

TEXAS' TASTIEST CHICKEN-FRIED STEAKS • DOING DALLAS BY DART

THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE OF TEXAS TEXAS

HIGHWAYS

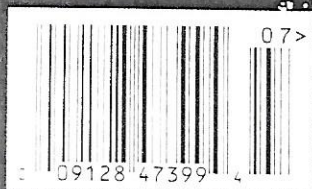
JULY 1999

\$3.50

HAVE A BLAST AT
LAKE TRAVIS

STAY ON THE BAY
Luther Hotel

Historic Pix
from '36



e x t r a o r d i n a r y

Views

P O L L Y S M I T H A N D

T H E T E X A S C E N T E N N I A L

b y E v e l y n B a r k e r

In 1936, Texas looked toward a future filled with promise. Not only did cattle roam the state's farthest reaches, but cotton reigned supreme, and oil gushed by the barrelful. It was time to let the world know that Texas was more than just cowboys and cactus. The 100th anniversary of Texas' independence from Mexico seemed like the perfect promotional opportunity.

The state planned a grand celebration for the historic milestone and called it the Texas Centennial Central Exposition. Centered at Dallas' newly revamped Fair Park, the six-month event showcased art, architecture, and Texas history. Two publicity offices—one in Dallas and one in New York—saturated newspapers and magazines nationwide with articles and photographs about Texas and the celebration. As part of this effort, the Centennial's promotional staff commissioned 27-year-old Polly Smith to travel across the state and tell the story of Texas through pictures.

Magnolia Petroleum Company, Dallas (note famed "Flying Red Horse" atop the building)



Born in Ruston, Louisiana, on December 29, 1908, Frances Suta Smith—called Polly, from a favorite lullaby—became interested in photography as a teenager in Austin. After graduating from high school, she traveled to New York to study with famed photographer Edward Steichen. She completed a brief, informal internship with him, then began working as a freelance photographer.

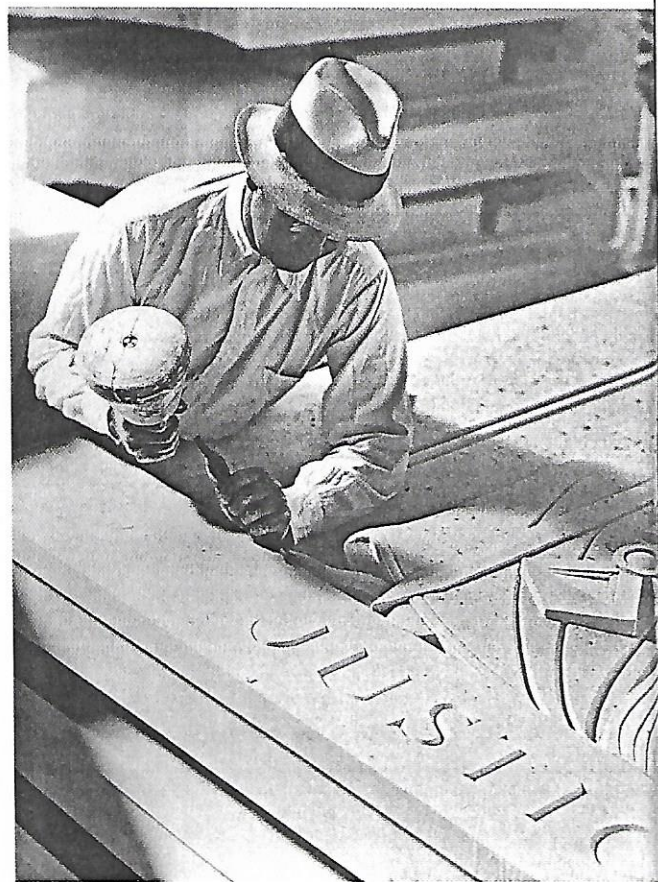
In 1935, Polly's work attracted the notice of Centennial officials, and they promptly hired her for \$35 a week. They gave her a long list of photo assignments: pioneer cabins, cattle ranching, citrus fruit harvesting, drilling for oil, university students, and horse racing, among others. A note added at the bottom of the list indicates that Texas had already moved beyond its Wild West image: "Doubt if you can get them but if possible get us some live Indians."

Clyde Vandeburg, chief of the Centennial's magazine division, elaborated on the assignment list: "What we want to attempt," he wrote to Polly, "is to get...the ordinary views of ordinary subjects—views of simple, every day, familiar subjects that the reader of the average farm publication or trade journal will appreciate and understand. Let color and human interest dominate in all your photographs." Armed with the list and a letter of introduction from the Centennial's promotion department, Polly set off on her solitary, 10-month trip across Texas.

From October 1935 through January 1936, she traveled through Central and East Texas, where she shot scenes of the booming East Texas oil and lumber industries, of mechanized farms and rural cotton workers, skyscrapers and 19th-Century homes, busy ports and simple water lilies. The images immediately began appearing in publications across the country.

She spent most of the spring of 1936 in South and West Texas. Her South Texas photos feature orange groves and palm trees, while those taken in West Texas show the Spanish influence on the state.

Her work was never easy. "I work as it is from sun up to sun down and far into the nite [sic] developing," she wrote in March. "I spent

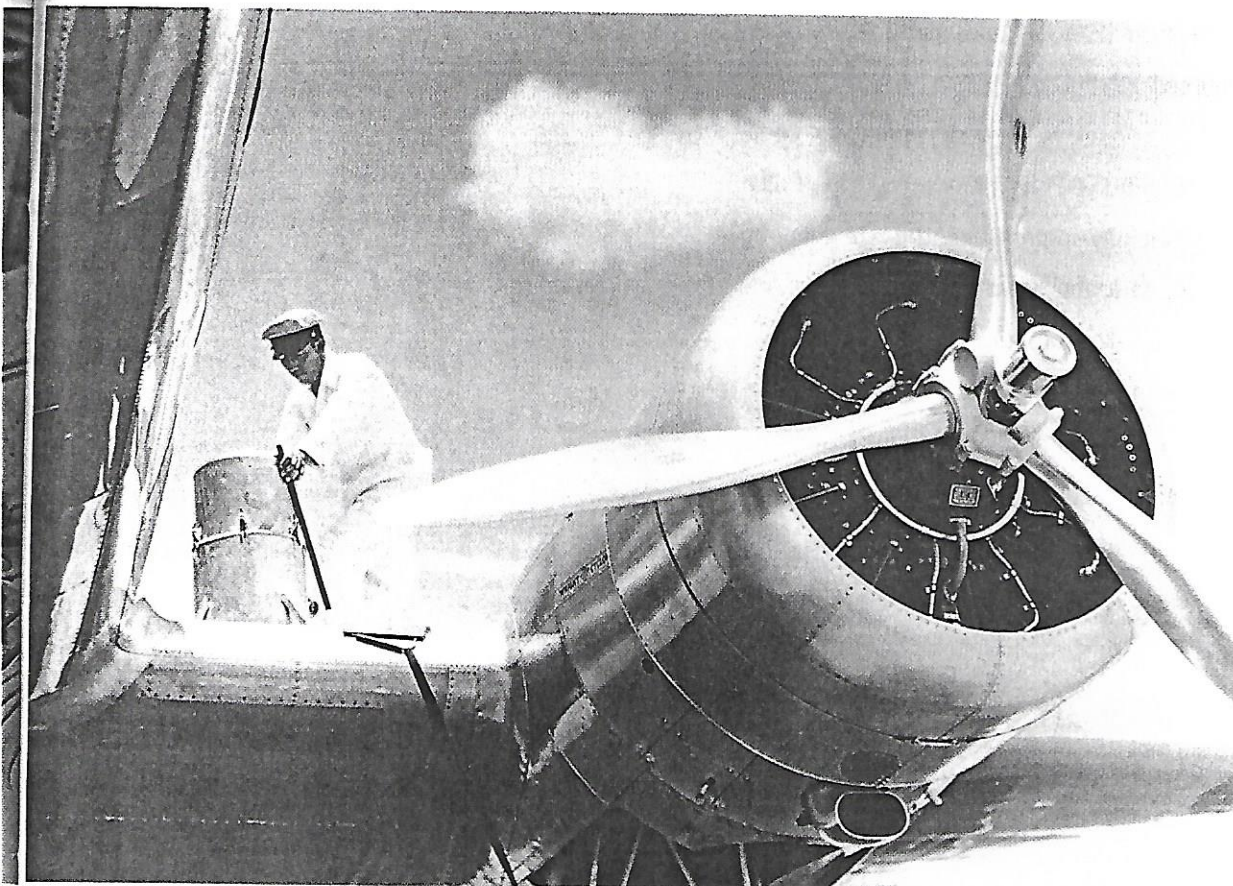


[RIGHT] Texas Derby winner's circle, Arlington Downs

[FAR RIGHT] Woman beside *horno* (oven), Lower Rio Grande Valley

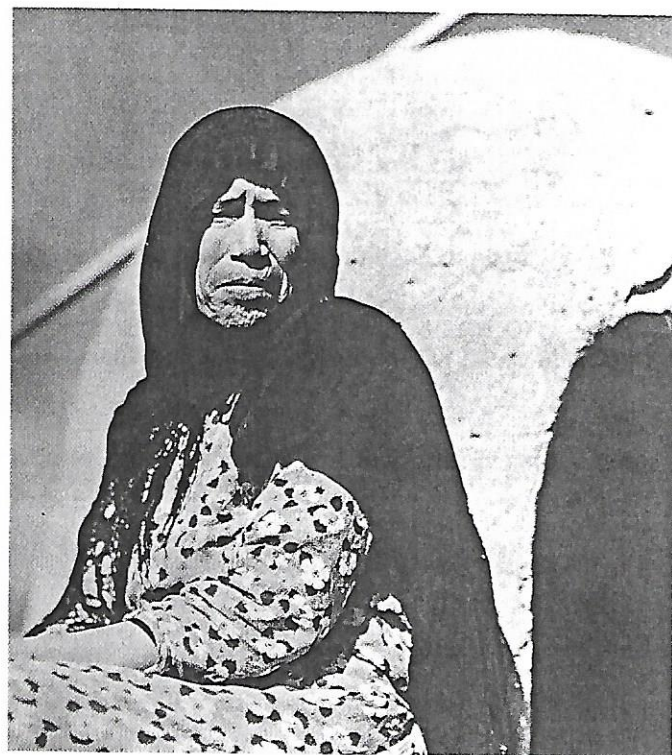


"WHAT we want to attempt," Clyde Vandeburg wrote to Polly, "simple, every day, familiar subjects.... Let color and human



[FAR LEFT] Stonework at
a quarry near Austin

[LEFT] Refueling a Pan
American airplane



"is to get...the ordinary views of ordinary subjects—views of
interest dominate in all your photographs."

practically three days last week in [San Antonio] battling with the police, trying to get shots planned...."

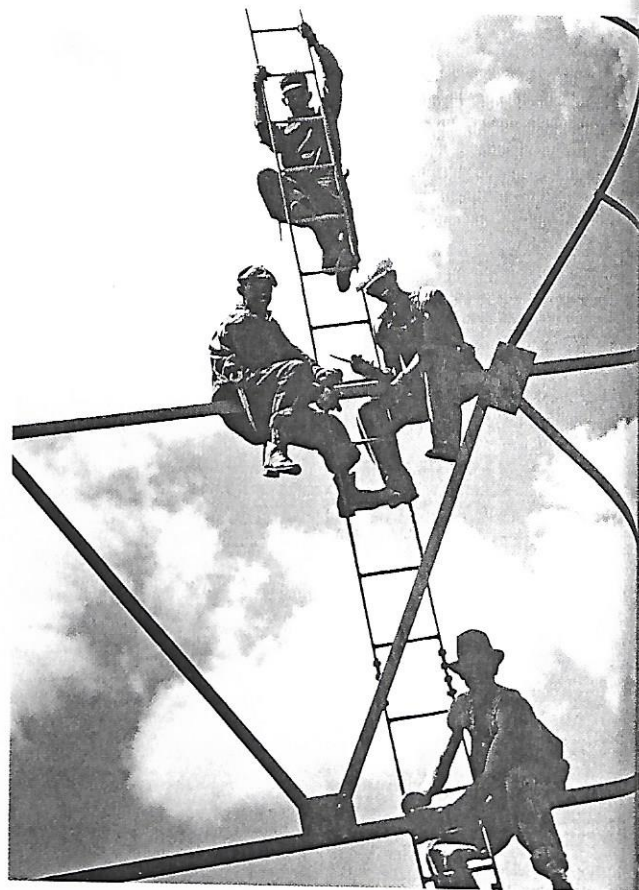
Like other photographers, the young woman depended on good weather. In a letter to Clyde Vandenburg, Polly's mother wrote, "Polly is, as you know, in Houston and vicinity, importuning the Sun god, but so far the days have been 'cold, dark and dreary.'" While in San Antonio, Polly reported to the Centennial's promotion department, "I have been expecting this fog to lift momentarily but so far nothing has happened but another norther. Since the shots Mr. Vandenburg requested are mostly architectural, it is quite essential for the sun to be present so I will just stay here and take the interiors and hope."

In March, Polly suffered a serious setback when someone stole her camera equipment. Her sister Gail Muskavitch has said, "She used to get so excited about what she was doing that she often didn't lock [her vehicle]." In a letter to Jacque Lansdale, on the Centennial staff, Polly described the theft as "my great loss." She wrote that she felt especially sad because "it was the lens with which I began my endeavors in this weird field and I loved it very much." Fortunately, the Dallas office paid for new equipment, and by the end of March, she was back in business.

At that point, Polly's mode of travel changed. Previously, she had driven from hotel to hotel along her route, accumulating negatives and periodically stopping to develop them. But with the delay caused by the theft, a friend in Austin had time to build an air-conditioned dark-room for her on the back of a Ford truck. From then on, Polly forsook hotels and lived in the truck, stopping to develop her work under any shady tree along the road.

Polly's photographs from this period appeared in magazines like *House Beautiful*, *Pictorial Review*, *Furniture Age*, and *Architectural Forum*. Her artistic tendencies, however, occasionally earned her a word of caution. Clyde Vandenburg wrote to her, "*Vanity Fair* or *Vogue* would be very likely to accept an angle shot such as the circular staircase, but it would be a total loss with *Cappers Farmer* or the *Angora Goat Raiser*."

The Centennial ended in November 1936, and with it ended one of the greatest publicity efforts the state has ever seen. Afterward, Polly went on to other freelance assignments. Her body of work became



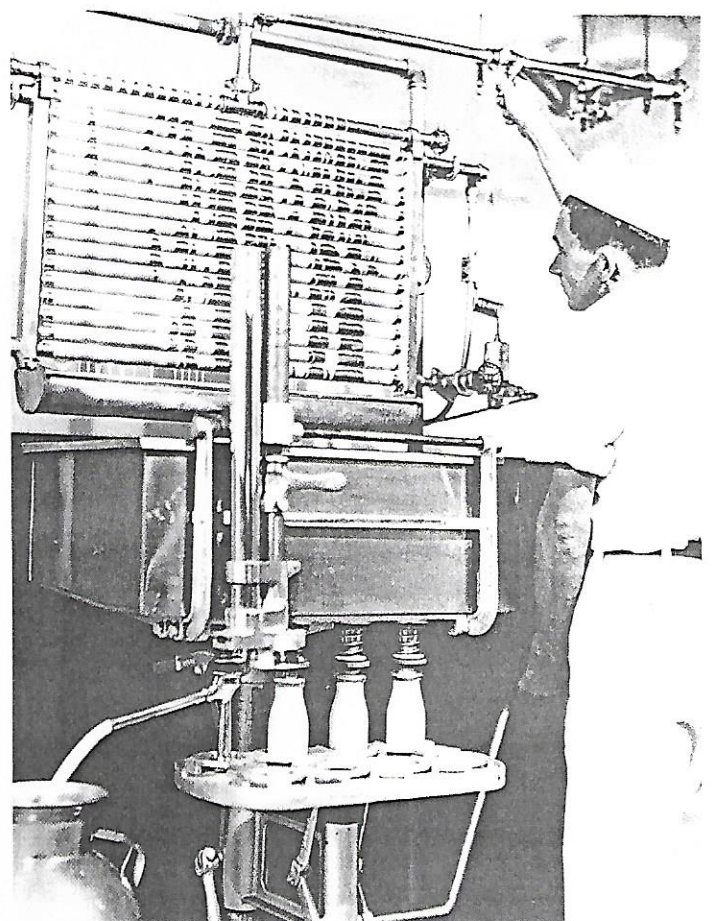
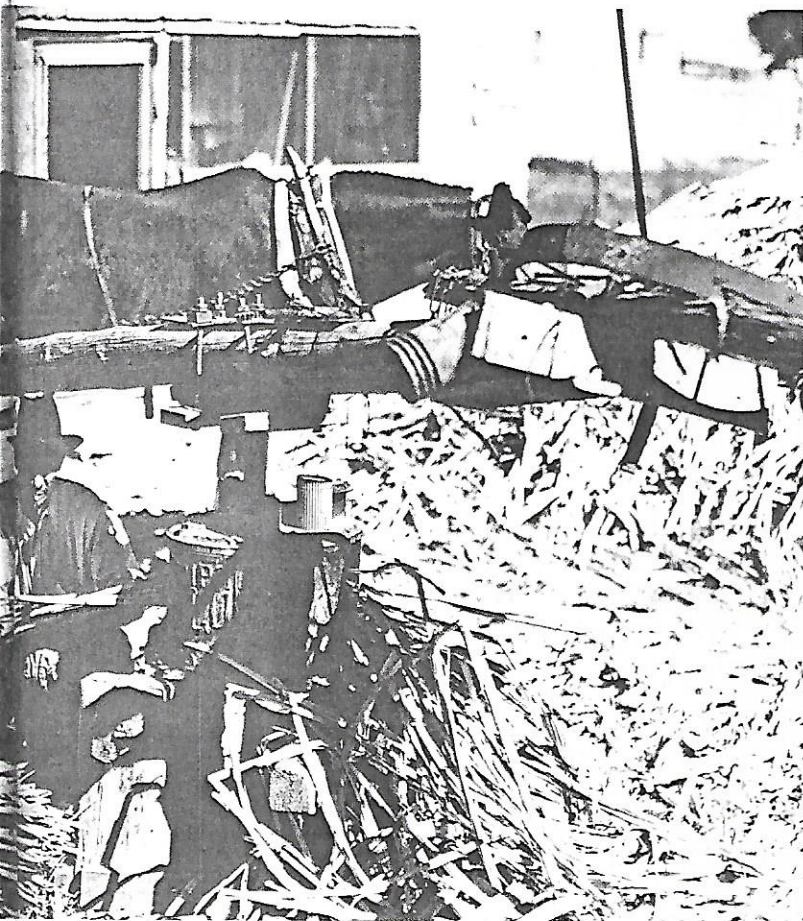
[RIGHT] Crushing sorghum
on a farm near Austin

[FAR RIGHT] Bottling milk
at a dairy near Austin



[FAR LEFT] Oil field workers, Gregg County, East Texas

[LEFT] Laird Hill, aka Pistol Hill, just southwest of Kilgore in Rusk County



so well known that in 1938, *Texas Parade* called her “one of Texas’ finest artists with the camera,” and added, “Pick up an illustrated book on Texas and you likely will find one or more of her ‘unusual’ shots.”

But in 1944, soon after enrolling at the University of Texas to study painting and sculpture, Polly was diagnosed with the first of what would become a series of health problems. She quit her classes and permanently retired from photography. For the rest of her life, she lived quietly and reclusively with various family members. In 1969, she moved to Auburn, California, and remained there until her death on June 18, 1980.

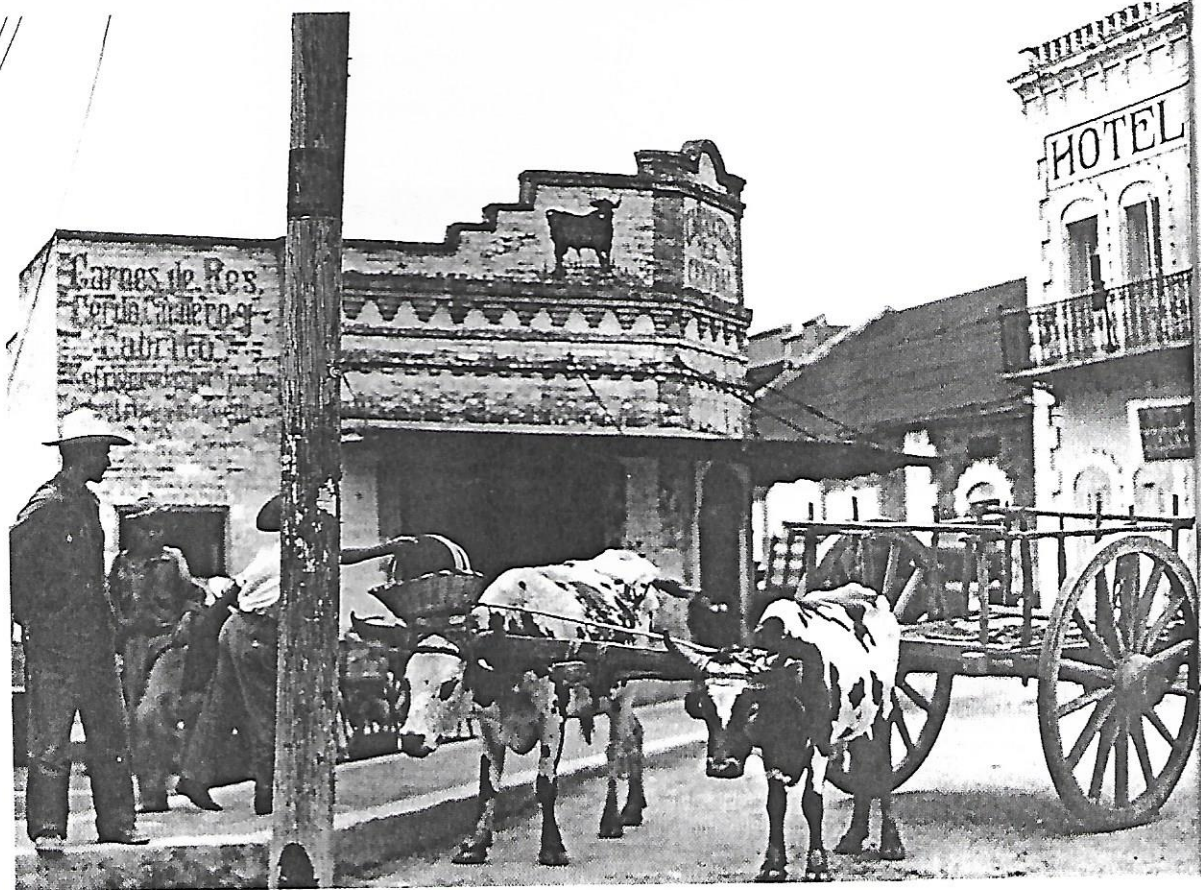
Polly Smith’s Centennial photos capture a fascinating era in Texas history, as the state began to shed its image as a rough and wild territory and to promote its status as a national power. Since 1938, the Dallas Historical Society has preserved the Texas Centennial Central Exposition’s papers—including Polly’s photographs. The Hall of State in Dallas’ Fair Park permanently displays a selection of her works. ★

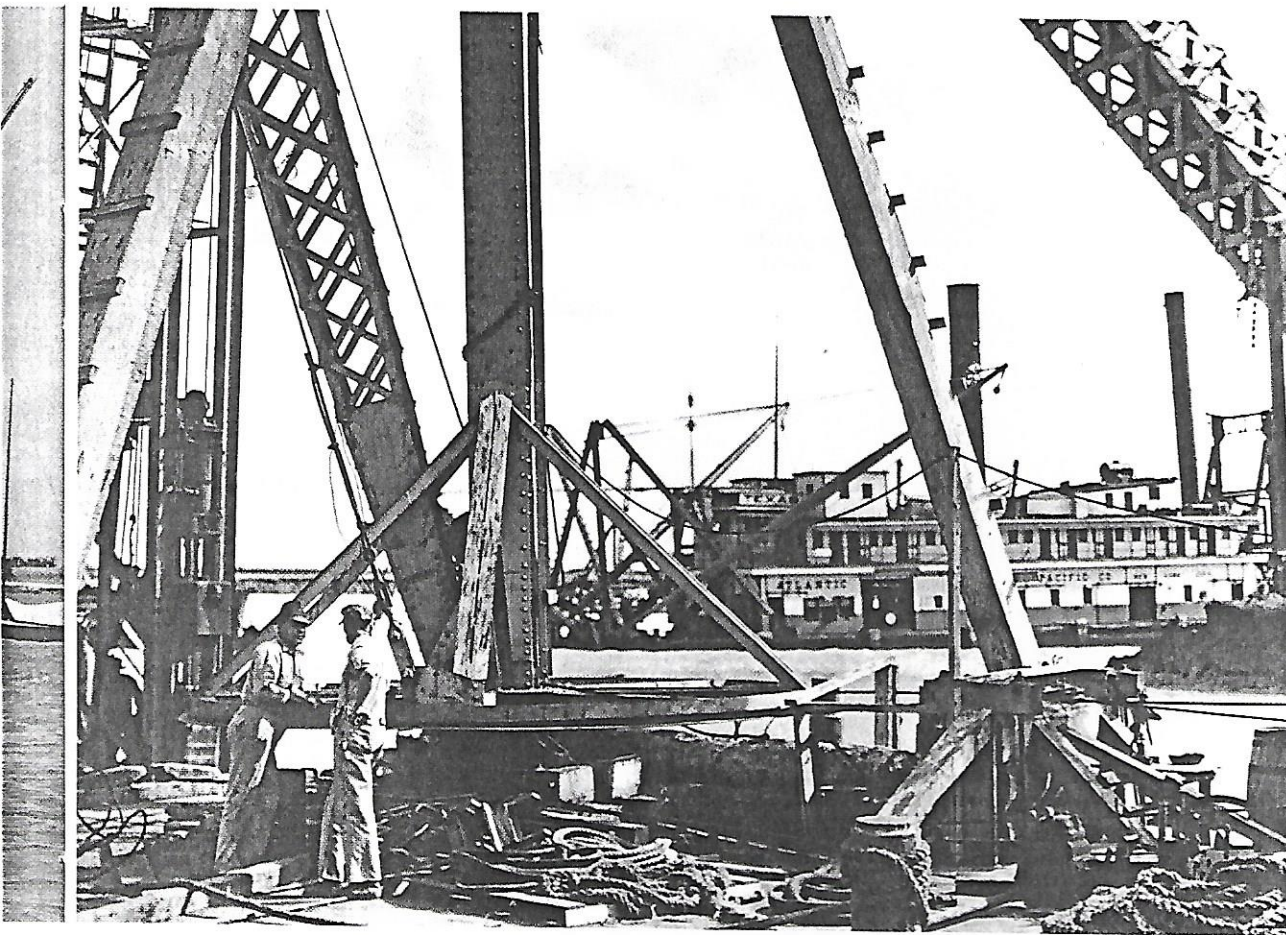
EVELYN BARKER of Dallas has previously written for the history journal *Legacies*. This is her first article for *Texas Highways*.



[RIGHT] Street scene,
Laredo

[FAR RIGHT] Student
Union, University of
Texas, Austin





[FAR LEFT] Sailboats, probably on White Rock Lake in Dallas

[LEFT] Houston Ship Channel



WHEN...WHERE...HOW

Polly Smith, Photographer

The Dallas Historical Society, located in the Hall of State in Fair Park, owns about 200 of Polly Smith's Texas Centennial prints, some 20 of which are on permanent display in the Hall of State. To reach Fair Park from Interstate 30 in Dallas, take the 2nd Ave. exit (just east of downtown), and go south on 2nd Ave. three blocks to the park.

The Hall of State and its exhibits are open to the public at no charge. Hours: Tue-Sat 9-5, Sun 1-5. Wheelchair accessible. The historical society's library opens Tue-Fri 9:30-4:30. Write to the Dallas Historical Society, Box 150038, Dallas 75315-0038; 214/421-4500. Web sites: www.dallashistory.com and www.hallofstate.com.

As the site of the 1936 Texas Centennial Central Exposition, Fair Park boasts a renowned collection of Art Deco buildings and artwork. The park, which includes museums, theaters, and gardens, also hosts the State Fair of Texas each fall. Call 214/421-9600 for Fair Park events, exhibits, hours, and directions.