

A Grande Dame Shines Again:

Big Spring's Hotel Settles During Eighty-Five Years of Boom, Bust, and Boom

Barbara A. Brannon, PhD barbara.brannon@gmail.com

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[TITLE SLIDE]

Here you are overlooking downtown Big Spring, Texas, a city of 27,000, from the mesa called Scenic Mountain. You see that one skyscraper dominates the landscape. This is where the Hotel Settles stood silently for decades as a ghost.

1. The Settles Lights Up Again

But watch with me what took place in Big Spring on the mild, moonlit winter evening of December 30, 2012. Imagine that you are standing in the parking lot west of Runnels Street at Third Avenue, the old Bankhead Highway. You are surrounded by residents and visitors of all ages, holding their collective breath as the scene plunges into darkness and all goes quiet.

Then *this* happens.

[QUICKLY PLAY 15 SLIDES OF HOTEL RELIGHTING; LEAVE ON RED SIGN CLOSEUP]

The cheers and the joyful noise of car horns are the sounds of community pride, prosperity, and the power of historic preservation.

2. From Years of Decline

[Photo of Settles bar in state of deterioration]

In 1980 those lights were turned off. The grand hotel that had once been host to President Herbert Hoover, Duke Ellington, and Elvis Presley stood empty.

[Photo of Settles grand staircase in state of deterioration]

Raided of all its elegant trappings and fine furnishings—even its hardwood telephone booths—it stood as a vandalized, fenced-off shell, surrounded by blight, a fifteen-story eyesore and a safety hazard.

This is the story of one landmark historic building in a West Texas city and how its rescue and restoration today pumps new life into that city's downtown.

[Photo of reception on grand reopening night]

Those of us who see historic preservation as a necessary adjunct to the study of history hope that the story of the Hotel Settles will stand as a shining example for other cities and other properties as risk. We say: *it can be done*.

3. Big Spring in the Roaring Twenties

[Howard County in Horse-and-Buggy Days]

Big Spring, Texas, had long been a favored watering spot for herds of bison, the Comanches and other Indians who hunted them, and the explorers and traders who followed on their heels. In 1849 Captain Randolph Marcy came upon the flowing spring that would later give the city its name, and he blazed a trail that the military, and civilian settlers, would use. Some stayed here, in this valley sheltered by the caprock, where there was ample forage for cattle.

By 1880 the Texas & Pacific Railroad pushed through, and a town began to coalesce around it. Two years later, when Howard County was organized, the new seat of Big Spring gained a general store and a post office. By the end of the decade it boasted a newspaper, four stores, several schools, and six saloons.¹ (It was still a favored watering spot.)

The city grew over the next quarter century into a prosperous hub for shipping cattle, cotton, and grain. A population fast approaching 4,000 cried out for roofs over their heads, and neither home building nor temporary lodging could keep pace.

[Cole Camp House, c. 1900]

At the busy intersection of Third and Runnels, the two-story Cosmopolitan Hotel was purchased by the British Earl of Aylesford in 1884, partly for his private residence. On another corner the two-story Cole Camp House eventually gave way to the Cole Hotel in 1910, a year after the T&P Hotel, situated a block from the Railway, burned down. A handful of other modest hostelries welcomed travelers, but by 1926 the Cole, too, had burned, and the Cosmopolitan was demolished.

Most travelers and future residents, if they weren't coming by hoof, arrived by train. But increasingly they were arriving in that newfangled contraption called the automobile. For Big Spring, favorably situated at the intersections of north-south routes, the east-west Overland Trail, and the railroad, was fast becoming what journalist James Johnston would

¹ Handbook of Texas Online, "Big Spring," www.tshaonline.org

call “Crossroads Canaan.” It was a land of milk and honey with a bright economic outlook and a mobile society.²

Furthermore, that stretch of Third Street, along which the county courthouse was located and so many mercantile enterprises had sprung up, had recently gained a new, national name: the Bankhead Highway.

[Bankhead Highway map]

The Bankhead, as you’ve heard from Dan Smith, was the first all-weather transcontinental route. During the automobile era before numbered and paved national highways, this was important, and the route’s designation through Big Spring, already a regional hub, was a likely predictor that businesses along it would thrive.

[Bankhead Café, Third St.]

Hotels attracted overnight guests as well as long-term residents. Cafés, restaurants, saloons, and movie houses would flourish, as would drug stores, variety stores and five-and-dimes, and service stations. By the mid-1920s the city was woefully short of lodging, and several new grand hotels were in the works.

Something even bigger than the highway happened in 1926, however.

[Photo of oil gusher]

Oil. Big strikes in the region turned struggling ranchers into instant millionaires. Among those lucky ones, in 1927, were W. R. Settles and his wife, Lillian, who’d moved into town from their Glasscock County ranch a few years earlier after W. R. was injured falling from a windmill.

Just who were these nouveaux riches who were about to lend their name to the most impressive structure in town?

5. W. R. and Lillie Settles background

² James Johnston has provided a great deal of historical detail, and developed the thesis of Big Spring as the “land of milk and honey” confronted with the hedonism of the modern world in his self-published book *Crossroads Canaan: A Texas Town in The Jazz Age*. Tammy Burrow Schrecengost’s *Big Spring and Howard County* (Arcadia, 2002) and *Big Spring Revisited* (Arcadia, 2010) make use of the Big Spring Heritage Museum’s rich photographic resources to illustrate aspects of life in the area during the city’s early days. Other sources used here as evidence of residence and business activity in Big Spring include newspaper articles, US Census records, vital statistics records, city directories, historical photographs, and contemporary maps. Further information can be drawn from land abstracts and Sanborn Insurance Maps, which I did not have the opportunity to consult for this paper.

[Portrait of W. R. and Lillie Settles]

During that period in the 1880s when Texas seemed to *beckon* to settlers and homesteaders, especially those who weren't afraid of hard work, William Rowan Settles³ left his native Kentucky and his sweetheart, Lillian Greer, and came to East Texas as a ranch hand. Both families had Kentucky ancestors for several generations back, who farmed the rich hills around the Bardstown distillery region.

In 1893 Settles filed on three sections of school land south of Big Spring and set to work ranching it. There's no indication exactly what brought him to this part of Texas, other than the desire to strike out on his own in wide-open country. But the following year he returned to Kentucky to marry Lillie, by now a schoolteacher, and bring her back to their spread.⁴

The Settleses were honest, church-going, teetotaling people who enlarged their landholdings and managed their Hereford herds and ranching leases wisely. They had no children of their own. A brother, and W. R.'s parents, moved to Big Spring at some point as well. There is evidence in newspaper clippings that W. R. had some interest in transportation for his adopted state.⁵ After he was injured in 1924, he and his wife built a respectably sized house in town — on a street they named Temperance.

They paid little heed to the talk of oil in the area in the mid-1920s. After all, Big Spring had been *taken* by a huckster a few years earlier. But the year W. R. turned 70, in 1927, a well came in on his ranch. Considering it a fluke, the Settleses gave all the proceeds to the Presbyterian Church. And then there came six more.⁶ W. R. and Lillie became wealthy overnight.

6. Contracting, design, construction of hotel; architect; builder, financing

The Settleses, who told the *Big Spring Herald* a few years later that they hadn't felt a great deal of excitement at the oil strike, didn't really have a plan for the money. Their oil gauger, or pumper, out at the field did.

³ In a bit of future irony, in his 1947 Howard County death certificate, Mr. Settles's name is spelled William *Ryan* Settles. I am not aware of any relation or connection to the ancestors of G. Brint Ryan.

⁴ Lane Bond, "The Fascinating Saga of the Settles Hotel," manuscript version of a paper published by Bond in the *Permian Historical Annual*, downloaded from <http://bondwebs.com/Settles%20Hotel%20%20Final%20PDF.pdf>

⁵ "Jacksonville [Texas] Ready," *Fort Worth Gazette*, 5 May 1887.

⁶ Hotel Settles information, unpublished draft shared with the author by Tammy Schrecengost, Big Spring Heritage Museum, March 28, 2015

[Tinsley in Big Spring city directory, US Census]

Maurice Leon Tinsley, himself a descendant of Kentucky forbears, became their adviser and business manager when it came to where to invest their fortune. M. L. Tinsley and his brothers and his growing family had been following work opportunities around Texas in jobs like grocery sales and petroleum products, when the increasing oilfield activity drew them to Big Spring. The city wanted for hotels, Tinsley reminded them, and the Settleses could do right by their community by building one.

In 1928 Tinsley persuaded the elderly couple to begin quietly buying up parcels along the Bankhead Highway (by then designated as US 80) east of the courthouse, in a quarter that was bustling with commercial activity. Tinsley, who'd never finished high school, stepped easily into the role of agent and civic booster. His announcement that the Hotel Settles would be the finest Big Spring had ever seen must have taken the city by surprise.

“Mr. Tinsley chose the site,” Lillie Settles told the newspaper, “bought all materials used in the project, supervised the building from start to finish, and purchased all furniture, draperies and linens. The building and plans were carried out smoothly and without a single hitch, thanks to Mr. Tinsley.” Tinsley told the Chamber of Commerce that if the city would float a bond issue, the \$100,000 mortgage would be the only debt on the property.⁷

Tinsley's tastes ran high, however. Noted Abilene architect David S. Castle was hired to design the building, and Fenton Baker of the Baker Hotel chain was engaged to oversee construction.

[Photo of front elevation drawing]

The hotel's interior was to be carried out in an “Italian Modern Renaissance” theme, with lobby walls paneled in solid mahogany and walnut, floors made of marble terrazzo, and ceilings done in a combination of ivory and tans with ornate beaded trim cornice and gold fillet molding. Banquet room and ballroom would be finished in sage green and ivory. Elaborate drapes would adorn the windows.

Guest rooms would be done in French blue with gold rosette accents. Every room would boast a private bath, with tiled tub and shower combination. The 12th, 13th, and 14th floors would be divided into three-room apartments, furnished with Murphy beds and kitchenettes. There would be a drug store, a coffee shop, and a beauty shop on site.

⁷ Schrecengost notes.

At fifteen stories, the Hotel Settles would be the tallest building between Fort Worth and El Paso. Its red neon rooftop sign would be visible for miles across the plain.

[Photo of Settles under construction]

The site was cleared and excavation began—on October 15, 1929.

To compound the anxiety over the stock market crash, bad weather also caused costs to rise. Even so, Big Spring wasn't too greatly alarmed at the financial downturn that gripped the rest of the country. Texas was smarter. Oil was king. They'd ride it out. Construction on the hotel continued. By the summer of 1930, the Settles was nearly complete. But already the budget had skyrocketed to some \$700,000, and W. R. and Lillie were forced to mortgage their ranch to pay the lien the furniture company had levied before the doors even opened.

[Photo of Settles along Bankhead]

When the Settles held its Grand Opening on the 1st and 2nd of October, 1930, capacity crowds attended the gala dinner and dance both nights. Visitors traveled from as far away as Chicago to see the marvelous new hotel. A grand double staircase rose from the lobby to the mezzanine, with painted wrought-iron railing emblazoned with the scrolled S monogram. All the social rooms were equipped with audio speakers. A men's club, featuring game and billiard tables, occupied the entire fifteenth floor.

Most impressive of all was the American Elevator Company's bronze-finished two-car elevator. Geared at 600 feet per minute, its cars traveled from a full stop at the ground floor to the fourteenth in seventeen seconds. An employee ran the elevators twenty-four hours a day.

7. Depression hits; oil prices drop; hotel changes hands

[Photo of 1931 druggist convention]

The hotel was instantly popular with conventions, sales meetings, and social gatherings. At a time when oil ran \$3 a barrel, so did the nightly room rate at the Settles, or a filet mignon dinner in its formal restaurant. Tea or coffee cost a dime.⁸

[Newspaper headline: bankruptcy]

But a year later, that barrel of oil was going for the same price as a cup of coffee, and W. R. and Lillie weren't making enough off their royalties to cover the two-year note when it came

⁸ Schrecengost notes.

due. In 1932 the Settleses declared their management company bankrupt and lost both the hotel and the land that had secured it. M. L. Tinsley was awarded the lease to continue operating the hotel.⁹

Though not necessarily the con man or coward some citizens made him out to be, Tinsley had certainly cost the Settleses their fortune. He stuck around Big Spring for another year or so and then, according to the Settleses in a newspaper interview, left town without a dollar to his name himself. He moved to Lubbock to sell tires.¹⁰ As for W. R. and Lillie, they never slept a night in the hotel that still bears their name.¹¹

8. Settles continues to be popular destination through 1930s, 1940s.

[Photo of quilt sale in ballroom, 1940s]

Even during the Depression the hotel remained popular. A reporter for the *Big Spring Herald* in 1940 stated, "Motoring through has become the favorite mode of travel for all classes, rich or poor; it is inevitable that the Settles gets them sooner or later."

The Settles also attracted big bands and celebrity visitors from the start. But its real boom years occurred during World War II, with the opening of Big Spring Army Air Force bombardier school. Corporate business also boosted occupancy; American Airlines contracted for an entire floor for pilots and crews. One citizen recalled that the wartime price freeze, however, "kept the Settles from profiting although it was packed."

On V-J Day in 1945, soldiers "tore that hotel up from top to bottom" in their revelry. Pillows and furniture were tossed out of the windows, and one woman was dangled out of a high window by her heels."¹²

During the years that followed, the Settles saw occasional periods of high occupancy, especially when Webb Air Force Base was reactivated. Big Spring residents still recall that the hotel's meeting rooms and coffee shop were where every significant business deal in town was made.

⁹ "Settles Hotel Files Petition in Bankruptcy; Trustee Leases Building and Business to M. L. Tinsley," *Big Spring Daily Herald*, 19 February 1932.

¹⁰ Texas city directories of the 1920s through the 1940s, as well as Census records, show the pattern of frequent migration of the Tinsley family.

¹¹ "Big Spring Couple Gave First Oil Well Away," *Abilene Reporter-News*, 7 April 1929, p. 5; Sam Ashburn, "With Fortune Quickly Acquired and Suddenly Lost, Life Now Is More Peaceful for Mr. and Mrs. Settles," *Big Spring Daily Herald*, 22 Oct. 1933, p. 1ff.

¹² Schrecengost notes.

But with a declining class of clientele, the grand hotel inevitably declined as well. Ownership changed numerous times. By the 1960s there were rumors of a prostitution ring operating out of the Settles. The hotel had gained a reputation as a flophouse and brothel. In the opening scenes of the X-rated *Midnight Cowboy* that were filmed in Big Spring in 1969, a seedy Settles, glimpsed in the background, serves as a symbol for the dead-end Texas town Jon Voigt's character is looking to escape.

[Film still from *Midnight Cowboy* with Settles in the distance, 1969]

The biggest factors in the demise of the Settles, though, were threefold:

- the suspension of passenger rail service in 1967;
- the construction of Interstate 20, which bypassed Third Street and the old Bankhead Highway route; and
- the closure of Webb Air Force Base for good in 1977.

By March 1980 it became apparent that the property was being stripped of its furnishings and architectural elements for sale. The hotel closed. Everything of value, down to the doorknobs, was sold. What remained was destroyed by vandals or left to the elements.

9. Deterioration from 1960s to 1980s; closing; failed rescue attempts

[Photo of vandalized windows]

Citizens soon became sufficiently concerned by the danger posed when vagrants broke in or thrill seekers pushed stones from the roof, and mounted a campaign to secure the property and replace broken windows via private donations. The plan was successful in putting a Band-aid on the huge hulk of a building, but numerous efforts to redevelop the structure never went anywhere. The city foreclosed on the hotel in 1995 and was considering demolishing it in 2006 when a Big Spring city councilman invited a former classmate to come out and take a look.¹³

10. Purchase and restoration by G. Brint Ryan

[Ryan headshot; hotel plan]

Brint Ryan was a Big Spring High standout who'd shaken the dust off his feet and gone on to make a name for himself in Dallas in tax accounting. He'd also made a fortune helping big companies save big on their tax bills. He was just the guy to recognize the potential of a

¹³ Bond phone conversation with author, 31 March 2015.

historic hotel that could be restored, nominated for the National Register of Historic Places, and qualify for substantial tax incentives.

When Ryan bought the Settles for \$75,000, the hotel was valued at a *negative* \$250,000. That's a quarter million in the hole, to start with. Ryan figured bringing the place back up to standard would run \$12 million. He saw the potential for the Settles to once again take its place of honor on the city skyline. And to make a profit, at that. And although he eventually put up \$30 million of his own (and investors') money, and arranged a deal for the City of Big Spring to contribute \$4 million, he was right.¹⁴

Ryan located the original blueprints, still kept by the architect's family. These documents were critical in allowing the team to recreate the hotel's historical design. They broke ground in 2008, with Brint's younger brother, Kris, in charge of construction, and Gov. Rick Perry on hand to wish the project well. The Settles team were determined to follow the original plans and restore every detail to its original elegance, wherever possible, while also providing for the needs of the 21st-century traveler.¹⁵

[Guest room]

Circa-1930 rooms that might have seemed ample at the time, for instance, were combined to make spacious suites, on every floor except the 3rd, which was preserved in its original configuration for historical purposes.

[Settles Grill]

An inviting new restaurant, the Settles Grill, now occupies the space that was once the coffee shop. The former drugstore now serves up adult beverages as the Pharmacy Bar. A basement storeroom serves as a cigar lounge and billiard room. The ballroom has been painstakingly recreated, using a wealth of vintage photos for reference.

[Ballroom before restoration]

[Ballroom during restoration]

[Ballroom after restoration]

Meeting rooms combine old-fashioned comfort with state-of-the-art technology, and the swimming pool is a luxury oasis in the middle of the dusty oil patch.

[Hotel pool]

¹⁴ Bond, "Fascinating Saga," and author's phone conversation with Lane Bond, 31 May 2015.

¹⁵ Lawrence Connolly, AIA, "Hotel Settles: A Bell Cow Rings Again," *Texas Architect*, May/June 2013, expanded content accessed from magazine's website at <https://texasarchitects.org/v/article-detail/Hotel-Settles-A-Bell-Cow-Rings-Again/d2/>. Additional details regarding the building's structure and design, along with community background and a thorough bibliography, can be gleaned from the hotel's National Register of Historic Places registration form submitted by the Texas Historical Commission in December 2011.

11. Ongoing benefits to community

The Hotel Settles has proved an ongoing success since its almost three years back in service. It's boosted community pride, provided jobs for local workers, contributed to the tax base, and perhaps most important, prompted more revitalization and adaptive reuse around it. One lesson that the Settles has taught us is that *in any small city that ever possessed a grand hotel, there is no more powerful catalyst for other redevelopment than returning that building to its original purpose*. Hotels by their nature are public destinations and magnets for visitors. They embody romance. It's their mission to create buzz and preserve memories.

[photo of Bankhead Highway today: a magnet for more rehabilitation]

Big things are happening in Big Spring again these days. Tourism and hotel tax revenues are up. A gorgeous new visitor center has just opened across the street in the same building that housed the Bankhead Café eighty years ago. The amazing Municipal Auditorium, next door to the Settles, is undergoing a thorough restoration. And plans are well under way for interpretation and promotion of Big Spring's Bankhead Highway heritage, including a Summer on the Green concert series.

[Ryan family at reopening; historical plaque]

Now that red sign—reconstructed with energy-efficient LED lighting—shines over town again every night. And it represents for Big Spring, and for cities everywhere, what Brint Ryan described at the grand reopening as “a beacon for what's possible.”¹⁶

[photos of Hotel Settles then and now]

[Closing title slide; Settles logo]

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¹⁶ Bryan Mealer, “Up With the Old Hotel: How a Fabulously Wealthy Native Son of Big Spring Came Home to Save the Settles,” *Texas Monthly*, March 2013. Mealer, himself a Big Spring native currently working on a memoir of growing up in the boom-and-bust city, was present—as was I—for the hotel's grand reopening in December 2012 and had unparalleled access to interview Ryan and others involved in the restoration of the hotel.