

Continuation of;
THE PROMISED LAND - A HISTORY OF BROWN COUNTY, TEXAS
by James C. White

R. D. Forsythe and Henry Ford

A pioneer of the sixties, who lived sixty-seven years in Brown and Mills counties, experiencing in his later years the thrills of the turbulent twenties and some of the throes of the throbbing thirties, was Robert D. Forsythe, native of Arkansas who settled here in 1866. During his long residence in the eastern part of Brown County he became one of the Gibraltar-like figures of the early days, and until his death in 1933 was revered by countless people who honored him for his sturdy citizenship and his unfailing goodness.

He was an outstanding figure in the life of the Williams Ranch community throughout the years when that settlement was headquarters for much of this territory. Mr. Forsythe was born in Polk County, Arkansas, August 23, 1847, and his parents moved to Texas in 1851, settling first in Ellis County. With his brother, Bud Forsythe, he came to Brown county in 1866, and established his home at Williams Ranch, with a big herd of cattle.

Later he and his brother engaged in merchandising at the Ranch. His ranch at first was in Brown County, but when Mills County was established a part of his holdings were included in the new county, including his home place. In 1917 he moved to the Zephyr community, however, and spent his remaining days as a citizen of Brown county.

The Forsythe store at Williams Ranch was a trading post for a great area of the new country, and the cattle operations of the brothers were both big and spectacular. Mr. Forsythe's grandfather was killed in the war of 1812, and his father fought in the Mexican war. It was during this war that the elder Forsythe became acquainted with Texas, and determined as soon as possible to move his family here. Of the Forsythe home at Williams Ranch Henry Ford wrote:

" ... a frontier trading post which inspired many of the legends that have come down to us of fights and tragedies; the swish of Indian arrows; legends that tell of the friendliness of that other day, of such open-handed hospitality, as in the instance when a stranger stopped and asked for a night's lodging. The genial host responded, 'Well, sit down and commence staying. Door locks and bells were not fashionable but the proverbial latch-string hanging on the outside was.'"

Mr. Forsythe made two cattle drives into New Mexico, disposing of his herds at a ranch on or near the present site of Roswell. There were 1,500 cattle in the first drive and 1,800 in the second. Good steers cost him \$10 and the best cows \$3, and he doubled his money by driving the cattle to New Mexico. It was on the first cattle drive to New Mexico that Mr. Forsythe met Henry Ford, then a young man wanting to come to Texas, and was instrumental in bringing to this county a citizen who exercised great leadership here throughout the remainder of his life.

Mr. Ford joined the wagon train and came home with Mr. Forsythe, living for a time at San Saba and Williams Ranch and later moving to Brownwood, to become county clerk for nine years and then a banker who served until his death in 1910. Ford accompanied his friend on the second drive to New Mexico.

The story of the period of tragedy and turmoil at Williams Ranch near the final years of that community's life is shrouded in more

or less mystery, and is colored by legends many of which probably are inaccurate. Mr. Forsythe was reluctant to discuss the matter,

but in a booklet published a few years ago by Tevis Clyde Smith, he was quoted at some length upon certain phases of the three-county feud.

"Willis Johnson was one of the pioneers of this district who worked for me at the old Williams Ranch," Mr. Forsythe was quoted

as recalling. Later he bought him some land of his own and as the years passed became enormously rich. "While apparently within the law most of the time, Johnson had many friends who were not, and when these friends got into trouble Johnson always gave them a helping hand. He went on the bonds of more cattle rustlers than anybody who ever lived in this section of the state. He did more than go on their bonds, too. When the time for their trials came he always hired good lawyers for them, and as a general rule these outlaws succeeded in beating their cases. Finally, Johnson got into a kidnaping scrape. He took a sixteen year old girl away from her parents and assisted her in marrying a man much older than herself. As far as the girl was concerned, she wanted to marry the man, but her parents objected to the match and took the suit to court, charging Johnson with abduction, and with swearing a lie in regard to the girl's age.

"Johnson's trial never came off. A few days before he was to appear in court he was ambushed near his home in Mills County. He was riding a \$500 race horse at the time and the man killed both Johnson and his horse.

"Johnson's murder started the famous San Saba, McCulloch and Mills counties feud, a reign of terror which lasted more than two years, eventually developing into a wire cutting war. I do not think I'm exaggerating when I estimate that one hundred men were killed in the three counties during these two years, back in the turbulent eighties. Most of them were the victims of ambushes- neither side gave the men they were after a chance to defend themselves."

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HENRY FORD

Henry Ford was born in Ohio County, West Virginia, January 28, 1845. Before coming here he had spent much time in New Mexico and elsewhere in the west, and was known as "a linguist of ability, an interpreter for the Indian tribes." His first work in this section was as a cowboy in San Saba County, but he became a cowboy for R. D. Forsythe soon after coming here, doing all the hard and dangerous work involved in frontier ranching.

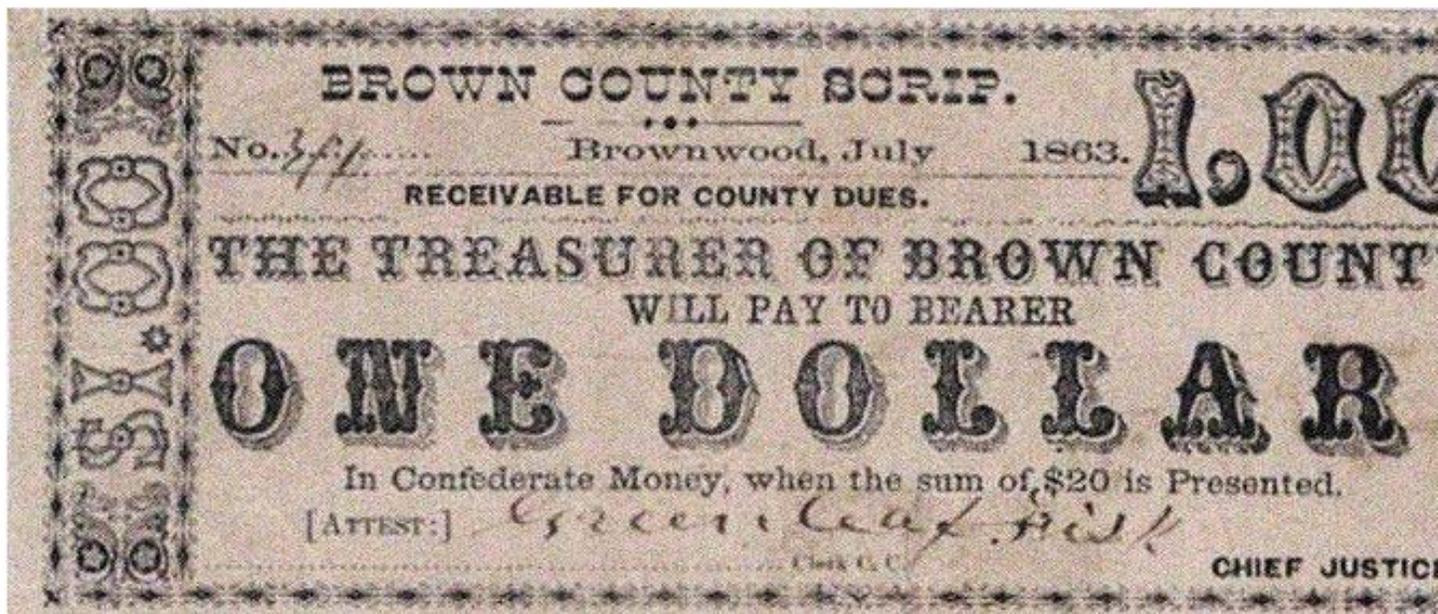
Early in the seventies he came to Brownwood, and was elected county clerk in 1875, holding that position nine years and leaving behind him a splendid record not only for fidelity to his duties but for the neatness of the records he kept. He saved his money, and went into the cattle business on a small scale, and this brought him directly in association with the Coggin brothers, S. R. and M.

J., who were the biggest cattle operators in the west at this period. In the eighties he gave up the cattle business and became associated with the Coggins in banking as a stockholder and cashier for Coggin, Ford and Martin. The bank later was reorganized as Coggin & Ford, then Coggin Bros. & Ford, Coggin-Ford Company and by other similar titles until after Mr. Ford's death it became the Coggin National Bank.

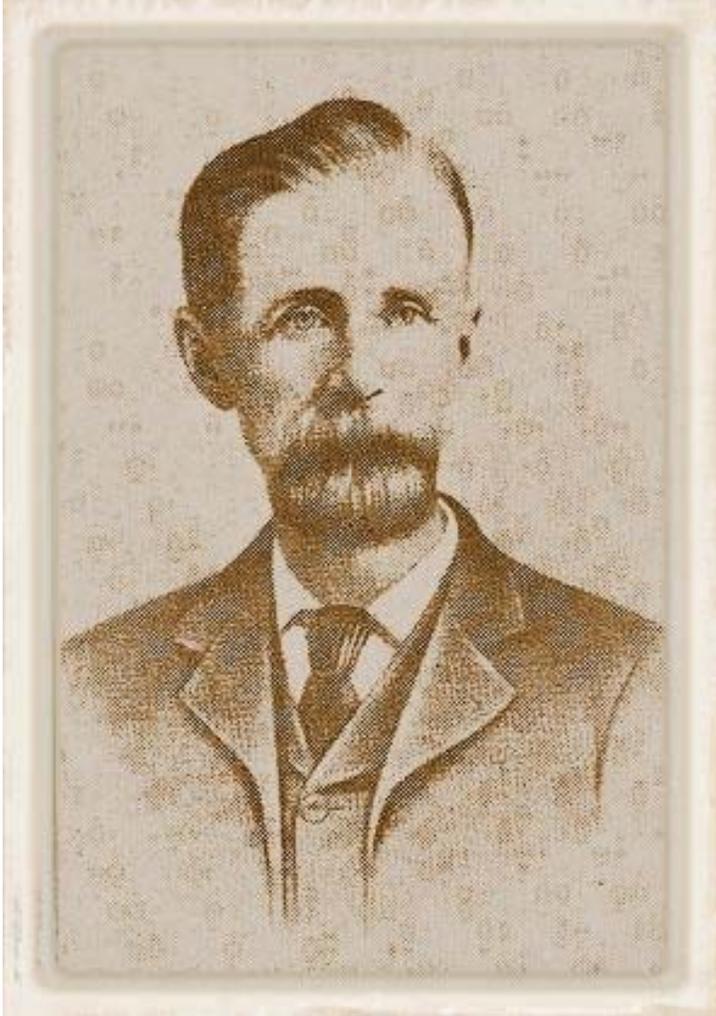
During all this period, until death ended his career in 1910, Mr. Ford managed the banking business of which he had charge for the benefit of the community. When times were hard and money scarce, he went away and borrowed large sums which he loaned to Brown County farmers and stockmen, usually with little or no security, and it was said that he never lost a loan, the gratitude of the people for his help in saving their homesteads inspiring them to make payment in full. He was one of the leaders of the community during the era when Brooke Smith, J. C. Weakley, John Y. Rankin, the Coggin brothers, T. C. Yantis and other stalwarts were inducing railroads to build into the county, were building waterworks systems and directing other great public improvements of lasting nature.

Mr. Ford spent much of his spare time gathering historical data about Brown County, and in a series of little booklets called "calculators" because they included tables to aid in figuring the costs of cotton and other commodities, calculating interest and making other arithmetical calculations he left for permanent record many of the facts as to the frontier period which otherwise probably would have been forgotten or obscured through the years.

Mr. Ford married three times, and two of his children still live in the county which he so greatly honored by his long and useful life here. They are Marion Ford and Mrs. O. B. Porter.



Scrip issued during the Civil War in Brown County for bank use.



Henry Ford



S.R. Coggin