

History of Somerville

1883-2008 SOMERVILLE BURLESON COUNTY, TEXAS

Somerville was one of many railroad boomtowns that started as a station stop beside the tracks of a railroad built in Texas from 1870 to 1900. Transportation was a major problem facing early Texas settlers. It was the railroads that made the development of Texas possible. Railway extension and economic growth paralleled each other for many years.

In 1880 the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway Company of Galveston, Texas built the first railroad bridge over Yegua Creek. Soon smoke belching steam engines with bells ringing and whistles wailing were pulling passenger and freight cars through the new town site named Somerville after Albert Somerville, the president of GC&SF.

To gain access to East Texas forests, the GC&SF bought a short line that ran from Montgomery to Navasota in 1882. Track was laid from Navasota to join the mainline in Somerville by 1883. Somerville was made a Division Headquarters for the East Texas Branch line, which later became known as the Beaumont Branch. A railroad yard, machine shops, and a roundhouse were built to service the steam engines. In 1897 a group of Chicago investors built the Texas Tie and Lumber Preserving Company that was bought by the Santa Fe in 1905. A large train depot was built to accommodate trainmen and passengers in 1900. The Somerville Depot housed a Fred Harvey Hotel and Restaurant that became a social gathering place for Somerville folks and their neighbors from the surrounding area for the next forty years. People from Burleson and other Texas Counties, all parts of the United States, and other countries came to Somerville to work for the Santa Fe or start a business. By 1913 Somerville had a population of over 3000 people and was the largest town in Burleson County, but since that time the population has been around 1700. The Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe became a subsidiary of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad in 1887. A post office opened in 1894 for sixteen months and was reopened in 1897. The first general store in the community was opened in 1893. The first community union church services were held in the offices of the tie plant in 1898.

In 1903 the Somerville Independent School District was established, and a two story, brick all grades public school was built by 1905. A native stone gymnasium and football stadium with seating and fence were built by the WPA during the Depression and finished by 1939. Somerville was incorporated in 1913 and adopted the city commission form of government. The United States Army Corps of Engineers began construction of the Somerville Dam and Reservoir on Yegua Creek at the southwestern edge of the town in 1962 and completed the project four years later, producing one of the most outstanding recreational areas in south central Texas.

The improvements of highways, construction of the interstate highway system, and the introduction of jet air transportation greatly reduced the number of people using passenger train service, which was turned over to Amtrack in 1971. Somerville once had five or six passenger trains a day. The last Santa Fe steam engines were replaced with Diesel engines by 1975. The days of the economy of Somerville being largely dependent on the railroad and its related industries would soon be past.

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The Somerville Historical Society was incorporated in 1979 and established the Somerville Area Museum that opened in 1983. The museum houses archives, collections, and exhibits of photos and artifacts for the purpose of preserving the history of Somerville and the surrounding area from 1850 to 1950.