In some ways Luling is like many other small Texas towns, but circumstances over the years changed its trajectory and contributed to a certain uniqueness that is evident to this day. Every town should always highlight its cultural heritage, and Luling does it about as well as anyone. Every life lived has a story to tell, and this story will be good at times and other times, not so much. It is what makes us who we are. A community’s story or heritage needs to be shared and communicated, but more importantly, it needs to be captured and archived in this digital age so future generations can benefit and learn from it. Mainstreeters know it is difficult to move the needle out there in the public realm sometimes, and when we do finally make an impact, we should record, catalog, properly archive, and protect it so it will mean something many years down the road. Otherwise, we are just dust in the wind. Our trials and tribulations, history, accomplishments, and disappointments do not mean much if future generations cannot see, touch, smell, taste, hear, or learn from it, so build a mural. Build a monument. Protect those photos. Tell those stories and let everyone know who you are and of what you are made.

(Cont. on page 2)
We have tried to bolster the value in our history in Luling, but it can be likened to running uphill on marbles at times. It is usually inherent for Mainstreeters to dream it and lead the way, to sell our ideas to the public, change hearts and minds, somehow make money appear out of nowhere to execute the plan, and then maybe we have a chance to see it through to the end. This is not always easy, but it can be done. Because of Luling’s extensive history, there is a good story to be told, and over the years, community leaders did a suitable job identifying and highlighting some of these aspects. When I started managing the Luling Main Street program five years ago, I concentrated on the low-hanging fruit—low-cost improvements that pack a punch. Identifying and executing those wins early on allowed our Main Street group to build momentum and get people on our side when it was time for some of the grander ideas. Our little Main Street group painted a 3-D mural, added decorative crosswalks, constructed Rafael Rios Pocket Park, and built Heritage Circle, including a 15-foot pole clock surrounded by panels highlighting the amazing accomplishments of some famous Luling people. We added wayfinding signage, built custom trash receptacles, and tons of other low-impact things on our own dime with funds raised with our own hands demonstrating the Main Street machine at work and our small contribution to the bigger picture. These are some of the things that people think of first when considering Luling (in no order): barbecue, watermelons, oil fields, crazy pump jack art, the Luling Watermelon Thump Festival, huge oil derricks, a mammoth-sized Santa Claus standing guard over downtown at Christmas, decorative water towers, and the beautiful Zedler Mill. Having lived in Houston, the fourth largest city in the country, for many years, it always amused me when my little hometown of Luling came up in conversation. Many people would mention some items on the above list, so believe that good news travels! All communities are known for something, but luckily Luling seems to have more than its fair share of somethings. This is fine and good if it is realized that bad news travels faster, which keeps us community revitalizers on our toes! Without further ado, here is Luling’s story.

History Matters

In the 1840s, in a location about a day's horseback ride just south of Austin, people started settling an area with rich and sandy soils ideal for growing black diamond watermelons and other crops. Due to logistical limitations of the period, the local watermelon trade was meager, but the railroad was about to change that. During the 1870s, railroad expansion was a boon for certain communities, and after the completion of a terminus just west of Plum Creek in 1874, Luling was born. A couple miles away on the banks of the San Marcos River, a new gristmill/sawmill/cotton gin, Zedler Mill, was created. New homes, schools, churches, and hotels were built in rapid fashion, and it was during this time that downtown Luling started to take shape. This rapid growth contributed many things, but it also attracted some unsavory characters trying to cash in. For years, Luling was known by many to be the “toughest town in Texas,” a moniker that faded over time as downtown Luling became more civilized.

Booms and Busts Matter

Through the years, Luling always had an agrarian-based economy until 1922 when Luling’s trajectory changed forever. Millions of years ago, this Texas region was at the bottom of the sea, and this revelation is why our state has some of the largest oil deposits in the country. For many years, two different fault lines in the Luling
area were suspected by geologists of trapping deposits of oil below, but no one had ever tapped them. After six misses, a local oil-wildcatter leveraged everything to try one last time to strike oil. Lucky number seven hit the correct depth, striking oil, and Luling would never be the same. In a matter of months, Luling would quadruple in size as the major oil companies came to town locking down oil leasing rights. Vast fortunes were made, and now almost 100 years later, oil continues to be extracted from the earth right below Luling. Anyone in the oil industry knows that when times are good, they can be great, but when they are bad, they can be horrible. The oil market always has its wild ebbs and flows, and oil towns like Luling are at the mercy of so many external conditions and circumstances. Local Luling merchants always must balance the good with the bad because for every major boom time, there is a forthcoming bust that could be looming just around the corner.

**Philanthropy Matters**

Edgar B. Davis was the wildcatter mentioned above who risked it all and was the first to find oil in this region. Everyone loves a good story and his story is a first-rate one. His contributions to Luling are enormous, and his story sent Luling onto a completely different track (no railroad puns intended). He helped the Luling community immensely over the years and donated thousands of acres for various projects, including two large clubhouses on each side of town. He also provided 1,200 acres of land creating the Luling Foundation Farm, which was set up as an experimental farm for discovering new practices to help farming efficiency in the area. Main Street was named Davis Street after him, as was the local hospital built in 1966. The generosity did not end with his passing in 1951. Oil industry stalwarts who call Luling home continued this giving spirit throughout the years and always support local groups that are fundraising for various concerns or causes. Cake auctions in this town are like no other; well, when the oil market is up anyways.

**Uniqueness Matters**

It is funny how negatives sometimes resolve themselves into positives. I am sure you are familiar with the phrase, “If given lemons, just make lemonade.” Lemons abound, so to speak, in each of our communities, and how community leaders deal with

Luling’s community is full of rich heritage and history from their (top) 3-D Mural that was completed in 2011, (middle) the famous watermelon water tower, and the (bottom) Luling Oil Museum.
these issues change the storyline for the better or the worse. For example, many years ago, in June 2000, a very cruel person felt it necessary to set fire to many historic Main Street buildings one night. Several buildings were lost forever, but the local Luling Watermelon Thump Association “made lemonade.” They salvaged the front facade of a building, which was a total loss and turned it into what is now the famous Watermelon Thump Spitway, where the legendary watermelon seed spitting contest is held in June each year.

Anyone who has seen an oil pump jack knows that it is not the prettiest thing on earth, which leads to another example. The Luling Chamber of Commerce came up with a plan and raised funds to create unique pump-jack art to make an otherwise unsightly piece of equipment into an eccentric piece of art that has been a conversation piece for tourists and townspeople alike for years. Luling also has turned its local water towers into huge pieces of art that can be seen for miles. That is why Luling can boast that it has the world’s largest watermelon, and all of this helps the tourism trade.

Many people visit Luling Main Street from all over the world just to experience the barbecue. Many others travel hundreds of miles to see a wedding at the beautiful Zedler Mill Pavilion on the water’s edge of the San Marcos River. Photographers and videographers come from afar to track and chart our major festivals. Uniqueness sells, and people like good stories. They will find out about you, and they will come. Believe it!

EXPLOREING PREVITALIZATION

Article written by Emily Koller, Planner, Texas Main Street Program

On a recent trip to Memphis, Tennessee, I attended a tour organized by the Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office. The tour was meant to highlight recent preservation success stories as well as music history landmarks—such as Elvis’ Graceland and Sun Studio—in a city known as the “Home of the Blues and the Birthplace of Rock and Roll.” Elvis’ music is on the first cassette tape I can remember owning, so I was more than excited. However, Graceland was the last stop of the day and I was prepared to have trouble focusing on everything before that. As it turns out, Graceland was not the most memorable aspect of the tour, and I returned very inspired by a uniquely Memphian strategy called “previtalization,” which I would describe as a hybrid between historic preservation and the DIY philosophy of tactical urbanism.

We traveled in the nation’s only music bus with stellar commentary provided by the Memphian Heritage Foundation’s dynamic long-time executive director, who was interrupted periodically by different guests, including a musician who provided a lesson in the Memphis backbeat complete with shakers and a sing-along. While music was obviously supposed to be an
important theme of the day, the other important theme
turned out to be this concept of previtalization, but I
did not realize it until much later.

The term was first used at the 1890 Tennessee Brewery,
a spectacular Romanesque building on the bluff
overlooking the Mississippi River on the edge of
downtown. Today, the brewery has been converted into
46 apartments with about 13,500 square feet of office
and commercial. The “brewery district” also includes a
new 88-unit apartment building, a 339-space garage,
and plans for an additional 80,000 square feet of
residential development.

The unbelievable part is that the Tennessee Brewery,
vacant since 1953, was facing impending demolition in
the summer of 2014—only three years ago! A group of
local civic leaders, some of whom were involved with the
Mayor’s Innovation Delivery Team, convinced the owner
at the time to allow a temporary café and beer garden
on the weekends for six weeks. The event was known
as Untapped and brought over 20,000 people into the
space, or an average of 3,300 people per week! While
it offered beer, games, live music, and an assortment of
fun events like a spelling bee watch party, the goal was
to make the building itself the attraction. By November
2014, a local Memphian closed on the property, and by
the following spring, the developer reached an agreement
with the Downtown Memphis Commission, who would
build and finance the parking garage to jump start the
redevelopment.

This was an amazing success story. I filed it away and
looked forward to the next stop—the 1883 Clayborn
Temple, best known for being a hub of political activism
during the Civil Rights movement. It was the starting
point for the Sanitation Workers’ Strike in 1968, which
was the cause that would bring Martin Luther King Jr.
to Memphis. The Clayborn is in the middle of a major
fundraising campaign, and we learned that their primary
strategy for raising awareness about the significance of
the building was, you guessed it, previtalization. The
church has been structurally stabilized but is nowhere near
restored and is hosting numerous events to bring people
to experience the raw beauty of the unfinished space. The
future vision involves a use that will continue to position
the church as a place for positive social change, and all
events and activities align with that vision.

Crosstown Concourse was our third and final preservation
project on the tour. Built in 1927, this was one of Sears’
massive catalog merchandise distribution centers which
now totals about 1.5 million square feet. Completely
redeveloped as a “mixed-use vertical urban village,”
the project is the largest historic tax credit project in
Tennessee history. The scale was overwhelming. We
stood around in awe as the project developers described
taking it from a cocktail napkin idea to reality. I started
to think about Elvis, when once again I heard the
term previtalization. Crosstown Arts—as a founding
partner, co-developer and tenant of the project—relied
on a series of arts-based events to bring people into the
massive building, driving engagement and momentum,
and eventually tenant commitments which were to be
followed by financing.
By now, I was piecing together that Memphis was really rocking (pardon the music pun) this previtalization thing, although I knew they did not invent the term or the concept. Technically, this is a strategy from the tactical urbanism approach to community design. The philosophy promotes improving the livability of towns and cities through low-cost, incremental, and small-scale changes that help build social capital and organizational capacity. Often projects are described as “interventions” and are intended to cut through typical bureaucratic procedures to implement simple ideas that get people excited and engaged. For example, taking over a parking space in front of a café to create a pleasant outdoor dining space for people to gather and linger is a common Tactical Urbanist intervention. Street Plans Collaborative, an award-winning urban planning, design, and research/advocacy firm, is credited as developing the term in 2010. They published a series of guides to support those working at the local level.

In the most recent guide, site previtalization is defined as “the temporary re-activation of a previously inactive, underutilized parcel of land.” They do not specifically focus on vacant buildings, but their philosophy emphasizes working at the micro-scale. They also explore pop-up shops and cafes, food trucks, and temporary retail as specific tactics which are applicable to either vacant parcels or buildings. In the downtown revitalization field, none of these tactics are new to us as ways to help people imagine the possibilities of vacant buildings and spaces. So why was I so moved by Memphis? Part of it is that tactical urbanism is still new enough that there are not a lot of examples of permanent physical changes that are the result of planned interventions. The Tennessee Brewery and Crosstown Commons are major developments that directly attribute their success to simple DIY urbanist tactics.

The other reason these projects made such an impression is that I did not go on a “previtalization” tour. It wasn’t a special thing; it was oddly just part of everyone’s vocabulary there. Often, tactical urbanism projects get caught up in the idea of themselves. “Hey—we did a great thing for our community because we staged an event and activated this space for a day. The end.” The most critical aspect of the approach is the part that is hardest to do—building social capital and organizational capacity. Clearly something is in the water there. There are many people who were stirred to action because of the pop-up events in these dramatic historic spaces—neighbors, artists, beer drinkers, city commissioners, lenders, developers. The pride for the history of the city was tangible. It is not about flipping open a book and picking the latest trendy planning tool. Memphis was a good reminder that tactical urbanism does work, but more importantly, works best when people really care about history and place.

The lesson is that when utilizing such tactics in your own historic downtowns, you cannot be content with temporary activation—the measures should focus on people and capacity. Who are you engaging and are you moving them to action through your projects and interventions? If not, how can you better connect them to history and place?

Links:

More on the Tennessee Brewery and the Untapped Event
http://www.atthebrewery.com/

MemFeast at the Crosstown Concourse before redevelopment in 2012. The event allows anyone from the community to purchase a $25 ticket for a locally sourced meal along with drinks and a ballot to vote on a series of public art proposals from a juried selection of artists. At the end of the night, the ballots are cast and the winning artist receives $5,000. Photo by Jamie Harmon, Crosstown Arts.
More on the Clayborn Temple
https://www.claybornreborn.org/

More on Crosstown Commons
http://crosstownarts.org/

More on Tactical Urbanism
http://tacticalurbanismguide.com/about/


SPECIAL VOLUNTEERS

In each edition of Main Street Matters, we continue to spotlight those volunteers whose contributions and dedication are important to the success of local programs. If you would like to honor a special volunteer with a spotlight, please send a short narrative and image to sarah.marshall@thc.texas.gov.

Dr. Curtis Ratliff and Mrs. Linda Ratliff, Grapevine Main Street Program Written by David Klempin, Main Street Manager, Grapevine Main Street Program

Dr. Curtis Ratliff and Mrs. Linda Ratliff are the kind of volunteers organizations dream of finding. They are generous, resourceful, creative, hardworking, dedicated, and fully committed to the mission. For more than 20 years, they have given their time and financial resources in support of the Grapevine Main Street Program, Grapevine Heritage Foundation, Nash Farm, the Grapevine Wine Pouring Society, and Grapevine’s festival program.

Since 2010, Dr. Ratliff served as the chairman of the Grapevine Heritage Foundation Board of Directors, which also is Grapevine’s Main Street Board. In addition, the Foundation Board serves as Grapevine’s “preservation advocates.” As an advocate and leader, Dr. Ratliff regularly attends Grapevine Historic Preservation Commission meetings and speaks in favor of strong preservation decisions.

Prior to serving as Grapevine Heritage Foundation chairman, Dr. Ratliff was chairman of the Nash Farm Committee. He was instrumental in helping raise $800,000 from the community to restore the oldest remaining farmstead in Tarrant County, the ca. 1859 Nash Farm. Today Nash Farm has a year-round calendar of activities and is home to heritage breed chickens, turkeys, and sheep just one-half mile west of Main Street. Nash Farm is marketed with Grapevine’s attractions by the Grapevine Convention & Visitors Bureau, and it is considered a part of the Grapevine Historic Township. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark.

Mrs. Linda Ratliff shares Dr. Ratliff’s love and passion for Main Street and Nash Farm, and participates in period clothing to educate young and old about their agricultural heritage. For special Nash Farm events and programs, you will find Dr. Ratliff making rope, demonstrating butchering and curing techniques, driving tractors, leading tours, feeding animals, and more.

Mrs. Linda Ratliff brings innovative approaches to programs and promotions. To capture the attention of thousands of drivers who pass by Nash Farm each day, she created a life-size “scarecrow family” that silently tells a changing family saga. She has kept the scarecrow characters changing and communicating for more than eight years. The scarecrow couple has transitioned from courtship to marriage to parenthood to celebrating holidays to acquiring pets and more! “Seeing what the scarecrows are up to” is a favorite pastime for many Grapevine families and is an excellent promotional tool for Nash Farm.
To stay abreast of historic preservation issues and topics, the Ratliffs regularly attend the National Trust for Historic Preservation annual conferences held in major cities throughout the United States and also participate in the Association for Living History, Farm, and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM) conferences. They share new ideas to improve Grapevine’s programs and increase tourism statistics.

Grapevine’s world renowned festivals depend on dedicated volunteers. For 19 years, the Ratliffs were active members of the Grapevine Pouring Society, one of the backbone organizations of the city’s Main Street festival program. They eagerly shared their knowledge of Texas wine with visitors from around the world, and you can be sure they always added a word or two about historic preservation!

In November 2013, Dr. Ratliff was the recipient of the “Beyond the Call of Duty Award” presented to him by the Grapevine Convention & Visitors Bureau, and twice Mrs. Linda Ratliff earned the “Harlan Jewett Preservation Award” from the Grapevine Heritage Foundation. But more than awards, the Ratliffs are recipients of true appreciation from the heart from the Grapevine Heritage Foundation and Main Street Board, the Grapevine Convention & Visitors Bureau board and staff, Grapevine citizens, and thousands of visitors and classroom students who make their way to Main Street and Nash Farm each year. In the case of Dr. Curtis Ratliff and Mrs. Linda Ratliff, the old adage is more than true: Volunteers are not paid, because they are priceless!

Josh and Diana Morriss

Written by Dani Hamblett, Main Street Texarkana contributor, with the assistance of Ina McDowell, Main Street Manager, Texarkana Main Street Program

Downtown Texarkana has had its ebbs and flows over the past 100 plus years, and the Morrisses involvement with downtown has traced a similar path.

Judge Josh Morriss III was born downtown at the former Texarkana Memorial Hospital and grew up frequenting the streets of downtown, where his father was a partner at Offenhauser Insurance Company, founded in 1882. “We hung out downtown; bought our clothes downtown; did our banking downtown; everything,” Josh recalled.

After leaving Texarkana briefly for college and law school, Morriss returned in 1976 and brought a special someone along, his new wife, Diana, from Dallas. Diana remembers fondly the years bringing their own children downtown regularly for shoe shopping, parades, visits to Timberlake Hardware, and Wednesday evening meals with the whole family at (now closed) Bryce’s Cafeteria.

In 2002, Josh became Chief Justice of Texas’ Sixth Court of Appeals, located in the Bi-State Justice Center, and he once again found himself downtown. Not long after that, Josh became involved with Main Street Texarkana (MST), serving on the board and later as president.

“For as long as I’ve known him, Judge has always gone above and beyond to help wherever he is called,” says Ina McDowell. “Whether at events, as a spokesperson for downtown properties, doing website maintenance, and posting on Facebook, even landscaping projects! He works tirelessly in the community as a champion for downtown.”

As years went on, the Morrisses began thinking about looking for a building “to love on” in the downtown district. In 2006, that opportunity presented itself in a big way when former Main Street Texarkana Executive Director Bethany Hanna pointed them to the 200 block of West Broad Street. Most of the block was in such disrepair that Hanna feared the whole block of buildings, some of which date back to the late 1800s, would be lost if someone didn’t step forward to help them—soon. As a native Texarkanian, Josh

Josh and Diana Morriss purchased four buildings in downtown Texarkana that now house the Silvermoon on Broad and Silvermoon Children’s Theatre.
mourned the decline of downtown. As a member of boards and organizations, he had noticed a shortage of spaces in Texarkana where people could gather and meet. “We always say, good things happen when people get together,” Diana added. Then, a dream started to become a plan.

The time between the Morrisses purchase of the four buildings that now house the Silvermoon on Broad and the Silvermoon Children’s Theatre and their 2011 opening to the public was filled with ups and downs. Just when something seemed to be moving forward, further demo would reveal another challenge for their architect and contractor to solve, again and again. But the Morrisses stayed the course, and, four and a half years after they had begun, the Silvermoon on Broad (www.silvermoononbroad.com) was open for events and wedding business. “The rehab of that block and what the Morrises have created has had a huge impact on interest and growth downtown,” said McDowell. The Morrises credit Main Street and the City of Texarkana, Texas, in assisting them throughout the planning and construction process.

True to their dedication, now the Morrises not only work (Diana administering the Silvermoon, Josh at judging), but live downtown, in an apartment on the second floor of one of their buildings. Their investment is proving to be not just a business or a home, but a legacy for their family as well. Two of the Morrises three daughters, with Josh and Diana’s help, have created and run Silvermoon Children’s Theatre (www.silvermoonkids.com), where a new generation of young people (including the Morrises grandchildren) are drawn downtown. For Judge Josh and Diana, their home and hearts are truly ensconced in Texarkana’s historic downtown, what they refer to as “the heart of the city.”

In 2017, after 15 years of service to Main Street, Josh stepped down from Main Street’s board, but continues to volunteer his time, currently helping with MST’s annual fundraising event, Dine on the Line. Josh has also served other local organizations, including the boards of the Texarkana Public Library and Hospice of Texarkana; as a founder, board member, and president for Texarkana Repertory Company; as past president for the Wilbur Smith Rotary Club; and as elder and a 34-year-long stint as worship leader at Fellowship Bible Church. He also cleans floors at the Silvermoon on Broad.
Websites of Interest

- African American Heritage Preservation Foundation: www.aahpfdn.org
- (The) Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation: www.ahlp.org
- (The) American Institute of Architects: www.aia.org
- American Planning Association: www.planning.org
- American Society of Landscape Architects: www.asla.org
- (The) Cultural Landscape Foundation: www.tclf.org
- (The) Handbook of Texas Online: www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online
- Keep Texas Beautiful: www.ktb.org
- League of Historic American Theatres: www.lhat.org
- National Main Street Center: www.preservationnation.org/main-street
- National Park Service: www.nps.gov
- National Trust for Historic Preservation: www.preservationnation.org
- Partners for Sacred Places: www.sacredplaces.org
- Preservation Easement Trust: www.preservationeasement.org
- Preservation Directory.com: www.preservationdirectory.com
- Preservation Texas: www.preservationtexas.org
- Project for Public Spaces: www.pps.org
- Rails-to-Trails Conservancy: www.railstotrails.org
- Scenic America: www.scenic.org
- Texas Department of Agriculture: www.TexasAgriculture.gov
- Texas Commission on the Arts: www.arts.texas.gov
- Texas Downtown Association: www.texasdowntown.org
- Texas Folklife Resources: www.texasfolklife.org
- Texas Historical Commission: www.thc.texas.gov
- Texas Parks and Wildlife Department: www.tpwd.texas.gov
- Texas Rural Leadership Program: www.trlp.org
- Texas State Preservation Board: www.tspb.state.tx.us
- Urban Land Institute: www.uli.org