

History of Indianola (long version)

Unlike most of the Texas coast this portion was explored by a French explorer and adventurer named René-Robert de La Salle. Although he established Fort Saint Louis near the head waters of Lavaca Bay some 15 miles to the west, the French presence in the area was not long lived.

A statue dedicated to La Salle was erected near the beach at Indianola in May of 1939. La Salle still maintains his lonely vigil over Matagorda Bay as the statue remains a prominent landmark easily seen by boaters as well as by those driving along the beach road.

It's hard to believe that this scenic drive along the shore of Matagorda Bay, populated by vacation homes, fishing camps, bars and bait stands set among wind-driven salt cedar, was once a thriving center of commerce.

The city of Indianola began life at 1844 as a tent city called Carl's Haven, hastily thrown up at Indian Point, which was located about one mile eastward along the beach from present-day Magnolia Beach. This primitive settlement with few amenities served as temporary shelter for German immigrants awaiting overland transportation to the lush farmlands of Central Texas.

The town's name changed from Carl's Haven to Indian Point, and in 1849, Mrs. John Brown had the honor of changing the name to Indianola. She combined the words Indian and *ola*, the Spanish word for wave.

However, when a new settlement started to grow near the Powderhorn Lake area near the present-day location of the Indianola Fishing Marina, it eclipsed the Indian Point settlement, which became known as the old town section of Indianola. To take advantage of deeper water offered by Indianola, Harris and Morgan steam shippers moved their unloading operations from Lavaca, later Port Lavaca, some eight miles to the northwest.

The establishment of a deep-water port at Indianola brought an economic boom to the small coastal village. Indianola quickly became one of the largest ports in Texas. Indianola was a shining star in the history of Texas a city of great events and home to great and important people, leaders in early Texas commerce and politics. Her busy port opened the western portion of Texas to settlement and expansion. In the 1860s and 70s, Indianola town lots sold as high as \$400, a year's pay for many, but her reign as queen port of the Texas coast was cut off in its prime.

Tuesday, Sept. 15, 1875, brought threatening skies and moderate winds to Indianola. Anxious residents watched the gray skies with apprehension. By the morning of the 16th, the waters of Matagorda Bay had started to rise. Heavy seas were finding their

way into Main Street as the wind continued to blow harder and harder. Water began rising and in places was six or more feet deep. Salt flats became filled with water and soon the waves crashed over the town.

Homes and business began crumbling under the onslaught of the wind and water, and many souls were lost to the waves. Whole families disappeared. Men, women and children moved to the second story of homes or took refuge in the county courthouse. The courthouse, constructed of masonry, had a foundation that was six feet deep. The water rushed through broken windows and doors below while people huddled on its second floor.

At about nine o'clock, the eye of the storm passed over Indianola and the wind changed direction and blew, if possible, even harder. The water that had been moving inland now turned to find its way back to the bay. Buildings that had withstood the initial onslaught did not hold up to the powerful surge of water as it tried to find sea level. As the night winds raged, Indianola was ravaged, broken, destroyed.

At daybreak, survivors looked out onto their town and were horrified at the destruction. Topped buildings and debris littered what had been wide streets. The friends and family of many had ceased to exist. The inhabitants of Indianola felt it could not have been worse, but on Aug. 20, 1886, the worse came.

Just 11 years after the first storm had taken such a toll on Indianola, another storm struck the hapless city. Although this storm did not linger as long as the previous one, it was much more intense. Buildings that had survived the storm of 1875 now shattered, and just when it seemed things were at their worst, fate dealt Indianola a final devastating blow.

The signal station operated by one Captain Reed collapsed under the power of the waves and water. When the building fell, the captain and a companion were killed, and a lantern that had been burning in the building was flung to the floor. This shattered lantern is thought to have started the fire that, driven by hurricane winds, eventually destroyed Indianola's entire downtown district. The fire destroyed warehouses, dry goods stores, grocery stores and residences. Few structures escaped the combined ravages of wind, water and fire.

Indianola's day as an important Texas port was over. In 1887, the county seat was turned over to Lavaca, and Indianola passed into the realm of a ghost town. But you can't have a Texas ghost town without at least one story of desperate men clutching smoking pistols.

One of the best known feuds in Texas was the Sutton-Taylor feud, also known as the "DeWitt County War." On March 11, 1874, Bill and Jim Taylor boarded the steam ship *Clinton*, docked at Morgan's wharf in Indianola. Shots soon rang out, and when the

smoke had cleared, William Sutton and Gabriel Slaughter lay on the polished deck of the steamer, shot dead.

All of this in full view of William Sutton's wife Laura, who was expecting their first child. After the shooting, the Taylor brothers were able to escape with the help of friends in Indianola. A large reward was offered by Sutton's friends for the capture of the Taylors, and this started a manhunt that caused the death of Jim Taylor in a skirmish near the town of Clinton.

Bill Taylor, however, was brought back to Indianola to stand trial on charges stemming from the Sutton shooting. Taylor escaped from the jail at Indianola on Sept. 15, 1875, the day of the devastating hurricane. Records show that he was eventually captured and kept in jail in Galveston, then returned to Indianola for trial. Eventually, however, charges against him were dropped, and the Sutton-Taylor feud, along with Indianola, became history.

Today tangible evidence of the ghost town that was once the great port city of Indianola, the Queen City of the West, is not easy to find, but it is all around you. There are two cemeteries, one on high ground looking over old town and on the salt flats overlooking Powderhorn Lake. If you look closely, you might find the broken remains of a Shell Creek cistern, one of many that once held rainwater, captured and used for drinking water in a city where wells produced only salt water.

Gone nearly 150 years are the long wharves extending into the deep waters of Matagorda Bay, wharves lined to capacity with sailing vessels and Morgan Line steamers bound for New York, New Orleans, Pensacola and Havana, all tied bow to stern. Gone the trade in cattle, hogs, and lumber that was carried on with countries in both Central and South America.

Gone the Masonic lodge and the once-proud brick courthouse and jail, which would compare with any in Texas. Only a granite block marks the place where they lie beneath the waters of Matagorda Bay. And the three shell carriage drives, any of which was far superior to the famous beach drive at Galveston and equal perhaps to any in the world, gone, all gone.

Now only the soft sound made by the waves of Matagorda Bay as they swish against the shell beach. Along with the cry of the soaring gull can be heard where once drovers cried out and cracked their whips over the backs of oxen teams pulling the wagons that lined up for a mile to load and haul ships' cargo to all parts of the western United States and old Mexico.

Even now the largest, most famous ghost town in Texas lies all around you. The ghosts of the past are thick here.

For more information, contact:

Rhonda Cummins

Coastal & Marine Resource Agent for Calhoun County

Phone: 361-552-9747

Email: rdcummins@ag.tamu.edu