 1-C.
10. "72 Lots Sold in Balcones Heights," Express, Apr. 9, 1932, 1-C; "Balcones Heights," Express, May 1, 1932, 44.
14. "Notes and Comments on Local Real Estate," Express, Jun. 20, 1940, 10-C.

2. The Incorporation 'War' with San Antonio

1. Jack Long to Lewis F. Fisher, Jan. 4, 1989: The area was a partnership between Cotulla ranchers and South Texas rodeo producer Dudley Storey and T. Brooks Wood, a professional announcer and rodeo equipment dealer who had inherited the site. A rodeo was approved by the national Rodeo-Convention Association, according to Long, a local rodeo announcer who also performed there. It stood just west of the western end of present-day Storeywood Street north of Uvalde Elementary School.
9. Assistant Marshal as presenting judge were Volma and Earl Cusper, clerks. The election committee was chaired by Clyde Cress and included Kenneth, Ivan C. Maddox and Carl Kiefer. The group hired W. E. Bowls as its attorney.
16. Doce Lindsey to Lewis F. Fisher, Dec. 2, 1949. Still active in 1999 in management of Santa Courts, was renamed Mission Santa Mojada, in its original manager, Marie Matin, first secretary of the Santa Monica Motor Association—now the San Antonio Hotel-Motel Association—when it was organized in 1939.

Notes to pages 1–14

3. Hard Times in a Tax-Free City

12. "Citizens in Upstairs Back Balcones Ride," News-Journal, Aug. 18, 1955; A-1; "The trouble is, we have no taxes," Gaskins explained. "Whenever a town operates without taxes, the suggestion of it being a speed trap comes down on it." "What is a speed trap?" The mayor's response: "A speed trap is an unmarked road.

4. The World Redux in

6. Minutes, Jul. 9, 1962; Jan. 14, 1963. In 1964 the press noted "currency toward motorists going just slightly over the speed limit" and quoted Police Chief Bob Pryor as saying, "We haven't used radar since God knows when." New Mayor Donald Webster was reported in hankering to add, "Our officers are short." "(Little SA Suburb)," News, Nov. 26, 1964, 11-H.

5. New Realities


54 Notes to pages 13-37
16. "Croswinds mall changes image to draw tenants," San Antonio Business Journal, Sept. 4, 1989, 1. (This research from doing the in-depth report for the mall owners was the Indianapolis-based Stillerman, Jones and Company.)
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Balcones Heights, Texas is unique among San Antonio's suburban cities. Its wooded homesites were promoted during the Depression as affordable for families "of moderate means." Its residents incorporated in 1948 to gain zoning protection only to find themselves having to rely on revenue from traffic offenders to run the city.

Then two new interstate highways intersected at Balcones Heights, making it a major crossroads. A regional shopping mall and other businesses soon filled half the city's territory, bringing sales tax revenues that funded a host of municipal services.

Having marked its first half-century, Balcones Heights now deals with issues of urban renewal and long-range planning to enhance its strategic setting midway between downtown San Antonio and fast-growing affluent suburban areas to the northwest.