

Bassett Center's history goes back to pioneer El Pasoan

When O.T. Bassett made his first visit here on February 12, 1880, El Paso was a little village of 800 citizens anticipating the coming of the railroad. There was no bank, post office, church, trolley car, troop installation or public school.

Bassett and his friend, Charles N. Morehead, arrived by Overland Stage to buy land for the railroad.

On February 15, 1880, Morehead wrote in his diary, "Plenty of room here for a big city, which will be in time, after the railroad comes." Bassett shared his view, for the two men had hardly alighted from the stage before they visited Joseph Magoffin, one of the town's foremost citizens. They informed him of their desire to secure land. They also wanted to set up a bank and a lumber yard.

"You'll have to work fast if you want to be first," Magoffin told them. News of the rail race between the Southern Pacific and the Texas and Pacific was getting around.

Bassett and Morehead bought 600 acres of land in the suburbs of El Paso, then the former headed to St. Louis to raise money for the first bank. Bassett detoured

through New Mexico and Arizona to talk business with mining heads, then returned to Clinton, Ind., and his wife, Myrtle Nebeker Bassett.

That autumn, Myrtle died shortly after giving birth to Charles Nebeker Bassett. Bassett and Morehead returned on February 2, 1881. The following day they organized El Paso's first bank, the State National. Morehead was president, Magoffin vice president and Bassett, stockholder.

Bassett busied himself getting a lumber business started. He set up shop and began to take orders. May 13, 1881 saw the first train pull in to El Paso over the Southern Pacific. When the Texas and Pacific and Santa Fe arrived shortly afterward, Bassett met it. It carried California redwood: he was in business.

By the end of 1881, El Paso had banks, stores, a street car system, several churches and newspapers but still no public school.

In December 1882, the necessary paperwork was finalized to set up a school district. Bassett was named president of the school board.

During the years that followed, Bassett's son Charles visited his

father from time to time, but when his father died in 1889, Charles Bassett picked up where his father had left off.

He came to El Paso and operated the lumber yard; in 1908 he began his career with the State National Bank as vice president. In 1921 he became president of the State National Bank and in 1929, he built Bassett Tower downtown as a memorial to his father.

Bassett died in June, 1944, but members of the family still live in El Paso.

Bassett Center opened in 1962 on the outskirts of East El Paso by the freeway, which was still under construction. At the time, it was El Paso's largest shopping center. In 1973, the mall was enclosed and remodeled, and a major expansion was completed in 1981.

As El Paso grows and changes, Bassett Center keeps pace with the times and continues to offer the finest in shopping, dining and entertainment.

In 1954, ten years after the death of Charles N. Bassett, son of pioneer El Pasoan O.T. Bassett, Bassett Center was first envisioned by E.R. Bowman after hearing talk about the upcoming trend - regional

and suburban shopping centers.

Bowman located what is now Bassett Center in the only undeveloped area of 50 to 60 acres near the center of El Paso's population in that era.

At the time, the site was being worked as a sand and gravel pit by El Paso Sand Products Co. The owners of the original Bassett Center were the State National Bank, the children of Charles Bassett (Mrs. H.M. Daugherty, Mrs. Hugh McGovern and Mrs. Charles B. Hammond), Mrs. J.H. Sibley of New York, El Paso Sand Products Co., the Daugherty children and George G. Matkin.

The owners formed the Charles Bassett Corporation and signed a contract in 1955 with De Witt and Rearick as leasing agents for the center.

Following a favorable economic survey, the corporation employed Bartlett Cocke and Associates, who had experience in building shopping centers and department stores, to design the center. Bartlett Cocke collaborated with prominent mall development specialist John Grant in planning Bassett Center.

The White House, still a Bassett

mainstay, signed the first lease with the center in June, 1958. S.S. Kresge followed in March, 1959. The Popular, now one of Bassett's biggest stores, signed in February, 1960.

In 1960, Bassett Center began construction. In March 1962, at a time called "the big year of the big decade in El Paso," Bassett Center opened with 18 stores open for business.

Shortly thereafter, 27 other stores opened, making "Bassett Center the largest and most complete Center in the El Paso Southwest," according to an article in the Feb. 28, 1963, *El Paso Times*.

By March, 1963, Bassett Center boasted 47 stores and 4,500 parking spaces. The center was purchased in July, 1989 by Ca-fritz/Schonberger Group, Washington, D.C. Today, Bassett Center has over 90 tenants and is managed by Chicago-based Landau & Heyman, Inc., America's original shopping center management and development specialists since 1933.