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HUNTSVILLE -- ALABAMA AND TEXAS

by George M. Mahoney

(In response to an invitation from the Rotary Club and the City of Huntsville, Texas, seven Huntsville, Alabama, Rotarians accompanied Mayor Joe Davis to Huntsville, Texas, on July 12, 1986. The occasion was the celebration of the Texas Sesquicentennial and the 151st birthday of Huntsville, Texas, a city founded by Pleasant Gray from Huntsville, Alabama, who named the Texas town for the Alabama town.)

There is a striking similarity in the origin of the two cities of Huntsville, Alabama, and Huntsville, Texas. Both were established near a big spring, both town plats contain a county courthouse square in the center, and both were founded by pioneer settlers who braved the wilderness in search of a better life for themselves and their families.

In 1805, John Hunt, for whom Huntsville, Alabama, was named, settled near a big spring in the bend of the Tennessee River in what was then a part of the Mississippi Territory. Other families soon followed, and by 1808, when Madison County was created, more than 300 people had come to live near Hunt's spring in the community which was to be known as Huntsville.

When the Federal government first sold Madison County land at auction in 1809, Leroy Pope outbid John Hunt for the 160 acres around the Big Spring and thus became the real estate developer of the town. Although John Hunt bought land in the county, he did not finish paying for it and returned to his former home in Tennessee in 1814.

When the town of Huntsville was chosen as the seat of county government on July 5, 1810, its official name became Twickenham, in accordance with an act of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature. Because the citizens objected to the new name, the legislature changed it back to Huntsville in honor of its original pioneer settler.

By 1819 Huntsville had grown to be the largest town in the newly formed Alabama Territory and was chosen as the temporary capital during the period when Alabama was transformed into a state.

Pleasant Gray was also a pioneer settler who discovered a spring, obtained a land grant from the Mexican government, established a trading post, and founded the town of Huntsville, Texas. He named it in honor of his earlier hometown, Huntsville, Alabama.

According to Madison County (Alabama) deed records, Gray's father, Thomas Gray, owned farmland near Huntsville during the 1820's, but in 1826 sold his farm and moved to Tipton, Tennessee. There in 1828, Pleasant married Hannah E. Holshouser, and by the time he moved his family to Texas, three children had been born to this union.

Pleasant and his brother, Ephraim, were among a large number from Madison County who settled in Texas during the 1830's. Because many families had relatives and friends who were involved in the Texas revolution, several companies of volunteers were raised from north Alabama to fight for the cause. Most of Captain P. S. Wyatt's company of "Huntsville Volunteers" and Dr. Jack Shackerford's "Red Rovers" lost their lives in the Goliad Massacre on March 27, 1836. Other families from Madison County arrived in

Texas just in time to aid General Sam Houston fight the Battle of San Jacinto. Some of the older men who migrated to Texas had known both Sam Houston and David Crockett as they had fought side by side against the Creek Indians in 1813 and 1814 under the leadership of General Andrew Jackson.

The 1810 town plat of Huntsville, Alabama, and the 1844 plat of Huntsville, Texas, are very similar. Both are drawn in blocks which include a public square. Both have a big spring as a source of water supply. Both have a street named for the spring. Both have streets named for war heroes and national leaders. While Huntsville, Alabama, has streets named for Generals Gates, Greene, Lincoln, and Clinton of Revolutionary War fame, Huntsville, Texas, has streets named for Fannin, Milam, Travis, and Lamar of Texas Revolution fame.

Both cities have remained county seats of their respective counties over the years, as well as educational and cultural centers. While Huntsville, Alabama, developed its Greene Academy by 1821, Huntsville, Texas had its academy developed by 1844. Both built churches and lecture halls to support the religious and intellectual life of the community.

Although John Hunt and Pleasant Gray moved away from the towns which they founded, these communities have continued to flourish. Both cities are proud of their heritage and strive to preserve it. At the same time, they both look forward to a better future just as the pioneers did in the early nineteenth century.

Huntsville, Texas, today is a city of 30,000 in East Texas, 75 miles north of

Houston. It is famous as the retirement home of Texas hero Sam Houston and the home of Sam Houston College. Located in pine-covered, red sandy hills, it is the headquarters of the Raven Ranger District Office of Sam Houston National Forest of over 158,000 acres. Lumber mills and woodworking plants are important to its economy. The Texas Department of Corrections is also an important part of its economy, with many facilities located there, including the one where the famous Texas Prison Rodeo is put on by the prisoners and is attended by as many as 100,000 visitors annually.

Today Huntsville, Alabama, is the fastest growing metropolitan area in Alabama, with a current population of more than 165,000. Agriculture remains an economic mainstay for Madison County, with an annual gross income of more than \$60 million from cotton, soybeans and livestock. In the span of the last 35 years, Huntsville has made the transition from cotton and cotton mills to missiles, to space, and to diversified industry, without losing momentum in any of these fields. The ever-growing scope of scientific, technical and management tasks for the Army, NASA, private industry, and educational institutions has caused amazing growth. Huntsville has also grown into a regional center for health care, education, arts, entertainment, transportation, trade (including international) and distribution.

So, this is a "Tale of Two Cities" -- two sister cities with a common history. It is also the story of two men and two springs. Pleasant Gray's Texas spring no longer exists, while John Hunt's spring continues to flow and remains one of the sources of water for Alabama's fourth largest city, and one of

the nation's leaders in high technology.

Maybe, just maybe, the difference in the two springs is what has made the difference in the two cities.