

Texas Historical Commission Staff (CJB), 10/18/89

18" x 28" Official Texas Historical Marker without post, for attachment
to wood

Comal County (Job #05388)

Location: Gruene Historic District, New Braunfels

ORIGINAL GRUENE MERCANTILE*

FOUNDED IN 1878 BY HENRY D.

GRUENE TO SERVE THE FAMILIES
WORKING ON HIS COTTON FARMS,
THE ORIGINAL GRUENE MERCANTILE
SERVED MANY PURPOSES FOR THE
COMMUNITY, IN ADDITION TO PRO-
VIDING FOOD, CLOTHING, HOUSEHOLD
GOODS AND FARM IMPLEMENTS, THE
STORE WAS A STAGE STOP AND A
POST OFFICE, IT WAS ALSO USED AS
A DISTRIBUTION POINT FOR H.D.
GRUENE'S DISTILLERY, SELLING HIS
GREEN RIVER BRAND WHISKEY, THE
WOODEN BUILDING WAS MOVED TO
THIS SITE IN 1904 WHEN A NEW
TWO-STORY RED BRICK MERCANTILE
STRUCTURE WAS ERECTED ON THE
ORIGINAL SITE ACROSS THE STREET.**

(1989)***

*1/2 inch lettering to contrast with text

**1/2 inch lettering

***1/4 inch lettering

I. Original Gruene Mercantile

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The original Mercantile Store was founded by Henry D. Gruene in 1878. He began the store so his sharecroppers could purchase farm implements, hardware and supplies.¹ The store was very typical of any mercantile during that period of Texas ... it carried everything anyone needed. Gruene's mercantile store did bigger business in the 1880's than any store in New Braunfels.² Gruene also operated the post office for the area in the store. The store was on the Brown and Tarbox stagecoach line which ran two times weekly from Austin to San Antonio. The stage used four to six horses, and the trip from Gruene to San Antonio took 4½ hours. Gruene was a welcome stop for refreshments, supplies, and water for the horses.³ Sometime during this period the store's motto evolved: "Anything from ratskin to a ranch." Henry had a reputation for buying and selling and the old legend suggests that a down and out prospector approached him saying that he'd heard that he would buy anything. The prospector asked Henry what he'd give him for a ratskin and Henry said, "Oh, about \$1.00." (A large sum for those days). The prospector returned with 30 ratskins, which Henry duly purchased.

Henry D. also sold whiskey wholesale out of the store. His business stationery read:

"H. D. Gruene Distillery Distributory"
Fine Wines, Liquors and Cigars
Green River, The Whiskey Without A Headache⁴

During this period, from 1890 - 1919, the town was virtually a fiefdom. Mr. Gruene was the town's most important citizen and major economic force. The farmers depended on Henry D. for land, tools, credit at the Mercantile,

¹Hammer, Joe. Schlaraffenland: Gruene Texas. An unpublished term paper on file at the Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas. p. 12.

²Ibid. p. 11-12.

³Bracht, Vicktor, Texas in 1848, San Antonio, Naylor Printing Co., 1931. p. 82, 183.

⁴Hammer, Joe. p. 19-20.

lumber and entertainment on Saturday nights.⁵ By 1900, 8000 acres around Gruene were under cultivation by the 60 tenant farmers. It took seven and eight clerks to man the store. New Braunfels' residents, with the coming of the telephone, used to call orders for delivery from the Mercantile.⁶

This original Mercantile building is a narrow frame pitched roofed building with false front; a brick addition was built in 1914 after the original structure was moved across the street in 1904 to make room for the new brick Mercantile. It is said that this was accomplished by placing logs under the structure and pulling it with mules. A red barn was built next to the overhang in 1920. After 1904, the original Mercantile was used as the lumber yard. Gruene sold long leaf pine used in building barns and three & four room houses for the tenant farmers.⁷

In 1924, one of the first Chrysler agencies in the country opened its doors in the red brick addition. It sold the Maxwell automobile and closed the following year.⁸ The lumber yard closed during the depression. A chain store was introduced in the early 1940's, a member of the Independent Grocer's Association, but by that time Gruene population had dwindled to 75⁹ people and it did a moderate business aided perhaps by the prosperity that wars always bring. It closed after the war.

Presently the brick addition houses the Hunter Junction Gift and T-Shirt Shop; and the original wooden structure and Red Barn are vacant, but have recently been restored and are available for lease.

⁵Ibid. p. 12.

⁶Ibid. p. 20-21.

⁷Ibid. p. 14.

⁸Ibid. p. 28.

⁹The Texas Handbook, ed. Walter Prescott Webb, Austin, Texas, State Historical Society, 1952, p. 741.

II. History of Gruene community

The Gruene Historic District contains examples of late nineteenth century Victorian houses, as well as a few examples of mid-nineteenth century German colonial structures with Victorian additions. The town retains the ambience of a late nineteenth century cotton community, for there has been little construction since the 1920's. Located on the well-traveled road from San Antonio to Austin, Gruene served as a stage stop and by 1900 was a station stop for two railroads. Once the center for two to three hundred people, Gruene represents the ambitions of Henry D. Gruene, founder and developer of the town which bears his name.

The first people to settle in the area now known as Gruene, Texas, were German farmers, arriving in Texas in the late 1840's and 1850's with the Adelsverein, the Society for the Protection of German Immigration.¹ In New Braunfels, the first city to be surveyed and settled by the Society, town lots were quickly sold and new settlers moved north into the surrounding countryside where farm land was rich and fertile. About four miles northeast of New Braunfels, immediately east of the Guadalupe River, a community by the name of Goodwin emerged.

Among the first New Braunfels settlers arriving with the Adelsverein were Ernst Gruene, Sr. and his wife Antoinette, both of Hanover, Germany.² After their three children, Ernst, Jr., Henry D., and Joanna were born,³ the Gruenes moved to Comaltown, an adjoining community between the Comal and Guadalupe Rivers.⁴ Ernst Gruene, Sr. continued to acquire additional farm

¹Biggers, Don H., German Pioneers in Texas, Fredericksburg, Texas, Fredericksburg Publishing Co., 1925, pp. 21-25.

²Bieseke, R. L., The History of the German Settlement in Texas, 1831-1861, Austin, Von-Boeckmann-Jones Co., 1930, pp. 11-138.

³Comal Co. Census, 1850, County Clerk, New Braunfels, Texas.

⁴Hammer, Joe. Schlaraffenland: Gruene Texas. An unpublished term paper on file at the Archives Division, Texas, State Library, Austin, Texas. p. 7.

lands near New Braunfels. In 1872 when acreage was no longer available in Comaltown, Ernst Gruene, Sr. bought land on the east side of the Guadalupe River. The deep eluvial soil was extremely adaptable for the cultivation of grain products and cotton. However, it was Ernst, Sr.'s second son, Henry D., who was to develop a community, later known as Gruene, in this area.⁵

Born in 1850 in New Braunfels, Henry D. Gruene left the area in 1870 to join a cattle drive. Disillusioned after two years, H. D. returned to New Braunfels.⁶ In 1872 he married Bertha Simon and built a home on the east side of the Guadalupe River in the settlement of Goodwin.⁷ In January, 1873, H. D. Gruene bought his brother's half undivided interest of the property that the two brothers had jointly owned.

Cotton had been introduced into the area in 1852 and by the 1870's was recognized as the number one cash crop. With visions of converting the fertile land into cotton fields, Gruene advertised his need for sharecroppers. Within several months, twenty to thirty families moved onto H. D. Gruene's farm lands and he assigned plots of 100 to 200 acres to each. An educational facility was one of the earliest structures built.⁸ Gruene conveyed land for the building of a county rural school, known as "Thorn Hill School" in 1874, and a more centrally located school was built in 1893. In 1878 Gruene established the first mercantile store in a frame building on the road from San Antonio to Austin. Here tenants could buy groceries, canned goods, implements and hardware supplies inexpensively and could buy on credit, if necessary, until harvest time each year.⁹

⁵Ibid. p. 9.

⁶Ibid. p. 10.

⁷Ibid. p. 11.

⁸Ibid. p. 12.

⁹Ibid. p. 12.

Not long after building the mercantile store, H. D. Gruene constructed a cotton gin powered by water from the Guadalupe River. The gin processed raw cotton raised by his tenants and other farmers of the area until the structure burned in 1922. Gruene also set up a lumber yard in conjunction with his mercantile store and sold long-leaf pine used in building barns and the three and four room houses of the tenant farmers.¹⁰ In addition, Gruene built a dance hall and saloon in the 1880's. Providing entertainment for the tenants and surrounding farmers, Gruene Hall was the center of the community's social life.¹¹

By 1890 approximately 8000 acres of land east of the Guadalupe was planted with cotton and foodstuff.¹² A lumberyard served the tenants, New Braunfels people and the rural vicinity; the community had its own educational system and blacksmith shop; and the Guadalupe River provided power for the cotton gin. Since the gin was centrally located in the county, it became one of the most patronized. In addition, H. D. Gruene became the community's first postmaster in June, 1890, operating a post office out of the general store.¹³

Transportation was an important factor in the success of Gruene. The mercantile store was located in the old original north and southbound stagecoach route, the main road between Austin and San Antonio. The Brown Tarbox stagecoach line, as well as other travelers, regularly passed through Gruene and the store provided a stopping point, where provisions and refreshments could be obtained.¹⁴

¹⁰Ibid. p. 14.

¹¹Ibid. p. 15.

¹²Ibid. p. 20.

¹³From a list of Texas postmasters compiled by Grover C. Ramsey, Austin, Tx.

¹⁴Bracht, Victor, Texas in 1848. San Antonio, Naylor Printing Co., 1931, pp. 82, 183.

By 1904 the success of the store caused Gruene to construct a large two-story brick commercial building as a new location for the store.¹⁵ In actuality, the store also became a working bank, holding many farm mortgages as well as doing extensive farm financing.¹⁶ Within a few years after building the new store, Gruene added one-story additions to each side to house the banking and post office facilities. The International and Great Northern Railroad built a freight and passenger depot about a mile west of the community in the 1880's and the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas line built another depot in 1901. The railroad facilities allowed H. D. Gruene to branch out into exporting cotton and grain products and importing goods for his general mercantile store.¹⁷

The community originally named Goodwin, finally changed its name to Gruene after 1903 when the U. S. mail rural free delivery route was established. The name was most appropriate for the economic system as the whole life of the town rotated around the Gruene family.¹⁸ H. D. Gruene and his family dominated the town affairs. He and his two sons Max and Othmar formed a partnership. Upon H. D.'s retirement in 1910, he created an estate with the two brothers as managers. For a while the store was known as the Gruene Brothers store. H. D. Gruene's daughters, Mrs. Fritz Hampe and Mrs. Ella Ogletree and their families all resided in Gruene. Ernst Gruene Sr. and his wife retired from their old home and farm on Rock Street, Comaltown, in 1898, to settle in their son's community and lived there until their deaths in 1914 and 1917.

¹⁵Hammer, Joe. p. 20.

¹⁶The New Encyclopedia of Texas, Dallas, Texas, Texas Development Bureau, 1931. pp. 2138, 2968

¹⁷Hammer, Joe. p. 23.

¹⁸Hess, R. B., "Gruene Has A Heritage All Its Own," The Austin American, Aug, 2. 1962, p. 15.

In 1918 there were Spanish influenza epidemics throughout the United States. Max, only in his thirties, died of the plague. Soon afterwards H. D. Gruene discovered he had cancer. He traveled to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for treatment and while there contracted pneumonia and died in 1920.¹⁹

H. D. Gruene, one of the largest landholders in Comal County, had had grand visions for the town he founded. In 1916 he and a surveyor, Mr. Marbach, had drawn the town off into lots and proposed streets. However, the project never got further than the maps.²⁰

H. D. Gruene's death in 1920 marked an end to the period of Gruene's development. For a few years, the town continued its business ventures. In 1922 a fire destroyed most of the Gruene cotton gin, but within a few months a new electric cotton gin was constructed at a new location in Gruene.²¹ In 1924 a Chrysler agency, one of the first in the country, opened its doors across the street from the second mercantile store. Economic disaster struck the following year, however, when the boll weevil completely stripped the cotton crop. Not one bale of cotton was salvaged from the crop. The tenants fell into debt and many moved away.

No sooner had they recovered, when the Great Depression began another period of hard times. The 1930's saw a series of unfortunate events. The automobile that had helped bring prosperity and increased mobility to the people of Gruene in 1924 contributed to the town's decline a few years later by increasing the competition with the stores, jobs and amusement in New Braunfels. Declining cotton production brought an end to the tenant system and the closing of the store, the two railroad stations closed and the depots were later destroyed. After World War II the school house was moved just

¹⁹Hammer, Joe. P. 26.

²⁰Ibid. p. 27

²¹Ibid. p. 28

outside of New Braunfels to use as classroom space for the newly created Comal County Consolidated School until a new structure was built.²²

The town did see some activity during this period of decline. Othmar Gruene, aided by Max's son, H. D. Gruene, II, carried on the work of the Gruene estate. A chain store, the Independent Grocer's Association²³ established their business in the old first mercantile store building where the Chrysler Motor Company had been.²⁴ Lifeless since 1938, Gruene's second mercantile store began housing a series of businesses in the 1950's. Finally, in 1966 the Hadlock and Fox Manufacturing Company of San Antonio, located their establishment in the two-story brick building. One of the four or five U. S. manufacturers of western style saddle trees, the business continued to operate out of Gruene until 1979 and helped to bring new life to the town.²⁵ The one business which continued to operate throughout the hard times was the Gruene beer hall.

In 1970, an Austin developer bought the township of Gruene with plans to destroy most of the buildings in favor of condominiums and town houses. When interested preservationists approached him about the historical and architectural value of the community, he agreed to sell the historic properties intact and not disturb the area to be designated an historic district. Enthusiasm for the project spread so rapidly, that the houses have all been sold and restoration is in the final stages.

²²Ibid. p. 30-31.

²³The Texas Handbook, ed. Walter Prescott Webb, Austin, Texas, State Historical Society, 1952, p. 741.

²⁴Hammer, Joe. p. 28.

²⁵Stilwell, Hart, "Hopes for Business Brighter at Gruene," San Antonio Light, Feb. 26, 1966, p. 2.

Mr. H. D. Gruene and Max's Victorian homes are now a bed and breakfast inn. The water powered gin is the Gristmill Restaurant. The original mercantile and lumberyard are shops and the second brick store is an antique store. The electric powered cotton gin is the Old Gruene Gin Restaurant and Guadalupe Valley Winery.

SOURCES

1. Books

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2. Newspapers

Hess, R. B., "Gruene Has a Heritage All its Own," The Austin American, Aug. 2, 1962. p. 15.

Stilwell, Hart, "Hopes for Business Brighter at Gruene," San Antonio Light, Feb. 26, 1966, p. 2.

3. Records and Manuscripts

1850 and 1860 Comal County Census Lists.

List of Postmasters of Comal County, compiled by Grover Ramsey, Austin, Texas.

Hammer, Joe. Schlaraffenland: Gruene Texas, An unpublished term paper on file at the Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas.





