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The Evolution of Frisco's Place to Meet

By Beth Robinson and Lori Fairchild

THE MYSTERY CONTINUES as to the status of the steel structure on the northeast corner of Preston Road and FM 720. However, what used to be a luxurious estate used for elaborate Frisco parties and events will actually retire when the Frisco Convention & Visitors Bureau opens in the spring of 2005. In the spring of 1996, Frisco *STYLE* reported the history of the old Box Ranch/Brinkmann Ranch, *Box Ranch: A Legend in Limbo*. Even newer residents of Frisco will appreciate the history of the ranch and welcome the progress emblematic in the new Frisco Convention & Visitors Bureau.



*Brinkmann Ranch house today.
Frisco STYLE Magazine Archives*

THEN...

The skeletal structure looms on the Frisco prairie, bare yet packed with mystery. Does it represent the beginning of a brand new construction project, or the remains of one gone awry?

Few residents or visitors pass the northeast corner of Preston Road and FM 720 without wondering what this massive frame is going to be, or perhaps what it used to be.

For now, the past tense prevails in the answers to those questions. The mysterious building frame occupies the spot once covered by the Box Estate, a 14,000-square-foot mansion built in 1941 as a replica of Tara, the fictional Georgia plantation in "Gone With the Wind."

The mansion, last owned by the late Cloyce Box, was destroyed in the fall of 1987 by a fire that originated with flammable liquids being used in a remodeling project. None of the occupants of the home was inside at the time of the blaze, but it marked the end of an era for the Box Ranch.

Cloyce Box dreamed of rebuilding the mansion, this time even bigger than before. He poured about \$1 million into the construction process before financial setbacks put it on hold. A series of foreclosures, Mr. Box's death in 1993, a divorce settlement which returned the house to his first wife, Fern Box Carr, and miscellaneous litigation proceedings have suspended the future of the Box Ranch in a state of limbo.

THE GLORY DAYS

Cloyce and Fern Box bought the Frisco property in 1965, when their four sons—Tom, Don, Gary and Doug—ranged in age from 13 to 8. Although there had been three previous owners, "No one had lived in the house for very long until we bought it," recalls Mrs. Box Carr. "We had been in a smaller home in Dallas and had been looking for years for a house big enough. We went out there and just fell in love with that house. We had also fallen in love with horses, so we thought this was the perfect place."

Designed by architect John Astin Perkins, the two-story, colonial-style mansion exuded elegance, including carved wood trim, antique crystal chandeliers and two French fireplace mantels, one of which was rumored to have belonged to Napoleon. The home even had a full basement, rare in this part of the country.

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The Boxes invested in extensive remodeling and redecorating of their new home, converting the third-floor attic and adding central heat and air-conditioning, traditional furnishings, a Western art collection and a security system. “When we first moved in, it was such an open and safe feeling there that we didn’t have locks on the doors; we didn’t even have keys,” says Mrs. Box Carr.

A Texas native who boasted the physical attributes of both size and speed, Mr. Box had made a name for himself in the 1950s as an All-Pro football player – one of the Detroit Lions’ first wide receivers and a member of its 1952 and ’53 world championship teams. He counted Doak Walker and Frank Gifford among his friends.

Mr. Box graduated from Baylor Law School and was soon called into active duty in the Korean War and never practiced law. Following his successful but relatively brief professional football career, he made his fortune as an industrious businessman, first in the construction business, specializing in cement manufacturing plants, and later in oil and gas.

A man of many interests, Mr. Box added “rancher” to his repertoire, and began acquiring his Frisco ranch in tracts, eventually building it to 889 acres and making it home to crops, cattle and horses, including thoroughbreds and quarter horses.

The ranch produced two decades of fond memories for the Box family, from festive birthday parties and cozy Christmases to elegant wedding celebrations. But the glamorous highlights were the big parties, says Mrs. Box Carr.

“Mom and Dad prided themselves on having kind of a showplace,” adds Doug Box, the youngest of the four sons. “We entertained a lot; there was always something going on.”

HOLLYWOOD COMES TO FRISCO

The Box Estate, seemingly well hidden in tiny Frisco, actually was destined for the big-time. That moment arrived in early 1978, when the mansion was chosen by television producer Leonard Katzman as the first “Southfork Ranch” for the Dallas series.

Mr. Box agreed to the use of his home’s exterior for filming the pilot episode, but sent Lorimar Productions packing after he became disillusioned with the show’s negative image of the Texas oil industry. The Dallas cast and crew then moved to the Joe Duncan Estate in Wylie. Still, the glamour that came with being the original Southfork stuck, drawing curious gawkers for some time.

Even a lady in waiting to the Queen of England couldn’t resist the opportunity to see it when she was visiting Dallas. “Somebody from the (Dallas) Chamber of Commerce brought Lady Foxworth out, and she came in and sat down and had some light refreshments. I thought she would be dripping in jewels, but she had on blue jeans,” notes Mrs. Box Carr.

*Marla Roe, Executive Director, Frisco Convention & Visitors Bureau
photo by Frisco STYLE Staff*



Posing as the original home of the fictional Ewing family wasn't the end of the limelight for the Box Estate, though. In 1984, the ranch was selected by The Southland Corp. as the site for a party honoring the Olympic medallists.

"The Olympic organization sponsored it and paid for everything, and we had fireworks in the shape of the United States flag, and the Olympic symbols floating in the swimming pool," Mrs. Box Carr says. An estimated 10,000 guests roamed the Box Ranch, inside and out, including Olympic notables Mary Lou Retton and Greg Louganis.

END OF AN ERA

It is said that all good things must come to an end. So it was with the Box Ranch, as it was known in the 1970s and '80s. After nearly 40 years of marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Box divorced in 1986 and each later remarried. Mr. Box remained on the ranch and was living in the mansion with his second wife when fire destroyed it in 1987.

"They were in the process of redoing some woodwork in the east wing of the house when a freak accident occurred with some painters," says Doug. "We really don't know to this day the full mystery behind that story, but it instantaneously ignited the whole room, almost like a bomb going off."

A delayed emergency call, placed 15 minutes after the intense blaze began, plus the lack of a readily available water source on the property hampered the effort of the Frisco Fire Department, according to a 1988 report in *Texas Fireman*. The nearest fire hydrant was 2,700 feet away (a problem which has since been rectified), and the location of the swimming pool made it inaccessible for drafting water. Finally, a large pond about 600 feet from the house provided enough water to begin suppressing the fire, with the assistance of the McKinney and Plano fire departments.

Only about a third of the structure was left undamaged, and approximately \$1 million worth of the building and contents were saved. Structural damages totaled \$1.5 million and the lost contents were valued at \$1.7 million.

"A fire is one of the worst things you can go through," says Doug. "I think it left a lot of really deep scars in our family. It's kind of like a death – you never really get over it because it's such a final thing. And there were childhood keepsakes that I had there that were all gone."

"This is a whole city focus to bring tourism to Frisco."



Embassy Suites Hotel & Conference Center rendering provided by Embassy Suites

The timing was unfortunate for Cloyce Box. He initiated the process of rebuilding more than once, but the construction boom that had helped make him rich had given way to a bust, and portions of his property fell into foreclosure.

TODAY AND TOMORROW

Mr. Box died suddenly of a heart attack in 1993 at the age of 70. Hundreds of friends gathered at Lovers Lane Methodist Church in Dallas for his funeral, made all the more memorable by a eulogy delivered by football buddy Frank Gifford, and music performed by Kathie Lee Gifford.

Mr. Box's rebuilding of the original house appears suspended in time, remaining exactly the same today, as it was the day he died. Mrs. Box Carr says the property and the structure would lend themselves to a number of potential uses. "I think it's a beautiful setting for a home and I would love to see it rebuilt," she says. "I think it's one of the few facilities in this area that's so well adapted to horse-breeding, an

operating ranch or a boarding ranch for horses. It could even be turned into a clubhouse for equestrian purposes."

NEW OWNER, BRINKMANN, NOT BRINKER

The sign clearly reads "Brinkmann Ranch" yet passersby often mistake the name for "Brinker," assuming the owner of

this impressive property must be the well-known, well-heeled restaurateur Norman Brinker.

But Baxter Brinkmann, owner of the choice 2,400-acre tract surrounding what's left of the original Box Ranch has his own success story.

Baxter founded the Brinkmann Corp., a consumer products manufacturing company. Brinkmann has since become a household word, found on outdoor grills and meat smokers, lighting products, home security products and lawn and garden products.

Brinkmann, originally from Louisiana, acquired their sprawling Frisco ranch in eight separate transactions, including two parcels that once formed most of the Box Ranch.

"The property has great diversity," Baxter notes. "It's probably the most beautiful piece of property in the area north of Dallas. It's got rolling hills, some areas that are very heavy with trees, some areas with creeks and cliffs that are very reminiscent of the Hill Country, and head waters for Panther Creek and West Rowlett Creek."

The Brinkmann Ranch in Frisco is home to a thriving horse operation, a large herd of cattle and a tree farm comprising more than 10,000 Bradford pears, live oaks and red oaks. The horse operation includes a number of famous race and show horses. One of the brood mares, "Dashingly," is the all-time winning quarter horse race mare, having won \$1.752 million at the race track. "Benhad," a Brinkmann show horse, is a four-time world champion halter horse.

Plans for the Brinkmann Ranch are basically more of the same. "The property is 100 percent agricultural. Our immediate plan is

"Mr. Box died suddenly of a heart attack in 1993 at the age of 70."

to maintain the property, plant more trees, breed more horses, plant more crops and run more cattle,” Baxter says.

NOW... A NEW GATHERING PLACE

While the glamour of the old Box Ranch fades, the new Frisco Convention & Visitors Bureau is made ready for its first event in April 2005. The Frisco Conference Center, located in the John Q. Hammonds Embassy Suites Hotel, is under construction and scheduled to open just in time for the April event. Frisco will join the ranks of neighboring cities being able to provide a venue for citizen events from high school graduations to corporate functions.

Marla Roe, newly hired executive director for the Frisco Convention & Visitors Bureau, says the potential is unlimited. “We have already begun marketing the City of Frisco all over the state of Texas to attract suitable events to this beautiful facility. This is a whole city focus to bring tourism to Frisco for meetings, sporting events, conventions and trade shows.” The marketing efforts seem to be paying off already. Roe said after one week on TourTexas.com Frisco received 200 inquiries. Beginning in October, Frisco will start a branding process for the city to create a destination brand similar to Dallas’ new Live Large, Think Big slogan.

The Frisco Conference Center is owned by the city of Frisco and will be managed by the Embassy Suites Hotel. The multi-functional Conference Center offers over 100,000 square feet of flexible meeting and exhibit space, complete with high-speed Internet access, full video production and conferencing capabilities, on site audiovisual staff and a full service Business Center.

“The city has outgrown most of its existing facilities for functions like high school graduations or proms and we will be able to offer an area for receptions and parties for up to 4,000 people,” Roe explains.

The Embassy Suites Hotel, currently under construction, will offer 330 all-suite accommodations featuring large bedrooms, private living rooms and covered balconies. The hotel represents a \$40 million investment and the Conference Center another \$20 million. Artwork from local artists and bold colors will be featured throughout the Conference Center and the hotel located at Gaylord Parkway and Parkwood Boulevard.

Roe comes to Frisco after ten and a half years with the Arlington Convention & Visitors Bureau. Her focus will be events that will require more than ten hotel rooms. For more information on the Frisco Conference Center visit the website at www.visitfrisco.com.

Beth Robinson is editor-in-chief of Frisco STYLE Magazine. Missy Crump and Lori Fairchild are Collin County freelance writers.

