Trains, Planes, and Automobiles

EQ: How have the population and settlement patterns changed in Texas?

Expert Information

For centuries, civilizations developed near waterways for economic reasons, and Texas was no different. During the early 1800s, many Texas towns were built near rivers. Even through the time of the Republic and early statehood, rivers were the main source of transportation. Large rafts and flatbottom boats carried cotton bales, corn, and other goods down the rivers to coastal ports. These products were taken by ship across the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans to be loaded onto ships going to foreign countries throughout the world. Returning ships brought back goods to be sold in Texas.

Roads also connected the early communities in Texas. They were no more than dusty trails that turned into muddy bogs when it rained. There were few bridges across the rivers, but some ferryboats carried people and wagons through the water while the cattle swam. The oldest road was called "El Camino Real – The King’s Highway". Its dirt tracks stretched from the Rio Grande to Nacogdoches. As more towns developed, roads connected them, but a true system of transportation didn’t exist.

A faster way of traveling became possible in 1852 when the first railroad came to Texas. The state government was so eager to encourage railroad expansion that it gave land grants (free land) to the railroad companies for building tracks. All of this affected the price of land and buildings (real estate) in the towns along the tracks. More trains meant more people, which meant more need for business, which meant more money for Texas.

The first railroad tracks were laid near Houston and traveled at rates of seven miles per hour! Before the Civil War, Texas had 500 miles of track connecting its communities. Then after the Civil War, the Texas railroads began to be connected with tracks in other states. By 1900 there were 10,000 miles all over the state. The Texas economy was on the move. Towns that were built along the railroad lines were prosperous (successful). Towns not fortunate enough to be built along the lines suffered from economic depression, and some even became ghost towns.

Imagine that the year is 1900, and you are moving to Texas from Georgia in hopes of making money in a new business. You decide to ride the trains across the state to investigate the economic opportunities. Refer to the map in your textbook on page 439 and answer the following questions.

1. You decide to start your trip in Dallas and travel west to Sierra Blanca near the Rio Grande River. What is the name of the railroad company that you use? ____________________ 
   You see several interesting towns along the way, but you decide to continue your search for the perfect place to start your new business.

2. Next, you travel from Sierra Blanca to San Antonio. Name the Texas towns along the way where the train will stop.
   a. ____________________ b. ____________________ c. ____________________ d. ____________________

3. You decide to stay a few days at the Menger Hotel in San Antonio and meet with a banker. You even think about investing some of your money in the railroad business. What three railroad lines intersect (connect) in San Antonio?
   a. ____________________ b. ____________________ c. ____________________

4. You hear that ranching in South Texas is really good, so you travel to Uvalde. What is the name of the railroad company that owns the line to Uvalde? ____________________
   Once you get to Uvalde, you realize that there aren’t many other large business communities nearby, and there is only one train in and one train out of the area. You decide it’s not the place for you. On your train trip back to San Antonio you take a nap since you have already seen the countryside along the way.

5. It is the first week in September 1900, and you want to make a decision by the middle of the month. You decide to take the train from San Antonio to Houston. Now, this looks like a place that might be worth considering! Why do you think Houston might provide economic opportunities in the early 1900’s? (Hint: Think about transportation.)

Even though you think Houston might be the place for your new business, you consider traveling to visit the coastal city of Galveston. It sounds like it offers much economic opportunity. However, the local weather report warns of an upcoming storm, so you decide that Houston is the place for you after all. It is easily fifty miles from the coast and probably won’t have any danger from storms or extensive flooding!

6. Read pages 438-439 (A Network of Steel Connects Texas) in your textbook. Name the three large cities that developed rapidly because they were railroad centers.
7. Roads were made of __________________ _______________ in the late 1800s.
8. What lead the state to improve roads?
9. What contributed to the growth of industry?
10. How did communication help cotton farmers?
11. Who installed the first telephone in Texas?
12. In 1870, how many Texans worked in industry?
14. By 1900, what was the second largest industry in Texas?
15. By 1900, what was the most valuable industry in Texas?
16. What allowed mining to become an important industry in Texas?
17. When did oil become a major industry in Texas?

Expert Information: By the early 1900s Texans began to have automobiles, but they were still a luxury item for many. However, once oil was discovered at Spindletop, more businesses came to Texas, and the population began to explode. Texas was a big state, and there was a need for an organized system of transportation.

By the 1920s the Texas highway began to connect major cities. Farmers could transport products to nearby railroad stations for transport to market. Therefore, these roads became known as Farm to Market Roads. They were identified with the letters FM and a number. For example, 1960 was originally one of these roads. Most of these roads are still two-lane highways. State highways connected the different towns and cities in Texas. Finally, in 1956 an interstate highway system was planned to connect states across the country. Interstate Highways are labeled with the letter I and a number. Finally, in the mid-1990s the United States, Mexico, and Canada signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). It was designed to increase trade and promote business between the three countries. Since Texas borders Mexico, it became a major economic participant. The official NAFTA transportation link is I-35 that runs from Duluth, Minnesota through Dallas and eventually to Laredo, Texas and the border with Mexico. Once again, the transportation routes impacted the price of real estate.

When two-lane roads first started, businesses began to see a golden opportunity for making money. First of all, cafes and motor courts (similar to motels) were built along the highways. (Drive-through, fast food restaurants like McDonald’s and Jack-in-the-Box were still years away from development.) At the same time, businesses realized they could create roadside advertisements, since they had a captive audience that would be forced to read the signs along the way. Small signs were placed on fence posts that advertised different businesses and sites to visit in the city. One of the most popular roadside advertising companies was Burma-Shave, a maker of men’s shaving cream. Their small signs were placed about twenty yards apart and then placed further apart as speed limits increased. The individual signs had interesting, witty sayings that would read together to form a sentence. The last sign advertised Burma-Shave. At one point, 7,000 Burma-Shave signs were all across America, including the sides of barns. Signs had clever slogans on a variety of topics including traffic safety, advice for men about women, and advice for women about men. One example warned people to drive slowly near a school.

Once interstate highways began to be built, the roadside signs had to get bigger for people to see. Today we see the effects of this in billboards. Companies buy space on billboards for a certain period of time. The more cars that travel by a billboard daily, the more it costs to buy the space. Roadways have become an economic gold mine.

18. Choose a business, it can be one that already exists, and create a 5 sign roadside advertisement like the Burma-Shave signs. Get a piece of unlined paper from your teacher. Signs must be in black ink. NO decorations or color.