

SAMPLE HISTORY: Institutions

NOTE: This sample history, comprised of fictional information, represents in format, scope of content, documentation and length the type of narrative history required for a historical marker application. It is presented as a general guide for developing a narrative of a school or other institution.

SMACKDAB HIGH SCHOOL

I. CONTEXT

Ever since Post Oak County's early days, education has been important to its residents. When Philip and Gerald Young started the Youngstown settlement in the 1850s, one of the first institutions they erected was a school. Miss Sarah Park of Atlanta, Georgia became the school's first teacher, arriving in January 1859. However, the school closed during the Civil War.¹

By the 1860s, Smackdab, only a few miles to the northwest, was growing quickly. Soon there were three schools in the town. The earliest of the schools to open was a girls' school, which began in 1867. It was followed by Smackdab Academy, which was chartered in 1869.²

The third school opened as a result of state legislation, which established free public education in the 1870s. Smackdab School became the town's first public school, opening in 1876.³

II. OVERVIEW

Smackdab School opened on August 28, 1876, with William Springfield as teacher. The following were named as trustees in 1876: Dr. Philip Hornswaggle, Peter Marsh, James and Leonard Smith, Capt. Gerald Mason, Joseph Melton, Dr. Howard Sims and Michael Hoxie. The school housed nine grades and offered courses in science, elocution, Greek, Latin and agriculture.⁴

The first classes at Smackdab School were held in the Lee Girls' School building, which was abandoned by the school when it moved to Brenke, Texas in 1874. In 1881, Smackdab School trustees D.H. Clay, M.I. Daniels and C.H. Beard purchased land on the town square for \$1600.⁶ This location, where Smackdab Academy was once located, would house the newly constructed school building. Professor S.J. Ross was the teacher at the school when the new building was completed in 1884.⁵

In the following years, the school became a center of activity for the community. In addition to being used as a center of learning, the new building housed the annual Pumpkin Patch Festival (which still occurs today) beginning in 1895 and the Zucchini-Fest, which was held almost every year between 1899 and 1917.⁷ Several social events, including dances and holiday celebrations, were also held in the schoolhouse.

Smackdab School served as a shelter and meeting place in times of disaster. In the summer of 1886, at the high point of a major drought in the county (and throughout much of Texas), farmers met at the school during the evening of June 5 to discuss the dire situation. From this meeting began a series of actions which helped the desperate farmers through the rest of the year. The actions included a charitable relief fund, which started as a donation box located within the school's main office. Soon, money from local institutions and businesses filled donation boxes throughout town. The money was used to provide temporary payments and to purchase food for the farming families.⁸ It was said that Smackdab became a "real community" through this project, which began as a simple meeting of five local farmers.⁹

After the 1891 Texas and Northern Railroad Train Wreck, which took place in central Smackdab on October 30, rescuers rushed several victims to the school's cafeteria for medical treatment, as the small local hospital was filled to capacity. Luckily, of the 21 injured (passengers and those at the train stop), none died. However, the school continued to be used as a recovery center for several days.¹⁰ Teachers and schoolchildren alike volunteered. Patsy Marshall, only 8 years old at the time, could recall classmates bringing water to the patients and running various errands for the workers treating the patients.¹¹

1922 was a monumental year for the school. That year, Smackdab School expanded to include 11 grades.¹² It was also during that year that the school hired Theodore Olsen (1900-1968) as a teacher. Olsen, a native of Jergenson, served in France during the closing days of World War I. He taught at Smackdab until 1927, when he began work as an assistant superintendent in the Post Oak County Common School District. He became Smackdab School District's superintendent in 1936, serving in that position until 1955; to date he is the district's longest-serving superintendent. He was also an advisor to the Smackdab School District's Special School Integration Commission from 1962 to 1965. He was an

important voice of leadership and guidance for the commission, which finished its duties when integration occurred in Smackdab in 1965.¹³

In 1922, Smackdab also fielded its first athletic teams. Smackdab's football, baseball and boys' and girls' basketball squads played Jergenson and Youngstown, as well as rural schools such as Low Oak, High Prairie, Four Way and Gompers. No conclusive documentation can be found for the origin of the school mascot, but Patsy Marshall recalled at the age of 99 that the principal's wife, Mrs. Lucille Abernathy, was sitting down to cucumber sandwiches one Sunday afternoon under the trees in front of the school when a scorpion fell in her hair. Local tradition holds that this incident was the inspiration for the naming of the Smackdab Scorpions.¹⁴

By 1928, Smackdab School was renamed Smackdab High School, as all lower grades relocated to different schools. In 1946, a 12th grade was added. By 1948, the school expanded to the point that a new building was needed. Construction began on a new building, immediately west of the current one. By 1950, the new building was completed and classes were held there for the first time that fall. The old building continued to be used until 1961, when it was razed and a gymnasium was built on the same spot. Between 1950 and 1955, the Smackdab Independent School District absorbed several adjacent rural schools, including Gompers, Low Oak, Debs, LaFollete, Thomas and Dewey.¹⁵

Many of Smackdab's school traditions originated in the 1950s, including the establishment of the *Stinger* as the school yearbook (1952), the *Spitfire* as the school newspaper (1953), the annual bonfire before the big game with the Jergenson Jaguars (1955) and homecoming festivities, including the downtown parade and selection of the Pumpkin Patch Queen (1958). School integration occurred at Smackdab High School in 1965 and was notable for two reasons. First, Smackdab High School was the first school in Post Oak County to integrate.¹⁶ Secondly, integration went very smoothly at the school. No major incidents were recorded, and local and state newspapers lauded the event as a model for peaceful school integration across the state.¹⁷

Smackdab High School has been noted recently for the number of graduates that have become community, state and national leaders. Since it was the only high school in Smackdab until 1974, for

many years most local students attended the school. Thus, most of the community leaders, such as James Whitfield (still living), Barry Long (still living) and Julia Park (d. 2005), were graduates of Smackdab.¹⁸

Franklin White (1922-1991) graduated from Smackdab High School in 1939. Immediately after graduation, he left home to attend Brenke College in Brenke. In 1942, he joined the World War II effort and served in Italy and France. Soon after returning, White began his career of public service, serving on the Smackdab city council (1948-1950). He ran unsuccessfully for state representative in 1950 but was elected to that post in 1952 and served until 1964. That year, he ran for the Texas Senate, becoming the first state senator from Post Oak County. He continued as state senator until 1988. As a state senator, White was involved in several important pieces of legislation, including a series of reforms aimed at cleaning up campaign financing and legislative ethics between 1973 and 1974. On the strength of this legislation, White ran for the office of Texas comptroller in 1974 but failed to secure the seat. He ran again in 1978, but lost the election by a wide margin. White continued as senator throughout the 1980s, working mostly with legislation having to do with environmental regulations. He retired from public office in 1988 and passed away in 1991.¹⁹

Another important graduate is Michael Ortega (1952-), who graduated from Smackdab High School in 1970. In 1974, he ran for state representative but lost the election. After redistricting occurred, he ran again in 1982 and was victorious. Between those two elections, Ortega became an active force in race relations. He started a successful business, Ortega Consulting, in Brenke in 1977. The organization offered consultations on race relations in regards to business, politics and law. He continued to press equality issues throughout his tenure in the Texas House of Representatives, which ended in 2000 when he was appointed by the President to a post on the Federal Commission on Equality. Ortega became head of the commission in 2003 and continues to work in that capacity today (2007).²⁰

Smackdab High School continues to educate students in the city and the surrounding area. Under the leadership of Bill Barnes, who has served as principal of the school since 1988 and has been with the school in some capacity since 1975, Smackdab has grown to become a leader in education.²¹ Additional buildings were added on the school grounds in 1977, 1984, 1990 and 1998.²² With more modern

facilities, Smackdab High School has become a focal point of district and statewide contests (Academic Decathlon and others). In addition, with the area's increasingly diverse population, Smackdab High School now features one of the state's leading foreign language programs, offering Spanish, German, French, Italian, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Serbo-Croatian and Korean.²³

III. SIGNIFICANCE

Opening in 1876, Smackdab High School is one of the county's earliest schools and the first public school for the community it serves. From its early days, the school served as a center for the community, becoming an important gathering place for emergency meetings during the 1886 drought and 1891 train wreck. In addition, the school has graduated several important local and state leaders, including Michael Ortega, Franklin White, James Whitfield and Teddy Olsen, who oversaw the successful integration of the school in 1965. Today, Smackdab High School continues to be an important center of education for the city and county.

VI. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Prater, Elihu. *Beyond the Rim: A History of Early Post Oak County*. Smackdab: Post Oak County Historical Commission, 1978. p. 105.

² Prater, p. 107.

³ Savitch, Paul. *Schools of Post Oak County*. Jergenson: Post Oak County Historical Commission, 1984, p. 178.

⁴ Savitch, p. 26–28.

⁵ Savitch, p. 43.

⁶ Deed records: V. 64, p. 105, Office of the Post Oak County Clerk, Post Oak County Courthouse, Jergenson.

⁷ "A History of the Pumpkin Festival," *Smackdab Gazette*, October 8, 1995.

⁸ Prater, p. 194.

⁹ Statement by Joanna Ryan to G.L. Mann, January 1972; "19th Century Smackdab," Smackdab Heritage Club files.

¹⁰“School Helps Relief Efforts,” *Smackdab Spectator*, November 3, 1891.

¹¹Patsy Marshall. Oral history interview with Chris Bench, April 23, 1982; tape and transcript in possession of interviewer.

¹²Savitch, p. 29.

¹³*Smackdab Gazette*, May 4, 1968.

¹⁴Marshall interview.

¹⁵County Treasurer’s School Account Register, pp. 42, 83, 89–92, 165, Office of the Post Oak County Clerk, Post Oak County Courthouse, Jergenson.

¹⁶*Smackdab Gazette*, September 3, 1965.

¹⁷*El Paso Informer*, January 17, 1966; *Smackdab Gazette*, October 11, 1965.

¹⁸Savitch, pp. 67, 123.

¹⁹Smith, Jim, ed. “Franklin White,” *The Texana Handbook*. Austin: Smith Texana Publishers, 1999. Vol. 5, p. 291; *Smackdab Gazette*, November 27, 1991.

²⁰Smith, Jim, ed. “Michael Ortega,” *The Texana Handbook*. Austin: Smith Texana Publishers, 1999. Vol. 6, p. 395.

²¹*Smackdab Gazette*, August 11, 1998.

²²County Treasurer’s School Account Register, pp. 337-339, 406, 512, 832, Office of the Post Oak County Clerk, Post Oak County Courthouse, Jergenson.

²³Jerry Monahan. Interview with Chris Bench, March 11, 2006. Monahan serves in 2006 as assistant principal of Smackdab High School; tape and transcript in possession of interviewer.