



Tales of Texas

NEWSLETTER



September 2024

This issue of Tales of Texas concerns the local history of Friendswood, Texas.

"Figs and Quakers"

The headline photo above is courtesy of the City of Friendswood Facebook Page.

Historical marker photo by author's wife.

Stevenson Family courtesy of Historical Marker Data Base.

The fig plant courtesy of Chron.com historical photos

The fig mural courtesy of the City of Friendswood.

Comments? Go to website listed below.

© 2024 Daryl Lott

Religious Society of Friends

The Religious Society of Friends is the official name of what most people call the Quaker church. The informal name's documented origins aren't certain, but one story Quakers tell happened in 1647. King Charles I's court attendant told George Fox, a Quaker founder, to remove his hat in the presence of the king. Fox said the king needed to tremble and quake before the Lord instead of worrying about silliness. The king replied, "Get this quaker out of here."

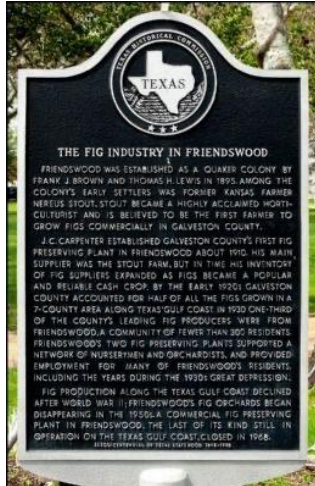
Friendswood, Texas

In 1895, two Quakers, Hadley Lewis and Frank Brown, founded a church and settlement that would become the City of Friendswood. Although still in Galveston County, the new settlement was inland and offered agricultural countryside to the settlers. The men started farming and would attract other settlers which meant they needed a school and church. The Friendswood Academy was built in in the early 1900's

where the current stone Friends Church now stands. The Quakers believed in the egalitarian education of both genders. They led the nation in educating girls and young women for non-traditional roles in professions such as medicine. Many "women's rights" issues came out of a college called Oberlin College in Ohio. Presbyterians founded the college, but there was a strong Quaker community to support it. It was the first college to grant co-ed degrees to women. It also admitted Black students and was proudly abolitionist. Lewis and Brown founded the settlement on faith, agriculture, and education.



Tales of Texas



Historical Marker



Members of the Stevenson Family
Working Figs Where the Present
Day Park Is

When World War Two came along, the fig orchards provided our servicemen around the world with a taste of Texas most people couldn't get. World War Two's economy drove production in all areas, including figs. But, alas, when the war ended, a new economic engine developed.

Recently, my wife took our grandchildren and me to the splash pad in nearby Friendswood. At Stevenson Park, a historical marker caught my attention. The marker's subject is the fig industry of Friendswood. I didn't know about this part of our Texas history. Throughout the first half of the 20th Century, figs played an important role in our area's economy. Fig trees grew naturally in the heat and humidity of the Texas Gulf Coast. Figs are easily picked from the low-to-the-ground sprawling trees with large leaves. They are easy to preserve and are quite tasty.

Very recently, as my sister and I were doing some genealogical research on our own family, we came across the 1940 census for our family project. Our maternal grandparents were listed on the census. Their location was Friendswood, Texas, and their occupations were listed as "fig plant." I instantly thought of the historical marker and rushed back to get more information.

Although the founders of Friendswood couldn't have foreseen the "Great Depression" and "Dust Bowl" of the 1930's, the fig industry sustained many people struggling to survive, including my family.

Many poor families, including children, picked figs in Galveston County and cotton in Brazoria County. The figs grew into a sustaining crop covering thousands of acres. In the Depression, any job was appreciated. The social safety nets of today did not exist then.



Tales of Texas

War's End



Fig Plant, Friendswood Texas



Fig Mural
Friendswood

After the war, everything changed. Friendswood, the agricultural Quaker community, faced the inevitable. The returning soldiers needed homes and places of employment not driven by figs.

The federal government introduced the GI Bill that provided funding for housing and education on behalf of the returning service men. Schools and universities expanded. Industry obtained the technological advancements of the war and began to produce them for civilian use. None of these things are bad, they are good things.

So, the fig orchards disappeared over time. The fig plants went away. Thousands of houses sprang up. Stores, shops, schools and non-Quaker churches replaced the orchards and processing plants.

The Quaker church and cemetery is still there. The park with the splash pad replaced the Stevenson orchard, but kept the Stevenson name.

The old-timers can still recall the figs and their prominence from Winnie to Brazoria.

My parents moved into my childhood home in SE Houston in the early 1950's. In the backyard, my mother planted a fig tree there. Every year she had us kids pick the figs and bring them to her. She would then put up jar after jar of fig preserves. Preserves, as opposed to jellies and jams, use the entire fig saturated with a sugary solution to put on toast or some other base.

Until I saw the census of 1940 and the historical marker, I didn't know how my mother knew so much about figs.

You can still get fig preserves at your local H-E-B. They are imported from France and Spain. Kinda sad.