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A TOWN LIKE NO OTHER

Westlake has been a lot of things, but it has never been ordinary

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WESTLAKE -- Sometimes on Sunday mornings, a swarm of small planes rises from a neighborhood airstrip and heads north to Lake Texoma. The destination: breakfast.

At Stagecoach Hills, residents can taxi planes from hangars on their lots and take off from a 2,700-foot-long grass runway.

Amusing situations occasionally arise, said Don Redding, an alderman and Stagecoach Hills resident. He recalled when a school bus and a plane encountered each other, traveling in opposite directions. The bus driver wanted the plane's pilot to yield.

"She motioned for the airplane to back up, and obviously that wasn't going to happen," Redding said. Small planes can't back up.

Westlake may be many things, but ordinary has never been one of them since the town was incorporated 50 years ago on Dec. 26, 1956. The town's first ordinance? A ban on hog farming.

Westlake, population 700, has long been home to the rich and famous. Tycoon Nelson Bunker Hunt, former pro football player Terry Bradshaw and the late *Dallas Morning News* publisher Ted Dealey have lived in Westlake.

These days, homeowners include Dallas Cowboys quarterback Drew Bledsoe, Texas Rangers baseball player Mark Teixeira, Dallas Stars goaltender Marty Turco, pro golfers Justin Leonard and Brant Jobe, retired Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway President Bill Greenwood and current BNSF President Matt Rose.

The town is one of the few in the state with no property tax, supporting itself instead on sales taxes, fees and fines. And it's the only municipality in Texas to operate a charter school, Westlake Academy.

But Westlake may be most famous for its near breakup in the late 1990s that pitted multimillionaire developer H. Ross Perot Jr. against the town.

The saga became fodder for the local and national media, including National Public Radio and *The New York Times*.

Despite the legal fight and a couple of other legal dust-ups over borders and annexations and disannexations over the years, Westlake as a community strives to take it easy, Redding said.

"It basically is a rural lifestyle, the objective at the outset is to minimize the clutter," Redding said. "We don't want the congestion or the clutter like a town that has wall-to-wall businesses."

Its own brand

An aerial view of the 6.6-square-mile town, southeast of U.S. 377 and Texas 114, shows a community of rolling hills, large fields and woodlands surrounded by subdivisions from other cities.

Most houses in Westlake are built on lots that are at least an acre, and many properties are much larger.

Motorists are often wowed when they pass the bright-colored buildings of Solana, Westlake's premier business park on Texas 114 designed by Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta.

Part of the park crosses over the highway into neighboring Southlake.

"Solana was planned and developed to take advantage of the natural setting in Westlake and Southlake, protecting the trees and water and landscape, and putting in every amenity we could think of," said Tom Allen, an executive with Maguire Partners, which manages the property.

Other major businesses include DaimlerChrysler and Fidelity Investments, Westlake's largest employer with 2,700 workers.

But ask residents about what they think is the town's major landmark and many will mention Westlake Academy, founded in 2003.

Westlake's leaders knew that a school was important to building a community, and none of the three public school districts serving Westlake were willing to build schools in the town because of its distant location on the border of Tarrant and Denton counties.

"We needed something that would pull us together. It would cap [Westlake] off as being a full community at that point," said Kelly Bradley, president of the Westlake Historical Preservation Society and wife of Westlake Mayor Scott Bradley.

Westlake being Westlake, it couldn't just have an ordinary school.

The town searched worldwide for a principal and eventually settled on Barbara Brizuela, who was deputy principal of a school in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The academy doesn't look like a school; it looks like a ski lodge, with large glass windows and lots of wood. The Parent Teacher Organization is called The House of Commons. Its president is dubbed The Speaker. And Brizuela's title is "head of school."

The academy teaches students in kindergarten through ninth grade based on the rigorous International Baccalaureate curriculum.

As an open-enrollment charter school, all children may seek admission whether or not they live in Westlake, but all children of Westlake residents are accepted.

The 350-student academy has a waiting list of more than 937 children.

The rich and famous

The area was first settled in the 1840s by farmers, said Joyce Roach of Keller, a local historian.

For decades, Westlake was home mostly to people of modest means who owned large tracts, Bradley said. Former *Morning News* publisher Dealey was representative of the affluent who wanted to own some acreage and get away from the hustle and bustle of the big city.

Bradley lives in Dealey's old 1938 house, which was designed by Charles Dilbeck, whose homes were popular for unusual and appealing designs.

"It was a place to come and play for people that had the big money," Roach said. "It didn't come from Fort Worth. It came from Dallas."

By 1956, growth was spreading across northern Tarrant and southern Denton counties. Led by J. Glen Turner -- an attorney, land developer, and oil and gas investor -- area ranchers sought to incorporate to avoid property taxes and maintain the area's rural nature, Town Manager Trent Petty said. That year, the town of Westlake was founded. The town continued to attract colorful people. In the early 1970s, Harold Thornton, an aircraft engineer, founded Stagecoach Hills, a small development with 31 homes that became part of Westlake in the 1990s. The name comes from the stagecoach stop that

once stood somewhere near the subdivision, said his son, Stephen Thornton. Most of the people who moved in were pilots.

Early on, the aerial breakfast trips were a regular weekend event, but now they've become an occasional treat. The food was inexpensive, but aviation fuel was never cheap.

"We used to call it the \$100 hamburger," said retired police Lt. Bill Buckmeyer, a Stagecoach Hills resident and pilot.

Nelson Bunker Hunt, among the nation's wealthiest people, also moved to town. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, he maintained an estate called the Circle T Ranch that was known for lavish parties with famous guests such as actor Charlton Heston.

Hunt once hosted the Cattle Baron's Ball as well, Bradley said.

"Anybody who was anyone in Dallas society was at the Cattle Baron's Ball," Bradley said. Ranch activities included training racehorses at a track on the property.

But Hunt is probably best remembered for his efforts to control the silver market. He and his brother, William Herbert Hunt, formed a group with Arab investors and began buying large amounts of silver, until they had enough to manipulate the price, according to an article on Buy and Hold, a stocks Web site. Intervention by the Federal Reserve and changes in silver trading rules led to a market collapse, the article said. The collapse led the brothers to declare bankruptcy. In August 1988, the brothers were convicted of conspiring to manipulate the market.

In 1993, H. Ross Perot Jr.'s Hillwood company bought the Circle T. Perot tried to sell the town on plans for a 20-acre downtown, a 54-hole golf course and luxury homes that would add about 50,000 residents to Westlake. Perot also asked for the waiver of zoning rules and a commitment of \$100 million from the town for roads and water projects.

But Mayor Bradley opposed parts of the plan. On April 29, 1997, most of the aldermen, who were sympathetic to Perot, ousted Bradley after putting him on trial in the cafeteria at IBM's Westlake offices.

On May 2, 1997, the day before Westlake's municipal elections, the aldermen voted to separate the Circle T and other properties from Westlake, so the town was left as a tiny patchwork of properties. The next day, residents overwhelmingly voted those aldermen out of office.

A legal scrap ensued that went to the Texas Supreme Court. Bradley was eventually reinstated, the disannexation was voided and the town remained intact.

A major factor in settling the dispute was Fidelity, which wanted the conflict resolved before buying parts of the Circle T.

David Pelletier, a spokesman for Hillwood and the Perot organization, said the company wouldn't comment on the past events. He noted that Hillwood has been responsible for bringing businesses, including DaimlerChrysler, to town.

Bradley, meanwhile, emerged as a folk hero in Westlake.

"It was probably the most trying event of my life, and I think the lives of everybody in Westlake because of the immense power and money that was arrayed against us," Bradley said.

Can it go on like this?

Westlake's rural beauty continues to be a draw. Fidelity moved its regional headquarters to Westlake in 2000 because the company looks for attractive locales with a large skilled work force nearby, said Vin Loporchio, a Fidelity spokesman.

"We want our employees to work in a natural setting that creates a creative and highly productive work environment," he said.

Julie and Bob Timmerman are recent additions to Westlake. Bob Timmerman is an oncologist and Julie Timmerman is a nurse anesthetist. The couple moved from Indianapolis two years ago with their three

children when Bob Timmerman took a job at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

"The school brought us here," Julie Timmerman said. "It has this rural setting and feeling, and the people are very friendly."

"The neighborhoods are full of little kids," Bob Timmerman said. "This I think is somewhat unexpected, the fact that the town attracted so many families."

How long Westlake will remain rural is an open question. Hillwood has interest from major retailers, but it's waiting for enough people to move in before it begins building its planned mall. In the last year, the town approved about 35 housing permits.

The demographics are already changing. While wealthy people have lived in Westlake for decades, the median value of a house, based on the 2000 Census, was \$257,100.

But the value of new homes has averaged about \$1 million because wealthy people are drawn to Westlake Academy, officials said. Houses being built in the Vaquero subdivision, situated around a golf course, sell for several million dollars.

For now, Westlake remains the quiet, friendly community that attracted Barbara Griggs, who moved to town in 1990. Griggs said she has stayed put because she loves the landscape and the people who run the town.

"It is beautiful," Griggs said. "Oh, I love it out there because it is so beautiful. It's all changing, but I intend to stay here until I won't be able to take care of the place."

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