

History of The Sisters

The two towns comprising The Sisters community had a storied past.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Bertram Randolph was one of the wealthiest men in the entire Brazos Valley. As the undisputed Cotton King in all of central Texas, he owned thousands of acres of prime farmland in River County. His plantation played such a vital role in the industry that the Trinity and Brazos Railway—soon known as the Boll Weevil—laid a set of tracks running strategically alongside his cotton gin.

During the heyday of cotton, the train made multiple daily stops at the Randolph depot. The frequent stops were necessary during ginning season to transport the crop to market; other times, the stops were necessary to fit the whim of Randolph's two daughters.

Naomi and Juliet Randolph were the epitome of the spoiled Southern belle. When Bertram's wife died at an early age and left him with two young girls to raise, he did the only thing he knew to do: he indulged them. No matter the whim, no matter the cost, the cotton baron gave his beloved daughters anything they wanted.

The one thing he couldn't provide for them, however, was camaraderie. Even as toddlers, the two girls were bitter rivals, constantly vying for their father's undivided attention. As the years progressed, so did their sense of competition. Their attempts to monopolize the people in their lives—their father, their nanny, the cook, the maid, the family pet, the other children who lived on the plantation—grew to such proportions that the only solution seemed not to be to share, but to divide. By their teen years, they even lived in separate wings of the house, and each had her own cook and her own

maid.

The sisters often took the train into the nearby towns that bordered the plantation. During their shopping excursions, they invariably caused a scene in town. The accusations flew back and forth: the seamstress catered to Juliet; the hat maker chose the more exquisite material for Naomi; the restaurant wasn't large enough for both of them; Juliet's special order of books arrived, so why was Naomi's delayed? The squabbles escalated until finally Bertram Randolph had enough.

His solution was to give each daughter her own town. By now, the cotton industry had reached its peak and began to decline. Some of his planting fields were already abandoned in favor of raising cattle, so he sectioned off a large plat of land on either side of the railroad to give to his daughters. A common area, however, would remain between them. As the gin was still an important part of the community at large, it became part of the shared property, along with the deep water well and the depot. The plantation had a school for the children whose parents lived and worked on the farm, and that, too, was designated as common ground.

Bertram built each daughter her own house, mirror images of one another on either side of the track. He also helped them get their towns started. For every proprietor willing to open an establishment in the new settlements, he offered a free lot on which to build their home.

First, however, they had to meet the approval of the town's namesake. Each woman had the final authority on which businesses and which people moved into their towns. And so, the towns became as different and as opinionated as the women they were named after.

Juliet, who revered all things prim and proper, designed her town to be pleasing to the eye. Flowerbeds lined her side of the train track. City blocks were laid with meticulous care,

with six of them deemed commercial property. Houses, particularly those along the main avenues of the town, required white paint, black shutters, and well-kept lawns; commercial buildings had specific height and color requirements, especially those facing the railroad. With the popularity of automobiles coming into vogue, neat parking spaces were designated around each commercial block; no parking was allowed on the brick-paved streets. And even though some types of businesses were absolutely essential to a town and could be delegated to the back streets, many establishments didn't meet the standards required in Juliet, Texas.

Naomi's free spirit reflected in the town on the northern side of the track. There were two long, distinct commercial blocks running horizontal with the railroad, but no buildings faced the iron horses. Like its founder, the town was built to snub convention and propriety; instead of posturing for the railway, the businesses presented their backs to the line. The two strings of buildings opened toward each other, with parking spaces lining both. When new businesses came to town, they squeezed in at random, giving the streets odd angles and curves and unbalanced city blocks. The unconventional businesses shunned in Juliet were welcomed in Naomi. The same could be said for many of the residents. Naomi, Texas was soon known as either a gathering place for outcasts or a gathering place for entrepreneurs, depending entirely upon who judged it.

As the years passed and the cotton industry further declined, Bertram Randolph realized his plantation would fall to neglect if he didn't find a suitable heir to take over his farming operation. Neither daughter was interested in the land, so he gave the bulk of the farm to his oldest and most trusted employee, Andrew deCordova. The deCordovas had been a part of the plantation for as long as anyone could

remember, living and working alongside the Randolphs from the very beginning. It seemed only fitting that the fertile fields be left to someone who loved the soil as much as Bertram did.

With the massive plantation now divided into three entities and with their father's health quickly declining, it was the perfect time for the sisters to make peace.

But the arrival of a private physician, hired to care for Bertram in his last days, made reconciliation between the sisters forever impossible. Both women promptly fell in love with Darwin Blakely, but the handsome young doctor couldn't choose between them.

In the end, just before he was killed in a freak accident, the doctor gave them both a part of himself. To Juliet, he gave his name; to Naomi, he gave a daughter. Thus, the circle of competition and bitterness continued, as did the legacy of the towns.

Juliet remained a town about appearances. Newcomers to the area who desired social standing, prestige, and an air of refinement settled within the perimeters of the town to the south. Through the years, property values in Juliet escalated and helped to control "undesirable" citizens. Cotton was the only big industry welcomed there. Until her death in 1984, Juliet Randolph Blakely remained in firm control of her town, personally screening each business and home that came into her town. With no children of her own, she left her estate to her cook's daughter. Bertha Hamilton Cessna, known to most of the town as Granny Bert, became heiress to the town of Juliet.

Across the tracks, Naomi remained a town known for its unconventional ways. Lower property values—and according to some, lower standards—brought in more industry for the northern town. It wasn't uncommon for someone to open a business in Naomi, but choose to live in the more prestigious

sister city. When Naomi Randolph died in 1986, she was trying to convince a popular fast-food chain to open in her town, a first for their rural area.

By the time the twenty-first century arrived, both towns had grown and prospered, but old prejudices remained. The common area still existed between them, as outlined in each town's charter. The old cotton gin was now home to The Sisters Volunteer Fire Department. Just across the tracks, and easily accessible by a footbridge, the old depot housed The Sisters Police Department and tiny jail. The shared deep water well sported a modern-day tower, and the school had long since grown and moved out across the new highway, to property donated by the deCordova ranch. The new highway ran perpendicular to the cities, crossing over the railroad by way of a tall overpass. Ramps exited off into each town, offering an alternate route across the tracks when a train was coming and, most importantly, connected the sister cities to a world beyond their petty rivalry.

Up and down the highway, billboards touted the beauty and friendly hometown appeal of The Sisters. They were home to a Heisman trophy winner. They had the State Championship basketball team. They had low property taxes and high test scores. According to the signs out on the highway, they had it all.

Below the overpass, however, buried within the boundaries of the city limits and within the confines of small minds, old rivalries and old loyalties still ran deep.