Blessed With Dogwood: The Story of a Small Town Festival

By Kitty Coyle

“When the Dogwood blooms in Bossier Parish it is time to go a-fishing. And when the earthworms begin showing signs, as they now are, the Dogwood is about to bloom.”

Bossier Banner, March 4, 1920

Plain Dealing, Louisiana, which proudly calls itself “the only town with the golden rule name,” lies thirty miles north of Shreveport and six miles east of the Red River, near the western tip of the Ozark Spur. Climbing out of the low-lying fields around Bossier City and Benton, its surrounding terrain rises and falls as it curves along the steep hills of state Highway 3, rolling on toward the Arkansas border. Just off the main highway, a few miles northwest of downtown, lie the barren hills where once the multitudes flocked to behold the glory that was known as the Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive. It was a glory that inspired a unique celebration, the Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive Festival, which became a beloved annual ritual. But, in the hearts and souls of the festival founders, the hallowed Dogwood Drive itself was always the reality and the reason.

If a time machine could somehow catapult us back to the springs of the 1950's in Plain Dealing, we would be astounded that a town so tiny could mount a spectacle so enormous as the Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive Festival. People accustomed to small-town festivals of today would stand transfixed by the grandeur of the Dogwood Festival Parade, with its dazzling floats that really floated—they were placed over cars rather than pulled along—and its grandly-appointed, musically-stirring, precision-marching high school bands. The Dogwood Festival was known in our nation's capitol and listed in the New York Times newspaper. Its queens were crowned by governors of the state.

Its rise and decline has something to teach us about how the Past can shine as a beacon for the present and a warning for the future. The festival was a high-minded venture that thrived during an era when ties to the community and to the land were stronger than quests for self-enhancement and profit. It lost its raison d'être because some of its founders did not apprehend the destructive

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ramifications of a changing world, leaving a priceless natural godsend unprotected.

Fifty years ago the nation was on the brink of massive changes that would eventually profoundly affect even the life of a small southern town. For generations Plain Dealing had been a bucolic place where people were deeply rooted and intimately connected. School children, for example, had to contend with teachers who had taught not only their older siblings, but often their parents as well. Life was community-centered, slow to change, and fairly comfortable but not affluent by the standards of today. However, monumental technological advances such as television, combined with the increasing affluence of the population, had unintended and unforeseen consequences. One was an increasingly materialistic culture. That materialism, along with a gradual weakening of communal loyalties, seem directly related to the downfall of the Dogwood Drive.

The Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive Festival was inaugurated with an elegant preview party on March 23, 1951. In attendance were Governor Earl K. Long and 100 other state and local dignitaries. Twelve thousand people toured the Dogwood Drive the following Sunday, and an estimated 50,000 from 25 states enjoyed the breathtaking spectacle of miles of white-blossomed trees during the four weeks of the Festival. It was a stunning, almost shocking success for those whose dreams had electrified the town for over a year, forging a spirit of common mission and destiny. There was no parade that year and no Dogwood queen. At its genesis, as always at its heart, the Festival was about the sanctity of nature and the love and pride of a small town.

In the Beginning

It all began when a handful of townspeople, inspired by the zeal of one local visionary, sought to celebrate the timeless beauty of their native landscape. There seemed to be no other motive originally for these people, who had loved the Dogwood Hills northwest of Plain Dealing all their lives before anyone ever thought of having a festival. Those wooded hills had always been there, as if they were the birthright of successive generations in perpetuity.

Throughout history many others had experienced the beauty of that land, beginning with the native Americans who inhabited the area in an earlier time. According to general knowledge, the explorer DeSoto and his men were

2 "Plain Dealing Host to Over 12,000 Last Sunday," The Plain Dealing Progress, March 29, 1951, hereafter cited as Progress; "Visitors Here From Twenty-Five States," Progress, April 5, 1951; "Plain Dealing Lions Club Sponsors Original Dogwood Drive," Progress, March 20, 1952.
probably the first Europeans on the scene, during their 1542 Red River expedition. The chronicler of that exploration could well have been describing the future Dogwood Drive when he wrote of the beauty of “flowering trees in the little mountains.” In 1895, when the town of Plain Dealing was only five years old, editor William Scanland expressed in his Bossier-Banner newspaper his delight in the beautiful scenery “just 3 miles West of this place,” in the Phelps Lake area, where he rode with his daughter on horseback “up hills and down hills until we finally arrived on the top of a hill” that was so high that he could not “see the foot of it on the other side.” He was undoubtedly referring to what was later known as “Delaney Mountain” on the Dogwood Drive route, which, at an elevation of 400-500 feet, is the second highest point in Louisiana. It was probably named for John Delaney, an early settler whose 1907 murder in the Dogwood Hills was never solved.

By the middle of the Twentieth Century, F.G. Phillips, editor of the weekly Plain Dealing Progress, and others had come to believe that, by the grace of God, they were surrounded by a miracle of nature that should be shared with the world. At the time the only festivals in Northwest Louisiana were the Natchitoches Christmas Lights Festival, which began in 1926, and Shreveport’s Holiday in Dixie, organized in 1949. The Ruston Peach Festival was inaugurated two months after the first Plain Dealing Dogwood celebration in 1951, while the numerous festivals of today all came much later.

In the Ark-La-Tex region, the Tyler Rose Festival, begun in 1933 to showcase the local rose industry, was well-known. However, it was the Palestine, Texas Dogwood Trails, organized in 1939, that inspired the Plain Dealing festival. By 1950 several Plain Dealing residents had driven through the Palestine Dogwood trails, and the feeling grew that the Dogwood hills of home were far lovelier.

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5 “P.H. Lions Club Designate Name For Scenic Route,” Progress, October 5, 1950.
6 Ardis Manty, “Looking Backward,” Bossier-Banner Progress, March 27, 1975
10 “Cover Story,” publication of Palestine, Texas Area Chamber of Commerce, n.d.
11 Tyler Rose Museum Fact Sheet, n.d.2.
People began to talk about the possibility of establishing a public scenic drive through the local area.

Several people through the years have been credited with coming up with the idea for the Dogwood Drive Festival, but the truth is that no one knows who was first to think of it. According to a memoir written by former football coach and principal Glenn Crawford, a trio of ladies thought the whole thing up over afternoon sodas. He writes:

One early spring my wife Olivia, Maurine Acton, and Rita Keoun were having their after-school Coca-Cola at Walker Brothers’ Drug Store and the Dogwood’s beauty and easy approach became the topic of their meeting. One of the three said, ‘Why don’t we get the Lions Club to form a yearly Dogwood Drive?’

Mr. Crawford states that he happened to be president of the Lions Club at the time and presented the idea at the next meeting when, “it was approved and became a reality.”13 Most people, however, have considered F.G. Phillips the founder of the Dogwood Festival because of his evangelical devotion to the project from the beginning. According to journalist and local historian John Ardis Manry, the idea for a Dogwood Drive grew out of a chance encounter between Mr. Phillips and Mr. and Mrs. John Watkins, who were taking a walk in the Dogwood hills one day in the early spring of 1950.14 The Watkins lived in Minden, but Mrs. Watkins was a Plain Dealing native and was the sister of the mayor of Plain Dealing, Doyle Sanders. After his discussion with the Watkins, Mr. Phillips published an editorial in the Plain Dealing Progress, “Our Own Dogwood Trail.”15 A few days later the editorial was reprinted in the Shreveport Journal, along with a letter from John Watkins advocating the Dogwood Drive project in Plain Dealing. Journal editor Dolph Frantz added his own editorial endorsement.16

From that time on the Dogwood Drive idea had an aura of inevitability, as Mr. Phillips continued to crusade editorially in the Progress until he reported on May 4, 1950 that the Lions Club had made the “big decision” to sponsor the Dogwood

14 John Manry, Video Transcript, 1992, 14, Bossier Parish Library Historical Center
Drive project. The motion, made by John Doles, president of the bank and a highly respected and influential citizen, passed unanimously. It was a bold step indeed for a town with a population of 1,321, by far the smallest in the region to attempt a festival at the time.

Moreover, the vision for this festival was unique. Unlike the Natchitoches Christmas Festival or Holiday in Dixie, it was a nature festival. Unlike the Rose and Peach Festivals, it was a “non-artificial” nature festival, celebrating the creation of God rather than deliberate efforts of human beings. As such it was meant to serve a higher purpose. “The thought of the Dogwood Drive,” wrote Mr. Phillips in a Progress editorial, “is primarily and intrinsically altruistic and aesthetic. Commercializing in all eventualities is to be religiously avoided.”

For the community, the Dogwood Drive became hallowed ground. Acknowledging that spirit, J.C. Bolinger, a partner of S.H. Bolinger Company, which owned a large amount of the land on the Drive, vowed that “no Dogwood tree will ever be cut on Bolinger property.” This vision that united and galvanized the townspeople was expressed in the Articles of Incorporation of the Dogwood Drive Association, written by Mr. Phillips in the late spring of 1951:

The purpose for which this Corporation is formed is to initiate, foster, and support programs and projects for the preservation and development of the natural resources which abound in the hills and valleys of the Northwest portion of Bossier Parish, Louisiana...to encourage and develop among its members, an appreciation for the beauty of nature’s handiwork with which this community has been richly endowed by God...to stimulate a sense of pride among local citizens and promote the cultural life of the community through emphasis upon the wonders and beauty of God’s creation which conduces to a spirit of reverence... with special emphasis on the protection and propagation of the sacred Dogwood tree...
As long as Mr. Phillips was alive, that vision was not forsaken. A Georgia native and veteran of World War I, Mr. Phillips came to Plain Dealing in 1926 and served as school principal until 1949. He founded the Plain Dealing Progress in 1929 and bought the Bossier-Banner in 1945, combining the two as the Bossier-Banner Progress in 1953. He had a creative spirit and wrote the words of the Plain Dealing High School Alma Mater in 1948, as well as writing hymns for the local Methodist Church. 23 "He was very progressive," said Ardis Manry of Mr. Phillips, "He loved beauty." 24 He also loved his adopted hometown so much that he immersed himself in its activities. In the last decade of his life, his great passion was the Dogwood Drive.

That passion took hold of the community, and by the late spring of 1950 every group in town was involved in planning the first Dogwood Festival, including the Kadelphian Club, the Phi Delta Club, The American Legion, The P.T.A., the Home Demonstration Club, the Future Farmers of American, Boy Scouts, and all the churches. Committees were appointed to map out the route, set up roadside parks, arrange publicity, and plan the opening gala. Members of the organizations made presentations about the Dogwood Drive to their counterparts in surrounding towns, and that fall a committee prepared a Dogwood Booth for the Bossier-Webster Fair in Minden. 25

In early 1951 the pace picked up even more. The Lions Club met weekly with representatives of other organizations to discuss the Drive. Brochures and newspaper articles advertised the scenic highlights of the Drive, such as Trickle Springs, a 90-foot Holly tree, touted as the tallest in the country, and Gilmer Park, with its grove of Papaw trees. But the most breathtaking view of all among the snow-white studded hills and valleys was Delaney Mountain, with its vista of miniature cows grazing on the nearby Bolinger farm against the backdrop of the winding Red River and the distant borders of Texas and Arkansas. 26

As the opening day of the Festival approached, the town was in its glory, but even the most prophetic among the people could not have predicted the overwhelming success to come. Future mayor Leon Sanders vividly recalls that strange and wondrous Sabbath when the multitudes of cars on the red clay hills
kicked up so much dust that a mysterious cloud appeared in the northwest: "It was an Easter Sunday, and all the ladies' fine Easter clothes were covered with dust. They were not happy about that." Some wondered whether the red cloud portended the end of the world, Mr. Sanders reports, but the world of Plain Dealing was coming to a new beginning.²⁷

That new beginning meant that a new organization was needed to manage the festival, and before the end of 1951, The Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive Association had been chartered by the state, with 348 charter members. Made up of representatives from all the town's organizations, the Dogwood Drive Association became a powerful organization that effectively ran the Festival through its elected officers and appointed committees. Its first officers were: President, F.G. Phillips; first vice-president, M.R. Bolinger; Second Vice-president, E.S. Walker; treasurer, C.E. Bellar; and, secretary, Athlene Cornish, a high school business teacher who would serve in that office for the next forty years.²⁸

From the beginning the Dogwood Festival was closely connected to the historical roots of the town and the area. In early 1952 John Ardis Manry wrote an article in *Shreveport Magazine* about the first treaty between the Caddo Indian Nation and the United States, which was signed in 1806 at the Coushatta Indian village near Plain Dealing.²⁹ While this site was not actually located on the drive, there was an Indian mound in the Dogwood Dome area, believed to have been left by the Caddo Indians. Two years later a skull was uncovered there, and the area is still being studied by archeologists today.³⁰

Another folklorist who wrote colorful articles was Rupert Peyton, an editor of the *Bossier-Banner* newspaper. Nicknamed the "Prince of Plain Dealing" because of his fervent out-pourings about his hometown, Peyton loved making presentations to various civic groups throughout the area. In March 1952 he spoke to the Dogwood Association about Glover's Tavern, a stagecoach inn located about a mile north of the Dogwood Drive entrance in the 1830's. According to Peyton, guests at the Tavern included James Bowie, inventor of the Bowie knife, Stephen F. Austin, one of the founders of Texas, and James Conway, first governor of Arkansas.³¹

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²⁷ Leon Sanders, Oral History Interview, February 21, 2001, Bossier Parish Library Historical Center Oral History Collection.
²⁸ "Dogwood Drive Association Has Vital Meeting," *Progress*, July 19, 1951.
³¹ "Rupert Peyton is Guest Speaker at Dogwood Meeting," *Progress*, March 6, 1952.
Such presentations fuelled the town’s fervor as attention turned to planning for the 1952 Festival. At the suggestion of Dr. W.E.B. Lockridge, Baptist minister, an Easter sunrise service was scheduled in Gilmer Park, a tradition that continued for forty years. The Rev. Eugene Strickland, Presbyterian pastor, preached the first sunrise sermon.\(^3\)

**The First Dogwood Queen**

During this time traditions began that are still shrouded in secrecy. Nobody knows who came up with the idea of crowning a queen and honoring her with a fine parade, but these became revered annual rituals that took on more and more significance as time went by. On March 22, 1952 a secret committee of the Dogwood Association chose Marilyn Barnett, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. E. Denson Barnett as the first Dogwood Queen. In an elaborate ceremony, after young beauties from Plain Dealing and from surrounding towns were presented, The Queen was draped in an exquisite Dogwood-appliqued mantle with a flowing train, crowned by newly-elected state senator John Doles, and presented with a glittering Dogwood-tipped scepter by F.G. Phillips. The queen and her court were then serenaded by a soloist and a girls’ trio in a program that was broadcast over a Shreveport radio station—this was before the advent of television in the area—with Hub Brandao as master of ceremonies.\(^3\)

The parade that followed featured ten floats designed by the town civic and social organizations and marching bands from many area high schools, as well as politicians and dignitaries riding in decorated convertibles. The parade drew an estimated 5,000 people, said to be the largest crowd ever assembled in Plain Dealing at the time. The following weekend of the Festival was designated as Ark-La-Tex Day, featuring a program at the Legion Hut attended by Governor Robert Kennon and mayors of surrounding towns. Over 60,000 people toured the Dogwood Drive that year. Clyde Lusk, a Dogwood Association member and owner of the local Chevrolet dealership, expressed the awe of his fellow citizens when he jokingly proclaimed, “if we don’t mind, the show could get too big for us.”\(^3\)

Governor Kennon crowned the second Dogwood Queen, Julia Ann Burford, said to be a distant cousin to Jefferson Davis, in March 1953. In the audience that day was Julia Ann’s grandmother, Mrs. Julia Davis Swindle, who, according to Rupert Peyton, had been Festival Queen of Plain Dealing in 1891, “in the days

\(^{32}\) “Budding Dogwood Heralds Approach of Spring Fete,” *Bossier-Banner Progress*, February 28, 1952  
\(^{33}\) “Miss Marilyn Barnett Crowned Queen of Dogwood Drive in Highly Colorful Ceremonies,” *Bossier-Banner Progress*, March 27, 1952.  
\(^{34}\) “Record Crowds Brave Rain to Tour Dogwood Drive,” *Progress*, April 3, 1952.
when handsome men on handsome horses rode jousts to gather rings on a lance, with the winner having the right to designate the queens."

An added feature for the 1953 Festival was an antique display at the American Legion Hall. It included copies of the *Bossier Times*, the first Bossier Parish newspaper, established a century earlier. Also featured were silverware and silver doorknobs from Orchard Place, the ancestral home of the Gilmer family, who founded Plain Dealing.

Julia Ann Burford was the first Dogwood Queen to be invited to attend the Louisiana Mardi Gras Ball in Washington, D.C. (although Congressman Overton Brooks publicly regretted his oversight in not inviting Marilyn Barnett the year before). While in Washington in February, 1954, Julia Ann appeared on a local television program, where she was interviewed for seventeen minutes and then performed a “Dogwood Dance”. She also presented Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower with a Dogwood painting by Mrs. W.H. Martin, framed by Mrs. Madge Doles.

**An Artistic and Cultural Event**

Artistic endeavors were an integral part of the Dogwood Festival in the early years. In 1951 locally renown artists, such as Mrs. W. Martin, Mrs. Maureen Acton, and Mrs. Ruth Kidd, contributed works that hung in the American Legion Home. Alongside their paintings hung a large Dogwood landscape painted by members of Mrs. Lois Burford’s third grade class. Many townspeople were inspired to write original odes to the Dogwood, which were often printed in the newspaper and recited at the coronation ceremony. Rupert Peyton composed several poems, and others were written by Mrs. Muriel Blackwell, Mrs. Mollie Banks Gray, and Arthur Ray Teague.

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36 “Antique Show to be Sidelight of Dogwood Festival,” *Bossier-Banner Progress*, March 12, 1953.
38 “Dogwood Paintings Attract Attention,” *Progress*, April 5, 1951.
39 Mrs. Muriel Fontenot Blackwell was a high school teacher in Plain Dealing during the 1950’s and 1960’s. She later was an editor and writer of educational literature for the Baptist Church and published several books and volumes of poetry. Muriel F. Blackwell, Jacket cover, *Prairie Potpourri* (Baton Rouge: Claiter’s Book Store, Publishing Division,1967).

Mrs. Mollie Banks Gray (1862-1958) was the revered “grand old lady” of Plain Dealing. The great-great-grandniece of George Washington, “Mama” Gray was always at the center of the town’s civic and cultural life. She frequently contributed poetry to the Plain Dealing *Progress*. “Death Claims Miss Molly at age 96,” *The Shreveport Times*, May 18, 1958.

However, the greatest artistic honor bestowed on the Dogwood Festival was the composition of a special poem by Emma Wilson Emery, the first poet-laureate of Louisiana. Mrs. Emery served as poet-laureate from 1942 until her death in 1970. She was a long-time Shreveport resident who was one of the founders of the Shreveport chapter of the American Red Cross. During World War I she served as supervisor of the Caddo and Bossier Parish Red Cross nurses. Since she was also active in the American Legion Auxiliary, she may very well have known F.G. Phillips, who once served as Fourth District Commander of the American Legion. It is possible that Mr. Phillips, an amateur poet himself, encouraged or requested Mrs. Emery to write about the Dogwood Drive. Her poem, “Land of Dogwood Trails,” was read by him at the coronation ceremony in 1953 and appeared on the official Drive brochure and in newspapers frequently thereafter.

A Beloved Tradition

And so the rituals continued through the next eleven years, always the same. A local beauty, usually a college freshman, was chosen as queen by the committee that remains secret to this day. Her identity was not revealed until the coronation ceremony. Two young boys were similarly chosen as pages. They were given elaborate white costumes made in the same pattern as the queen’s mantle. After television stations were established in Shreveport in 1954 the coronation ceremonies were televised, and Al Bolton of KSLA television was a frequent master of ceremonies. The parades continued to get bigger and better, and the Drive continued to draw thousands to its beauty. The Dogwood Queens represented the town as goodwill ambassadors in other festivals and events such as the Sugar Bowl and Holiday in Dixie. By 1956 the Dogwood Festival of Plain Dealing was listed among the nation’s tourist attractions by the New York Times.

All this time, even in a small town with a party-line phone system and an operator, Annie Bell Moore, who knew everything about everybody, the secret committee remained secret. No one knew then or now exactly where the Queen’s mantle and page uniforms came from or where they were kept from year to year. Two women, Linda Chandler Matlock and Jack Waggoner Gore, the 1959 Dogwood Queen, do remember sewing on the mantle in Mrs. Ethel Steckol’s high school Home Economics class.

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40 Maude Hearn O’Pry, Chronicles of Shreveport (Shreveport, 1928), 446; Louisiana Authors Index, Emery, http://www.lib.lsu.edu/la/a.html.
42 Personal Interviews, April 7, 2001.
It is difficult to convey to those who did not live there what the Dogwood Festival meant to the people of Plain Dealing in the 1950’s and early 1960’s. F. G. Phillips saw in the Dogwood blossom the revelation of God’s grace, “a symbol of Divine sacrifice and the triumph of eternal life.” At some level the townspeople seemed to absorb this vision so that the festival, especially in the beginning, had religious overtones in addition to its communal significance. Since the festival usually coincided with the Easter season, the spiritual connection was especially significant, and The “Legend of the Dogwood” was well known to everyone:

At the time of the crucifixion, the Dogwood tree was as large and strong as the Oak and was chosen as the timber for the cross. To be used for this purpose distressed the tree, and Jesus, in His Pity, promised:

Never again shall you grow large enough to be used
For a cross. Henceforth the Dogwood Tree shall be slender
And twisted; its blossoms in the form of a cross...two long
And two short petals. At the edge of each petal there shall
Be nail prints; in the center of the flower, a Crown of Thorns.
And this tree shall be cherished as a reminder of my cross.

In time the Dogwood blossom became emblematic of the town and its image appeared on every publication or sign related to Plain Dealing. Local stores sold Dogwood-themed gifts, and Hamiter Bailey’s Dogwood Drive-In featured Dogwood burgers, which were topped with “Dogwood seeds” (actually, poppy seeds). Space was donated in various warehouses all over town so that the ladies could work all year on building and decorating the parade floats. Literally hundreds of volunteers put in hundreds of hours annually in planning and carrying out the festival, a project that brought them no monetary gain. Young people picnicked and courted on the Drive, in all seasons. To be Queen of Dogwood was considered by many to be a great honor for a young woman. The town and the festival seemed to be indelibly entwined.

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43 Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive Brochure, March 27-April 12, 1959, 2.
44 Ibid.
Changing Times

“All the birds of the forests do bitterly weep,
Saying 'Where shall we slumber and where shall we sleep?
For the Oak and the Ash,
They are all cutten down,
And the woods of bonny Portmore
Are all down to the ground.”

Traditional Irish

The Dogwood Drive route ran along public roads through privately-owned forest land, a fact that would prove crucial. Major property owners were the S.H. Bolinger Lumber Company, the Gilmer family, descendants of the founders of Plain Dealing, and M. Roy Bolinger, a wealthy local businessman. Smaller sections of land on the drive were owned by the Turnley family, Judge Chris Barnette, Walter and Wilbur Ford, Charles Smith, Charles Little, Ella Harris, Ben McDonald, Vanderbilt Wade, the Wallace family, and the Theo Campbell Estate.\(^\text{45}\) Apparently the festival organizers saw no need to make any legal arrangements with property owners, and there is no indication of signed agreements. In the exuberance of the initial planning for the festival, the major land holders seemed to be enthusiastic participants.

However, after fourteen phenomenally successful years, the Dogwood Festival was cancelled in 1965 and 1966, due to extensive cutting of timber by some of the property owners.\(^\text{46}\) Even though the festival was eventually resumed, it was not the same after that partial destruction of trees. The Dogwood Drive was reopened to the public in 1967 and continued to be enjoyed for many years, but it never regained its original splendor.\(^\text{47}\)

Outgoing Dogwood Association president J.D. Purcell referred in a *Shreveport Journal* article to “numerous reasons,” in addition to the cutting of the trees, for the cancellation of the festival in 1965.\(^\text{48}\) It was not held again until 1969 and 1970, after which there was a four-year lapse before the complete festival was resumed on a regular basis in 1975.\(^\text{49}\) There has been much speculation about the difficulties during those years. It could be that there were


conflicts within the Dogwood Association or rivalries about the selection of queens by the secret committee.

It is also likely that some of the difficulties with the festival in those years had to do with the issue of race. Some of the land covered by the Dogwood Drive was owned by Black families, and Black citizens had been encouraged from the beginning to tour the Drive. A 1952 Plain Dealing Progress article reported that Black school children had been bussed through the Drive and that Black landowners were "enthusiastic supporters." However, at the time, Blacks were observers, not participants. Lifelong Plain Dealing resident Annette Lee recalls attending parades a few times but not being especially interested in the festival, since "we were not a part of it." She does not remember any feelings of resentment or concern in the Black community, because "that was just the way it was." However, by the mid-1960's, racial tensions and anxieties were common all over the South and could have been one of the factors in the festival cancellations. Later on, after school integration in the 1970's, Black citizens did become involved, both in the planning of the festival and as participants in the parade.

Certainly a major problem for the festival was the deaths of founders such as Roy Bolinger in 1959 and, especially, F.G. Phillips, in 1961, which left a "leadership void" in the Dogwood Association, according to secretary Athlene Cornish. In a time of great upheaval, the loss of such leaders is particularly devastating. It is possible that F.G. Phillips, the driving force behind the festival, might have been able to hold things together and even figure out a way to prevent the further destruction of the Dogwood trees.

In 1969 the Plain Dealing Junior Chamber of Commerce resurrected the Festival in a vastly different form. For the next two years a "Miss Plain Dealing" beauty contest was held, with the winner reigning as Dogwood Queen. Charlotte Giles, in 1969, and Beverly Felknor, in 1970, both high school seniors, became Dogwood Queens through this process. They were the last Plain Dealing girls to wear the traditional mantle of the Dogwood Queen.

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50 "Colored Welcomed to Drive," Progress, March 27, 1952.
51 Personal Telephone Interview with Annette Lee, March 4, 2002.
52 "Dogwood Trail Ragged; Festival is Cancelled," The Shreveport Journal, April 5, 1965.
For the next four years the Drive remained open to the public, and some activities were held, such as the sunrise Easter service and trail rides, but there was no Dogwood Queen, and only the horseback riding clubs paraded through town. In 1975 a new group of leaders emerged to restore and modernize the Festival. Since then many new features have been added, such as treasure hunts, entertainment, and contests of all kind. Arts and Crafts booths and food vendors cram the streets on parade day. Beauty contests with outside judges have replaced the secret committee, and the competition includes girls of various ages vying for titles such as “Tiny Miss Dogwood,” “Miss Teen Dogwood” and “Miss Plain Dealing Dogwood.” Many of the contestants are from out of town, and no Plain Dealing girl has reigned as Dogwood Queen in the past 30 years. Parades have gotten smaller through the years, with less elaborate floats and no marching bands.

The town itself has changed in ways that have directly impacted the Dogwood Festival. Civic participation in general has declined. Many organizations have become inactive, including the Future Farmers of America, the Home Demonstration Club, the American Legion Auxiliary, the Phi Delta Club, and the Boy Scouts. All had been very involved in the festival during a time when hundreds of workers shared the burden each year. In recent times fewer and fewer volunteers have had to put in long hours to keep the festival going. It has remained a popular attraction in the area, but the high elegance of the Festival’s glory days is long gone, like the Dogwood trees themselves.

_A Woeful Destruction_

“O bonny Portmore,
I am sorry to see
Such a woeful destruction of your ornament tree;
For it stood on your shore for many a long day,
Til the long boats from Antrim
Came to take it away.”—Traditional Irish

The cutting of timber on the Dogwood Drive that began in the mid-1960’s had destroyed most of the Dogwood trees by the mid-1980’s, and by 1991 the Drive

was no longer open to the public.\textsuperscript{55} Some of the major property owners had died, and in 1978 the S.H. Bolinger Co. was liquidated.\textsuperscript{56} Its property was sold to Willamett Lumber Co. in 1979.\textsuperscript{57} Although Willamett denied clear-cutting on the Drive, blaming other property owners for the destruction,\textsuperscript{58} the fact is that the once-breathtakingly beautiful land has been so ravaged that it would be unrecognizable today by the founders of the Dogwood Festival.

It seems astounding now that those founders did not foresee the difficulties ahead and attempt to purchase the property or request donation from some of the wealthier owners, as was done in Palestine, Texas.\textsuperscript{59} The original Articles of Incorporation of the Dogwood Drive Association empower the organization to “own, buy, sell, mortgage, and lease real estate and personal property to carry out purposes for which it is organized . . . .”, but, though the Association frequently received funding from the parish police jury and from the state legislature for road improvements and building parks, there is no indication that attempts to obtain the property were made.\textsuperscript{60}

Apparently community leaders never dreamed that there would come a time when Dogwood trees would be destroyed for profit, or, perhaps, for some families, out of economic necessity. Such a thing had never happened before, and property owners like Roy Bolinger believed that stewardship of the land was a sacred commitment to the Creator. “Every little pine tree was a symbol in his soul of God’s wonderful handiwork,” wrote F.G. Phillips, in Mr. Bolinger’s obituary, “and he was a true husbandman in their care.”\textsuperscript{61} In 1952 Mr. Phillips observed in his fellow citizens, “the deepest gratitude for the wonderful gift that has been placed at our door.” He added a statement of faith that seems chilling in retrospect: “Surely we shall always be true to our trust.”\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{55} “Dogwood Festival Stumped,” The Shreveport Times, April 5, 1991.
\textsuperscript{57} Assessor’s Block Book For the Parish of Bossier Louisiana, Bossier Parish Courthouse, Benton, Louisiana, 32, 71.
\textsuperscript{58} “Dogwood Festival Stumped,” The Shreveport Times, April 5, 1991.
\textsuperscript{59} “Cover Story,” publication of Palestine, Texas Chamber of Commerce, n.d.
\textsuperscript{61} “M.R. Bolinger Succumbs to Severe Stroke,” Bossier-Banner Progress, April 23, 1959.
By the end of the decade, Roy Bolinger and F.G. Phillips and some others like them were gone, and a few years later many of their cherished ideals were forsaken.

At this time the future of the Festival is uncertain, but once the Dogwoods were gone, there seemed to many to be little point in the celebration anyway. It was always nice to have a communal event, but, without the fundamental inspiration behind it, there was an artificiality about the festivities. Although the Dogwood Festival overcame the controversies that threatened it, it could not remain true to its vision without the Dogwood trees.

The failure of the Association and the community to save the Dogwood trees should serve as a warning about the necessity for preservation of all things that are priceless and imperiled. There are many in Plain Dealing who will never know what they missed unless those of us who remember tell them. For the only real value in our capacity for memory is not nostalgia, but preservation and restoration.
Janet Phillips, FFA (Future Farmers of America) Queen. 1955. This float has a stack of timber and a pig and chickens in the cages. Jack Barham photographer. Bossier Parish Library Historical Center. Dogwood Festival collection.

State Senator John Doles, Sr. looks on while U.S. Congressman Overton Brooks crowns the 1954 Queen, Rita Vernon. Outgoing Queen Julia Burford presents the scepter. The ceremony takes place at the Legion hut, with artwork displayed in the background. Bossier Parish Library Historical Center, Boggs collection.

American Legion float. c. 1953. Charles Coyle portrays Uncle Sam in this patriotic float. Bossier Parish Library Historical Center, Boggs collection.
Postcard circa 1955. "Sylvan Scene in Lovers Lane on Famous Dogwood Drive, Plain Dealing, Louisiana." Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive, Inc., Plain Dealing, LA.
Land of Dogwood Trails

By EMMA WILSON EMERY
Poet Laureate of Louisiana

To the land of little mountains
The land of singing streams,
Where friendship is contagious
And man pursues his dreams;
Where the handbreadth is symbol
Of all things good and true—
In this land of Joy and Sunshine
We are waiting now for you.

We would share with you all beauty
In our rainbow-flowered world
Where the dogwood reigns in Springtime
As a queen with flag unfurled.

Lovely in pearl-white garbment,
With all modesty and grace,
As nature she will meet you
In a Heaven-favored place.

In the warm, clear sunlight, walking,
In the freshest moonlight, too.
She lifts her hand in greeting
And watches now for you.

Drive along our trails and linger
For a day, a month or two,
Or stay and be one of us—
We will gladly welcome you.

--The People of Plain Dealing.

SPECIAL EVENTS

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18 — Opening Day: Coronation of new Dogwood Queen at American Legion Club, 2:00 p.m.; Parade of bands and floats 3:00 p.m.

SUNDAY, MARCH 22—Dedication Glover's Inn Site, 2:30 p.m.

SUNDAY, APRIL 5—Easter sunrise service at Gilmer Park.

(Cover: Miss Marilyn Barnett, 1952 Dogwood Queen)

FOR INFORMATION, FOLDERS, MAPS, STOP AT LEGION HALL.

Her Imperial Majesty, Marilyn
1952 Dogwood Queen

PLAIN DEALING, LOUISIANA

MARCH 18 — APRIL 5, 1953

Longest and Most Beautiful Drive in the Southwest

Queen Marilyn Barnett on the cover and "Land of the Dogwood Trails" by Emma Wilson Emery. 1953 promotional brochure. Plain Dealing Dogwood Drive. Bossier Parish Library Historical Center, Boggs collection.