

Dimming *Friday Night Lights*:
Race, Gender, and the Ego of a Small-Town



"The Long Black Line."

Hattie Miller

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Dr. Celia Naylor
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“When you hold hands, it means you’re not just 11 individuals, but 11 grouped as ONE, with one goal in mind – to win the game. And when you reach over and grab a guy’s hand standing next to you, it’s inspirational because you know he’s out there doing exactly the same thing you’re doing – trying to win the game.”

– Dal Watson

Permian Football State Champion, 1984¹

The cover photograph is from Regina Walker McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, (Fort Worth, TX: R.W. McCally, 1986), 214.

¹ Regina Walker McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, (Fort Worth, TX: R.W. McCally, 1986), 140.

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Introduction

“This must not be planet earth...this must be hell.”

But it wasn't. It was just Odessa.²

The twenty-minute drive from my hometown of Midland, Texas to the neighboring town of Odessa,³ where my parents spent most of their careers, is one that I have taken more times than I can count. Midland is situated just northeast of Odessa with a drive of less than twenty-five miles between the two no matter which highway you take. The towns are commonly referred to as a metropolitan area with estimates of a combined population of approximately 325,000.⁴ As an elementary school student, I would fall asleep to the sounds of Golden Oldies on 97.9 FM as my mom drove in the early hours of the morning to make it to morning practice with the junior high gymnastics program at Permian High School, where my parents coached the women's and men's teams. Sleeping was the better option compared to watching the scenery go by as the rolling, flat plains of West Texas are fairly ordinary. The Midland-Odessa area is halfway between El Paso, Texas in the westernmost corner of the state and the Dallas-Fort Worth area, which is located in north-central Texas. There is no greenery like that of the state's eastern region, nor is there the rich, red dirt plateaus of the Big Bend region that are reminiscent of the Old West. The wide-open spaces to either side of Highway 191 are littered with pumpjacks, pumping in search of the lifeblood of the region that keeps so many businesses and families afloat and even thriving. When my mom and I took this route to school through 2005, pumpjacks and the occasional cow were the only points of interest between Midland and Odessa, but over

² H.G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2000), 30.

³ The location of Midland and Ector Counties, where the cities of Midland and Odessa respectively are located, is featured in Appendix A.

⁴ Trevor Hawes, "Midland-Odessa CSA Leads the Nation in Population Growth," *Midland Reporter-Telegram*, March 29, 2016, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.mrt.com/business/article/Midland-Odessa-CSA-leads-the-nation-in-population-7405540.php>.

the years, more and more businesses have been established along the highway, signifying the changing times and profitability of the oil industry.

You arrive at Odessa via an overpass which offers you a birds-eye view of the town. You merge from Highway 191 onto 42nd Street and to the left you see the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, the only four-year university between the sister cities offering bachelor's and master's programs, which inexplicably features a nearly full-size replica of Stonehenge. To your right you pass the Walmart, the Target, the HEB (the world's greatest grocery store chain available only in Texas and parts of Mexico), the only Chick-Fil-A in town, and the mall, which boasts a movie theatre, ice skating rink, indoor carousel, and headquarters for the local CBS 7 news team. Driving further down the road, you pass Memorial Park on the left, which erects a flag in honor of every life lost on September 11th each fall⁵ and where my parents used to spend their lunch breaks when they were still just dating. A few more blocks down the road, you take a left and finally arrive at Permian High School.

My mother graduated from Odessa High School, the westside feeder school, and whenever she and her brother drove past Permian High while growing up my grandmother would urge them to hold their breath, so as not to breathe in that Permian air, something my mom could never manage as a little girl. It was perhaps one of my grandparents' greatest disappointments when my mom accepted a job at Permian High School teaching special education and coaching girls' gymnastics, something they silently and not-so-secretly begrudge to this day. Even though I graduated from Midland High School, I often joke that I have more of an emotional connection to Permian than to my own alma mater given how many hours of my childhood were spent in the gym during weekday practices, in the press box at Ratliff Stadium during Friday night games

⁵ Odessa Parks and Recreation, "An American Tribute," September 6, 2018, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.odessatxparks.org/programs-events/special-events/american-tribute>.

with my dad, and traveling with the gymnastics team on the weekends. There is an energy within Permian that is distinctly different from other high schools, something that I was acutely aware of even as a child and believe even more strongly after attending a different high school and feeling its absence.

Few high schools can boast multiple books, a movie, and a TV show dedicated to the success and mystique of their football program. *Friday Night Lights*, by H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger, was published in 1990 after the author spent a year following the Permian Panthers’ 1988 football season. Bissinger arrived at Permian High assuring the administration that he wanted to write a book that celebrated the magic of Permian football, the winningest team of the Modern Day era of high school football.⁶ What resulted from Bissinger’s time, however, left a stain on Odessa and on Permian High School for years to come. The book spares no detail when it comes to the racial animosity of Odessa residents, dedicating numerous pages to the townspeople’s frequent use of the n-word with apparent abandon.⁷ He also situates senior James “Boobie” Miles, first-string fullback for the Panthers, as his tragic hero, utilizing him as another example of the town’s racism. Bissinger argues that Boobie was taken advantage of because of his athletic skills like so many other Black players on the team and that Boobie’s tragic downfall was the direct result of his participation in Permian football.

However, Bissinger fails to capture the events that preceded the ’88 football season and properly contextualize the racial attitudes of the town. The events of *Friday Night Lights* take place only five years after Ector County Independent School District (ECISD) first desegregated after a drawn-out court battle, that took over a decade to resolve with the United States government, a crucial detail necessary to unpack fully before casting judgement on the town.

⁶ McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, 19.

⁷ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 34.

There is plenty that can and should be said about the town's dark history of handling race; however, Bissinger does a disservice to the people of Odessa and, most importantly, the students of Permian High School in highlighting the unsavory elements of their culture without allowing space for the positive aspects of Permian and West Texas.

There is arguably no greater pinnacle of American masculinity than American football and West Texas embodies this idea to its fullest. Author and West Texas resident Regina Walker McCally writes in her work *The Secret of Mojo*, that "no other sport fits our nation's rough-and-tumble past better than football."⁸ During the decades prior to desegregation, Permian football, like so many other high school football programs across the country, was not just a celebration of American masculinity, but of white masculinity given the town's continued segregation. The spirit of Mojo, that mysterious moniker adopted by the team in the late 1960s as an undefinable encapsulation of Permian pride, crossed generational divides. It "[fostered] an intimacy between fathers and sons that they'd probably be uncomfortable with in other situations, and the uniquely 'Mojoian' dream of going to state became a dream that many players fulfilled for their dads."⁹ The winning tradition of Permian football, built over decades and sustained through cultural norms, was a source of pride for many in the town.

Cultural shifts in Odessa in the 1980s, such as the desegregation order of 1982, threatened the status quo of the town in a number of ways, not the least of which was high school football. Additionally, the town was experiencing a period of financial strife following a one of immense wealth due to the fallen price of oil, which dictates the nature of the economy for the entirety of the town. The events that propelled desegregation on top of a struggling economy

⁸ McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, 11-12.

⁹ Ibid, 164.

meant that the people of Odessa felt themselves being thrust about in a changing world with no clear idea of what their new role would be.

Enter Buzz Bissinger.

Bissinger, a Pulitzer-prize winning author and native New Yorker,¹⁰ came to Odessa with his family in 1988 with a mission to write a book that he proclaimed would be the *Hoosiers* of football.¹¹ It was an idea he had had for decades, and he was told by experts in the field of athletics that there was only one place in the country with a football program like the one he was looking for: the Permian Panthers of Odessa, Texas.¹² Though many were wary of Bissinger's intentions from the start, far more were thrilled that someone finally wanted to share the magic of Mojo with the world. Bissinger could not have arrived at a better time to stoke the egos of Permian fans. It was during points of stress that the town banded together even more strongly around the things that united them, like the success of their football team. At its height, the Permian Panthers were a consistent source of pride in a town that had so few other aspects that made them special. However, what Bissinger pitched and what he published could not have been more different.

Instead of exalting the triumphs of the Permian Panthers like so many had expected, Bissinger's book shone a light into all the darkest corners of the town and of their football program. They were described as racist backwoods hicks who cared only about high school football, something that the rest of the world already believed about them. The book was successful in part because it confirmed the biases many in the country held towards West

¹⁰ Buzz Bissinger, "About Buzz," accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.buzzbissinger.com/bio/>.

¹¹ The 1986 film *Hoosiers* was a loose retelling of the 1954 Indiana high school basketball team that, as the film portrays it, overcame the odds to win the state championships, when in actuality their team had a long-established basketball program and was considered a favorite to win. See Roger Elbert, "Hoosiers," Elbert Digital, LLC, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hoosiers-1987>.

¹² Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, xi.

Texans. This special gem that Odessa had once been so proud of was now portrayed for all the world to see as this dark and twisted element without acknowledging the countless ways that high school football was an incredible force for community building in West Texas. Bissinger did not acknowledge all the ways that Permian football was a lifeline for so many students and a way to receive the mentorship and guidance that they so desperately needed in their lives.

I grew up knowing all too well the pain *Friday Night Lights* inflicted on the town of Odessa and on the high school I loved so much. I avoided the book and all its later iterations for so many years because I thought that I knew the story already. In returning to my hometown and to Permian High School for one of the first times since I was in elementary school this past year, I learned the story was far more complex and certainly more nuanced than is portrayed by Bissinger. The pain inflicted by *Friday Night Lights* is a complicated one, and it is a blow from which the town has never fully recovered. Permian football, no matter how much its status may have waned in the decades since Bissinger left his mark, is still the single most unifying force in the city of Odessa. By examining this program and the broader aspects of Odessa in the 1980s one can understand what Bissinger got wrong and even what he got right.

In my first chapter, “Feast or Famine,” I explain the culture of Odessa, Texas by examining two key facets: the oil-based economy and the rise of Permian football. Though seemingly unrelated, the consistency of the Panthers’ success compensated for the insecurities brought on by the town’s boom and bust economy. I highlight the positive effects Permian football has on Odessa, an element of analysis that is fundamentally lacking in Bissinger’s work. In my second chapter, “A Form of Educational Malpractice,” I outline the battle for desegregation in Odessa, pulling from the experiences of both educators and students from this time in addition to related newspaper articles archived by ECISD. Odessa’s abnormal timeline

for desegregating is imperative in framing the racial attitudes of the town in the 1980s, and the intersection of race and sports is crucial both to my analysis and to Bissinger's. My third and final chapter, "Where's That Book Writer Dude?" describes how Bissinger became a part of the Permian family, the impressions he left on those he encountered, and the lasting impact of *Friday Night Lights*. Given that his work tells the stories of real people, giving Odessans a chance to voice their feelings of betrayal after Bissinger profited off their story is critical to my goals in writing this thesis.

I am proud to call West Texas my home. I am proud of the things that make West Texans tough, resilient, and enable them to fight for what they believe. However, my own beliefs are often at odds with those that some West Texans extoll, some of which Bissinger so astutely pinpoints. However, I depart from Bissinger in that I spent nearly two decades as opposed to a single year immersed in the culture of West Texas. I am intimately aware of the image my region can often project, but more importantly, I believe that West Texas can do better. I also believe that it is disingenuous and ineffective to shine a light on the problematic parts of a region's culture alone, particularly when it is that culture's positive attributes that can provide a pathway to change. In writing this thesis, I hope to give the nuances of Permian football the care they deserve without sacrificing an honest reflection on how the town can move forward.

Chapter 1: “Feast or Famine”
The Culture of Odessa, Texas

“There are so few other things we can look at with pride...When somebody talks about West Texas, they talk about football. There is nothing to replace it. It’s an integral part of what made the community strong. You take it away and it’s almost like you strip the identity of the people.” – Brad Allen, President of the Permian Football Booster Club in the 1980s¹³

Within popular culture, there is an image frequently conjured of the single-industry town; the coal mine, the factory, something that employs all the men of the town while establishing and reinforcing a clear social hierarchy. Should anything happen to alter this way of life, everyone is affected, from the lowliest worker to those few individuals who hold the purse strings. In films like *Billy Elliot* (2000), *All the Right Moves* (1983), *Rudy* (1993), *October Sky* (1999), *Flashdance* (1983), and more, these energy producing plants, quite literally, give life to the town. In West Texas, the people do not feed off the mines, but from a different source of energy buried deep in the ground.

The Permian Basin, a large swath of land “approximately 250 miles wide and 300 miles long, across West Texas and southeastern New Mexico” in the western-most region of the state of Texas, is the largest shale formation in the state and one of the most important oil and natural gas producing regions in the country.¹⁴ Today, the region can produce over three million barrels

¹³ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 43.

¹⁴ Chevron Corporation, “The Permian Basin: Business Overview: American Energy Powerhouse,” accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.chevron.com/projects/permian>.

of oil a day,¹⁵ accounting for 68% of the state's total production and 80% of its oil reserves.¹⁶ In addition to oil, the Permian Basin produces "nearly 4 billion cubic feet of natural gas each day."¹⁷ It employs thousands in towns like Midland and Odessa. The very existence of the industry fuels the success of other trades that are not directly related but nonetheless dependent on the business of those who come to the Basin in search of their fortunes. Many who study the region have even estimated that the amount of petroleum still sitting beneath the earth could transform the Permian Basin into the largest oil producing region in the world, transforming Texas into the United States' greatest hope for the future of fossil fuels.¹⁸

Given the importance of the Permian Basin as a producer of petroleum and natural gas, Odessa is dramatically affected by the industry's boom and bust cycle. It is an ever-enduring sequence where each boom leaves the town convinced that this one will last, with thousands of new residents pouring into the city to seek their fortunes. In 1970, Odessa had only 90,000 residents.¹⁹ At that time, "blue-collar Odessa was among Texas' proudest boom towns. Situated in the heart of one of the country's richest oil-producing regions, it was a raw and vital place, dominated by hulking refineries, manufacturing plants, and clangorous shipping yards."²⁰ Once the price of oil began skyrocketing, the population shot up to 120,000,²¹ a number which doesn't even take into consideration the number of residents in the neighboring Midland which is just as

¹⁵ Robert Rapier, "Why The Permian Basin May Become The World's Most Productive Oil Field," *Forbes*, December 27, 2018 accessed March 7, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2018/12/27/why-the-permian-basin-may-become-the-worlds-most-productive-oil-field/#2706080f5ccb>.

¹⁶ UTPB Center for Energy and Economic Diversification, "Permian Basin Statistics," The University of Texas of the Permian Basin, accessed November 21, 2018, <https://www.utpb.edu/ceed/energy-resources/petroleum-library/permian-basin-statistics/index>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Michael E. Webber, "Fracked," *The Alcalde*, accessed November 20, 2018, <http://alcalde.texasexes.org/fracked/index.html>.

¹⁹ People Staff, "A Dream Dies in Texas," *PEOPLE.com*, November 10, 1986, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://people.com/archive/a-dream-dies-in-texas-vol-26-no-19/>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

integrally connected to the boom and bust cycle, before declining just as quickly with the next bust.

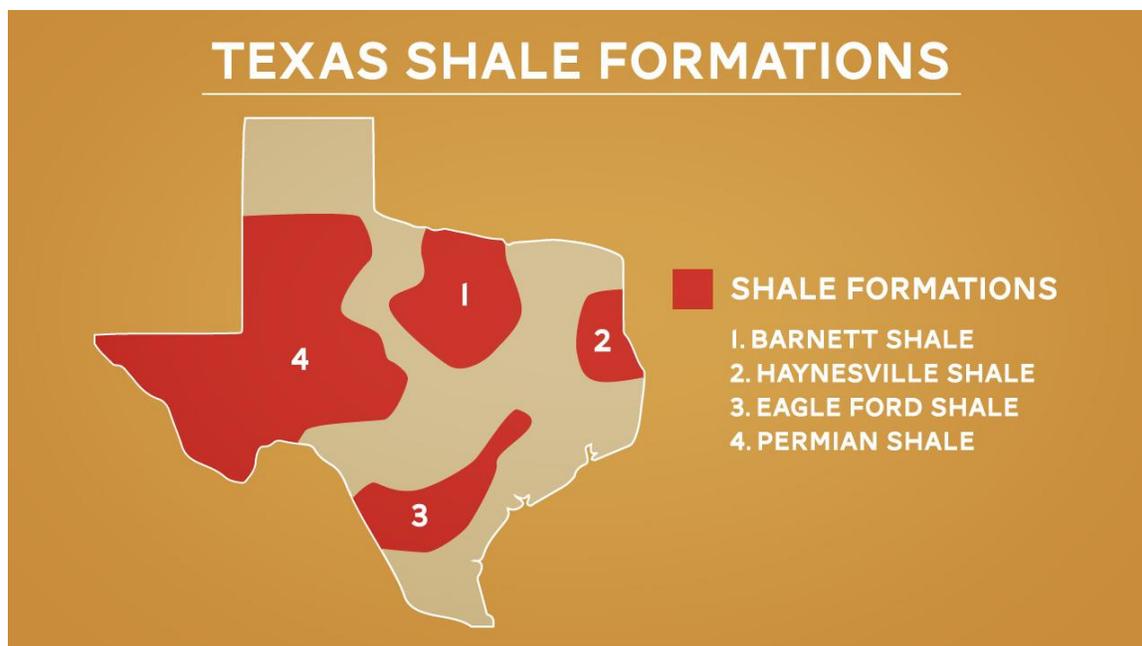


Image 1: Map of shale formations within the state of Texas.²²

Since the 1920s, Odessa has been “enmeshed in the cycles of the boom-and-bust oil town.”²³ In 1988, Odessa was recovering from two back to back busts in oil prices, 1983 and 1986. Between the end of 1982 and the beginning of 1983, the cost of oil dropped from \$92.03 per barrel to \$74.78 in just over six months.²⁴ The decrease in prices in 1983 resulted from a combination of factors including “continued warm weather in the Northeast...[which] postponed the need for heating oil purchases” in addition to relatively high oil inventories “from the stock buildup earlier [in 1983] amid fears of supply disruptions from the Iran-Iraq war.”²⁵ The cost of

²² Webber, "Fracked."

²³ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 29.

²⁴ Macrotrends, *Average monthly West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil price from January 1960 to August 2018 (in U.S. dollars per barrel)*, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart>.

²⁵ *The New York Times*, "Oil Prices Are Sharply Lower," *The New York Times Archives*, November 26, 1984, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/27/business/oil-prices-are-sharply-lower.html>.

oil is far more complicated than simply assessing what is being produced in West Texas; it is influenced by the environment in addition to the geopolitical context that is so often wrapped up in the international oil and gas industry. The cost of oil per barrel continued to generally decrease over the next few years before yet another dramatic bust. Between October of 1985 and March of 1986, the price per barrel dropped from \$70.66 to \$24.22.²⁶

My grandfather, Michael Miller, Sr., worked in the oil industry during the summers from the time he was fifteen until he dropped out of high school at sixteen to work full-time beginning as a roustabout.²⁷ A roustabout is an entry-level position requiring few skills or training and entails tasks such as cleaning “equipment, including drills and pumps and machinery and [keeping] work areas clean and orderly.”²⁸ He worked his way up before becoming an operations superintendent; he retired at the age of 67. With over fifty years of experience in oil and gas, my grandfather attributes his success in the industry, despite the many booms and busts over the decades that sent so many others scattering, to the fact that he started from the bottom and worked his way up, making him an invaluable resource to the companies for whom he worked.

From his experiences, those who were responsible for the groundwork immediately pertaining to the maintenance of the oil rigs were largely safe during busts as company management still needed people to monitor the oil rigs, regardless of the cost of oil; those in positions adjacent to the oil field, such as construction and consulting workers who were typically men in middle-class families, were hit the hardest.²⁹ As hundreds of these families left town, enrollment rates across Midland and Ector County Independent School Districts (MISD &

²⁶ Macrotrends, *Average monthly West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil price*.

²⁷ Michael Miller, Sr, "Interview with Michael Miller, Sr. on Oil Industry in Odessa in the '80s," telephone interview by author, November 19, 2018.

²⁸ Ron White, "What Does a Roustabout Do in the Oilfields?" *Chron.com*, November 09, 2016, accessed November 22, 2018.

²⁹ Miller, "Interview with Michael Miller, Sr."

ECISD) fell drastically.³⁰ However, this same group was also able to move out of West Texas most easily because of their socioeconomic advantage; as a result, many of these families moved out of Odessa to pursue more lucrative work in larger, more affluent metropolitan areas like Houston.³¹

The exodus of the families who ran larger companies that existed to support the oil industry resulted in the loss of jobs for many of the lower-income individuals who relied on these companies for work. This created a trickle-down effect that is so integral to the boom and bust cycle of West Texas. Whenever the price of oil crashes, it is not just those in the fields who are affected; the whole town feels the crushing blow from this drop in revenue. By November of 1986, Odessa's unemployment rate "reached 17.3 percent, the second highest in the state,"³² while motel after motel shuttered its doors and more than 400 establishments filed for bankruptcy that year.³³ Just as every boom brings prosperity for restaurants, retail stores, and other establishments, each bust decimates these businesses just as quickly.³⁴ Across the state, at least twenty banks closed in 1986 alone,³⁵ and a quick drive around Midland or Odessa during this time would reveal abandoned house after house along with countless boats and RV's for sale – remnants of a bygone era in which families could afford the luxury of a lake vacation miles away from the desert sun of West Texas.³⁶

There is no doubt that everyone in the town was hurt by the drop in oil prices, but the damage took on a different face for each socioeconomic class. Those responsible for the management of oil and gas companies were largely safe, though forced to contend with far fewer

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² People Staff, "A Dream Dies in Texas."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Webber, "Fracked."

³⁵ People Staff, "A Dream Dies in Texas."

³⁶ Miller, "Interview with Michael Miller, Sr."

luxuries than they were accustomed, while those within the lowest socioeconomic level were most dramatically hit. “Because I had started out in the oil patches as a roustabout at the very bottom of the ladder, and worked up, I could do multiple things so I was safe,”³⁷ my grandfather recounts, reflecting on the oil busts of the 1980’s. Whenever a bust would hit the oil industry, a typical pattern would emerge dictating who would keep their job, like my grandfather, and who was most at risk:

When a bust starts the person closest to the wellhead, that means the person working in the field, is usually the safest. The upper management goes first, especially engineering, geology, because they’re shutting down the drilling rigs...so the small guys, pumpers...those folks, they didn’t get hurt. Now the construction guys, the roustabout companies, the contract people they got hurt really bad. Those people were starving to death because they didn’t have any work.³⁸

The image of the once thriving, now poverty-stricken roustabout became a familiar sight in Odessa during this time. One report of the bust of ’86 describes one Odessa man Elbert Shellenberger and his sister Irene who were forced to find enough money to provide for themselves by whatever means necessary:

[The Shellenbergers] are looking for aluminum cans, which they will salvage and sell for 23¢ a pound. A craggy-faced, leather-skinned roughneck who worked the derricks, Elbert has been out of work more than two years. “You never think this kind of thing could happen to you,” he says, sadly, reaching into a barrel.³⁹

At the same time that lower-income workers like roustabouts and construction workers were losing their jobs, the middle- and upper-class owners and managers of these companies were also hit with changing social dynamics resulting from the economic turmoil. Across the state, Texas billionaires quickly became millionaires⁴⁰ as hundreds of single-income families found themselves renegotiating their family dynamic. My grandfather remembers that he worked

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ People Staff, "A Dream Dies in Texas."

⁴⁰ Ibid.

with several men who were the primary breadwinners for their families, bringing home a reliable and considerable income when suddenly everything shifted. “[One guy I worked with] and his wife found lesser jobs making close to the same money and they never came back to the oil field...they got burned in the oil patch...and a bunch of those men didn’t come back.”⁴¹ For many families, like the one my grandfather describes, the true loss from the bust was not defined solely by their income, but the resulting blow to these men’s identities as providers.⁴²

With the history of the oil economy repeating itself, it is a wonder why anyone would choose to stay in Odessa and continue to live at the mercy of such a temperamental resource. For some there was truly no alternative. Many young men who were working during this time entered the oil fields when they were teenagers, and the idea that young men are better off going into the fields to make a quick fortune rather than going off to college endures even to this day. One Permian teacher, Alan Jones, bemoaned oil’s impact on education in Odessa saying that “the oilfield just negates a lot of what we try to do.”⁴³ Because of this, many men who are laid off during a bust find themselves unable to acquire alternative work because they lack qualifications for other positions.⁴⁴ For some it was a matter of pride. For others, it is the simple thrill of the rollercoaster; the boom and bust cycle can be as exhilarating as it is exhausting. Reflecting on his own career, my grandfather stated, “the oil industry has made me a good living and my family and I’m very proud to have been part of it, but it has been feast or famine.”⁴⁵

The effects of a bust are widespread. Construction groups scale back, stores and boutiques close their doors, restaurants lay off dozens of waitstaff because there’s no need for

⁴¹ Miller, "Interview with Michael Miller, Sr."

⁴² People Staff, "A Dream Dies in Texas."

⁴³ Faught, Liz, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faught, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell on Permian High School and Desegregation," in-person interview by author, January 14, 2019, Permian High School, Odessa, TX.

⁴⁴ People Staff, "A Dream Dies in Texas."

⁴⁵ Miller, "Interview with Michael Miller, Sr."

those kinds of expenses when the town is hemorrhaging people fleeing to chase their next fortune. Those without the means to leave town are forced to remain and grapple with the changing economic status quo with no way of knowing when the next boom will come. These socioeconomic lines intersect with racial lines because more lucrative positions were at this point generally limited to white workers only. Nate Hearne, Permian's first Black coach, briefly left education following desegregation because he was told he would now have to serve as assistant coach under white head coaches whose teams he had beaten during segregation. Hearne's experience was unusual for a Black man in the oil field because he was a pumper, a relatively high-level position that he was able to secure because his brother was a supervisor for Chevron. His brother was a veteran and because of that earned a Bachelor of Science degree from North Texas which enabled his path to supervisor and opened the door for Hearne. Hearne's experience was not the norm for minorities in West Texas; instead, race and class intersect causing an even greater amalgamation of social tensions that come together on the high school football field.

It is important to center the 1988 Permian Panthers' football season within the broader economic context of the town to understand how these high school players' performances on the field served such a crucial role for the town. At the same time that the town was undergoing major racial upheavals due to the desegregation of the public-school system just six years prior, families were also being forced to contend with new gender roles and shifts within the class structure resulting from the latest bust. Odessa in the 1980s faced social upheavals from every direction, including the catalysts of the oil busts in 1983 and 1986.

What would come to be known as Odessa High was founded in 1890, much earlier than its cross-town counterpart of Permian High, with the construction of Odessa's first public

schoolhouse.⁴⁶ It wasn't until 1921 that Ector County was formally established as a union of all existing schools in Odessa, Texas.⁴⁷ Illustrating that the importance of high school football has long since been a part of the culture of Odessa, a formal football team was created in 1923 as a way to remedy "the high dropout rate among boys at Odessa High."⁴⁸ They were the Yellowjackets until 1925, when the students voted unanimously to change the school's mascot to something more befitting of West Texas and, henceforth, they were known as the Odessa High Bronchos.⁴⁹

There is a common argument that West Texas football teams consistently outperform larger schools from more eastern school districts because of the barren nature of the region. The argument is not without merit as West Texas high schools do have uncommonly good records when it comes to football. One of the most prolific football coaches in Permian history, John Wilkens, was well aware of the prowess of West Texas teams, arguing that, "when you beat teams like Abilene Cooper and Midland Lee, you've got to be good."⁵⁰ In Wilkens' view, Permian players competed not only for their school but for West Texas pride and prestige as a whole,⁵¹ though many other coaches and players alike have maintained that Permian players compete with an additional level of pride unrivaled by other schools.

Permian High School was founded in 1959⁵² due to increased populations as a result of an oil boom,⁵³ but most fans attribute the birth of Mojo football to the 1965 football season,

⁴⁶ R. McSpadden, "Early History for Public Education in Ector County Decade 1900," Odessa High School History, accessed March 6, 2019. http://www.odessahigh.com/history_1.html.

⁴⁷ R. McSpadden, "Early History for Public Education in Ector County Decade 1920," Odessa High School History, accessed March 6, 2019. http://www.odessahigh.com/history_3.html

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, 8.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Permian High School – Mojo History," Ector County Independent School District, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.ectorcountysd.org/Page/12473>.

⁵³ McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, 24.

when the Panthers won their first state championship⁵⁴ under the leadership of Coach Gene Mayfield. Though Coach Mayfield is most remembered for ushering in the era of Mojo, he is notorious among Permian players for his infamous two-a-day practices the summer before school started in the sand dunes of Monahans Sandhills State Park:⁵⁵

Twenty miles outside Odessa toward El Paso are the Monahans Sandhills, and after the flatland of Odessa, they pop up so unexpectedly that a traveler on I-20 thinks he must be seeing a mirage. It was no mirage, however, that visitors to the Monahans Sandhills State Park viewed in August of 1965 when they saw football players loping across the sand. The park is a 4,000-acre expanse of 50-foot-high sand dunes, often called a miniature Sahara for campers, hikers, picnickers and sand surfers. It stretches endlessly, with blowing sand, miniature Harvard oaks that bear normal sized acorns, black-winged lesser goldfinches, blood-sucking assassin bugs, scarab beetles, robber flies, ant lions, and sometimes rattlesnakes...but seldom, if ever, football players.⁵⁶

Though Coach Mayfield no longer held practices in the sandhills by the seventies, for decades players knew their legacy, and the practices set a precedent that playing football for Permian High was an honor that was not to be taken lightly. It was a few years after Mayfield's infamous practices that the term "Mojo" was first coined by fans as a reference to the "magic" of Permian football,⁵⁷ though the exact meaning of the word is so elusive that an entire book, titled *The Secret of Mojo*, has been dedicated to the subject. Speaking to the masculine nature of Permian's success, McCally notes that writers refer to Mojo like they would "a person, many times using the masculine personal pronouns, 'he,' 'him,' and 'his.'"⁵⁸ Many stories debate from where exactly the term Mojo emerged,⁵⁹ but the consensus is that it was borne in the wake of a brutal 28-0 loss to Abilene-Cooper in 1967.⁶⁰ It is a term that fans hold as uniquely Permian because, as

⁵⁴ "Permian High School – Mojo History."

⁵⁵ McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, 40.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Permian High School – Mojo History."

⁵⁸ McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

one Permian football alum puts it, “lots of schools have Bronchos and Eagles, and even Panthers, but there’s only one Mojo!”⁶¹

Though the football team is most emblematic of the spirit of Mojo, the standard of excellence encapsulated by the term is reflected throughout all areas of the school. Martha Mitchell began coaching at Permian in 1971 before becoming their head gymnastics coach.⁶² Despite not having a gymnastics background before coaching the sport,⁶³ Mitchell won two state titles, Coach of the Year, served as President of the Texas High School Gymnastics Coaches Association, and was inducted as a Gymnastics Association of Texas Life Member in their Hall of Fame by the end of her career.⁶⁴ According to Mitchell, at Permian “we always said excellence breeds excellence. That’s what we just talked about at the school...Everybody wanted to be great because we *were* great.”⁶⁵

My father, Todd Vesely fondly referred to as “Coach,” who became Mitchell’s counterpart for the men’s gymnastics team, was initially skeptical of “Mojo Mania” when he first relocated to Odessa from his hometown of New York City in 1979. “As an outsider, it was odd. It seemed misplaced. It seemed over the top...absolutely football, but the school pride thing was very foreign to me.”⁶⁶ He continued that his opinions began to shift when he joined Permian High’s staff in 1985: “I felt a part of the Permian family very quickly. Once you would get in and fall in love with working with the kids...it was just an outstanding environment.”⁶⁷ When it came

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Adam Zuvanich, "HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASTICS: Former Permian Coach Inducted into Hall of Honor," *Odessa American*, April 24, 2013, accessed April 7, 2019, https://www.oaoa.com/sports/high_school/teams/permian/article_f516cc84-ad48-11e2-8a9b-001a4bcf6878.html.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Todd Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely on Permian High School and ECISD Athletics," telephone interview by author, April 2, 2018.

⁶⁵ Faught, Jones, and Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faught, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell."

⁶⁶ Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

to the football team, his opinion also shifted through “getting to know the young people and seeing their size compared to the size of the people they played against, seeing how committed [they were] and how hard they [worked], seeing how much it helped them develop as people... seeing those young people overcome the kinds of things that they did. That's what changed...It was really, it was the kids that won me over.”⁶⁸

The underdog nature of the Permian football team is another frequent point of note when discussing their success. Though the players have become more closely matched with other schools in terms of weight over time, in the beginning Permian players were consistently smaller than their opponents from other schools; yet “Permian seemed to possess a kind of magic that enabled them to win even when they often lacked size, speed and talent...and when they beat the odds, sportswriters attributed their victories to the mysterious Mojo.”⁶⁹ Nate Hearne, who joined the school in 1986, believed that it was not a matter of magic; rather, Permian’s success on the football field resulted from a long-held traditions of winning. He explained that, “You don't [just] get that, that was built over a 35-year history and pretty soon everyone around the state knew that about Permian High School. And I've been in places where they've had many traditions, but...it will never be like the Permian tradition...they could never get that mystique.”⁷⁰

Other coaches in the district echoed Hearne’s sentiment that there was a level of determination unique to Permian High School that better explained their success than simply brushing it off as “Mojo Magic.” Doak Huddleston, a 1979 graduate of Permian High School, currently employed as Permian’s head golf coach but he was previously employed as football and baseball coaches at various junior high schools. Because of the feeder system that prepares

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, xi.

⁷⁰ Nate Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne on Permian Football and Desegregation," In-person interview by author, January 19, 2019, Mimi’s Café, Arlington, TX.

young men for the rigorous expectations of Permian football from a young age, a key component to maintaining their winning tradition, he worked closely with the coaches at Permian High throughout his career. Like Hearne, Huddleston does not believe that Permian's history of success is unique simply because they are Permian; rather, he believes that success "was ingrained in us" and that their unique success is derived from Permian's ability to continue "year after year after year after year."⁷¹ Huddleston explains that other programs may have "that intensity, but then there's a coaching change and that intensity drops off." Permian, however, was able to maintain their philosophy for decades. Given Permian's longstanding success in maintaining a legacy of victory despite staffing changes, the demands were understandably high not only for students but for the coaches. According to Huddleston:

We're talking 95 to a hundred hours a week [as a coach] because the philosophy is if you're going to field a team, make sure you field a team that has a chance to win. Now I know some coaches in other districts, they would go home, and they'd worked maybe eight hours on a weekend. Permian High School, 5:30 Saturday morning, you're watching film and you probably didn't get home until 1:30 in the morning. And you had to prepare and that was some of the pressure, but I can tell you playing there and then coaching, the kids were prepared. They knew what was fixing to happen. They gave them a chance to be successful and that was part of the sacrifice.

Huddleston is more qualified than the average Permian coach to attest to the experience of Permian football players as he played on both the varsity and junior varsity teams during his time in high school. The legacy of the players from days gone by was key in Huddleston's understanding of their success: "I think that's the deal about playing for Permian, the pride in what the guys before you did in 1965, 1972, because they're looking at you too." Between Huddleston's sophomore and senior years of high school, Permian only lost two games in those three seasons and so he feels satisfied with the work he did for his alma mater.

⁷¹ Doak Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston on Permian Football," in-person interview by author, January 14, 2019, Odessa, TX.

To illustrate the magnitude of his achievements, Huddleston remembers a few years back when, as a coach at Nimitz Junior High, he wore his letter jacket for a throwback day during spirit week. His students doubted whether the jacket was actually his and one student asked why there were no all-state patches on his jacket to which he replied, "I wasn't all-state. I said you had to be special to be that." There is a certain kind of power in wearing a Mojo jacket that elicits respect not only in West Texas but across the state. Nate Hearne recounts one student who "looked like he came from low socioeconomic background" but because of his Permian letterman jacket, "he was walking with his head up... That made all the difference in his morning."⁷²

Despite the degree of reverence granted to Permian football on the basis of its name alone, few coaches felt that it should be the focus of the program. Hearne maintains in the years since retiring that for him "it was never [just] about Mojo." He recalls one moment with a player who was particularly anxious about an upcoming game and the consequences of losing:

I said to [one student], 'all the things that I taught you for all these years, out there coaching, you have to understand that it wasn't about playing here. It wasn't about winning state championships. It wasn't about mojo. It's about you and everything that I taught you and everything that I've given you. I wanted you to use that to become a good father, a good son, a good husband. That's what this whole thing is about.'

Huddleston in his reflections on the years since feels similarly about the role that Permian football had on his life. It was through football that he learned the core principles that guide him as an adult and his relationships with his fellow teammates continue to be some of the strongest in his life. "Those values that I was taught as a player from those coaches are the same values I look at when things get tough as an adult," remarks Huddleston, and to this day, he still gets together with his football buddies to argue over whose junior high football team was the best.

⁷² Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

They do not, however, dispute games from high school because by then they were all playing for Permian.⁷³

With a strong winning tradition established in the late 1960s under Mayfield's leadership, the Panthers were riding high, but the winds of change were beginning to pick up speed. By the 1980s, racial tensions were bubbling to the surface across the country and soon even small towns like Odessa that prided themselves on being separate from the overbearing thumb of the federal government would be forced to change their ways. It was during these times, that Odessa residents would hold even more tightly to the things that defined them and brought them success.

⁷³ Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston."

Chapter 2: “A Form of Educational Malpractice”
The Fight to Desegregate Odessa, Texas

In the sixties and seventies, during the social upheaval of freedom rides and cafeteria sit-ins and boycotts in Birmingham and marches on Selma, Odessa stood locked in time.⁷⁴

The landmark Supreme Court Case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* may have formally desegregated United States schools in 1954 after determining that “separate but equal educational facilities for racial minorities is inherently unequal,”⁷⁵ but it did not change the face of schools instantly. Despite its unanimous decision,⁷⁶ the Supreme Court case did not affect Ector County Independent School District (ECISD) students until 1982 when they were forced to desegregate the district after a twelve-year court battle.⁷⁷ It would take nearly two more decades before the district was released from their desegregation order;⁷⁸ thus, it took nearly half a century after *Brown v. Board* for Odessa to meet the requirements for integration.

Though school districts were required by *Brown* “to take all action necessary to convert to unitary systems”⁷⁹ beginning in 1968, Ector County was able to ignore the court’s wishes for nearly a decade and a half.⁸⁰ “It was a fight,”⁸¹ remembers Todd Vesely who came to Odessa shortly before ECISD’s desegregation order was implemented. “It was a war...nobody's

⁷⁴ Bissinger, *The Secret of Mojo*, 98.

⁷⁵ “*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1),” *Oyez*, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1940-1955/347us483>.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Tim Madigan and Elizabeth Simpson, “Preparations run smoothly, but some are wary. Officials say problems not very likely,” *Odessa American*, Sunday August 15, 1982, accessed January 4, 2019 from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

⁷⁸ Ruth Campbell, “ECISD Officially Released from Desegregation Order,” *Midland Reporter-Telegram*, June 5, 2010, <https://www.mrt.com/news/article/ECISD-officially-released-from-desegregation-order-7487834.php>.

⁷⁹ Unitary status refers to a school district which has become sufficiently desegregated, as opposed to dual status in which students are separated on the basis of race. For more, see: “Dual and Unitary Systems,” *U.S.A. Education Law*, accessed March 7, 2019, <http://usedulaw.com/261-dual-and-unitary-systems.html>.

⁸⁰ US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, *United States of America, v. Crucial, et al., West Odessa Parents for Quality Neighborhood Schools, v. Ector County Independent School District, Et Al.*, *Justia U.S. Law*, December 29, 1983, accessed March 6, 2019, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/722/1182/51407/>.

⁸¹ Vesely, “Interview with Todd Vesely.”

comfortable with change [and] racist change is really tough and then to be *told* that you're going to do it?"⁸² The image of a shotgun-wielding, libertarian-minded, pick-up-truck-driving West Texan is stereotypical, but it is grounded in an ounce of fact, according to Vesely. West Texans have a disinclination to being told what to do and when those orders concern biases as deeply held as ones regarding racial hierarchies, change becomes all the more difficult.

Permian High School was founded just five years after the *Brown* decision,⁸³ and yet, the student body was overwhelmingly made up of white students from its start. Long-time Permian educators like Martha Mitchell and Liz Faught, who is frequently referred to as the Queen of Mojo, remarked that the school was so homogenous prior to desegregation that they could recall by name the few students of color who attended Permian in the years prior.⁸⁴ Odessa has a railroad track running through the town and the neighborhoods south of the tracks had higher concentrations of Black and Latinx⁸⁵ populations compared to northside neighborhoods.⁸⁶ In 1970, the United States filed against ECISD on the basis of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as well as the Fourteenth Amendment. While the district reached a settlement with the United States soon after, it was not until 1981 that the district was forced to make good on their agreement. During the 1967-1968 school year, minority student enrollment in south Odessa schools was 87.4%.⁸⁷ In the 1980-1981 school year,⁸⁸ it increased to 96.4%,⁸⁹ proving that not

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ "Permian High School – Mojo History."

⁸⁴ Faught, Jones, and Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faught, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell."

⁸⁵ I use the term Latinx (pronounced "La-teen-ex") as a gender-neutral alternatives to the binary terms Latina and Latino. For a more in-depth explanation, see Josh Logue, "Latina/o/x," *Inside Higher Ed*, December 8, 2015, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/12/08/studentsadopt-gendernonspecific-term-latinx-be-more-inclusive>.

⁸⁶ US Court of Appeals, *United States of America*.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ For context, the percentage breakdown of whites and Blacks in Ector County in 1980 were 85.5% and 4.5% respectively. These numbers were calculated using 1980 census data retrieved from the Midland County Public Library.

⁸⁹ US Court of Appeals, *United States of America*.

only had the district failed to desegregate its schools, but the schools had also become more segregated over time, a fact which the court alleged had not been accidental but intentional.⁹⁰

Dr. Nate Hearne remembers that his junior high players had clearly inferior sports equipment when he was coaching at southside schools during the 1970s and 1980s; “When I went into coaching at Blackshear Junior High, I walked into the locker room [and it] was so dilapidated and run-down it could have been condemned.”⁹¹ Dr. Hearne would use his own funds to purchase basic equipment for his athletes “just to make them feel good about themselves” since the materials supplied by the school dated back to the fifties.⁹² Compared to the collegiate level stadium made available to the Odessa and Permian High School teams, the stadium for minority students was filled “with grass and rocks and broken seats.”⁹³

“Think about the political landscape during deseg, and the political landscape in ‘are we going to build a stadium?’” posits Vesely. “How much are we going to spend and where are we going to build it?”⁹⁴ To add insult to injury, Ratliff Stadium cost a whopping \$4.8 million to build. It had originally been slated to be built on the southside before land was donated elsewhere by local philanthropists after whom the facility, which boasts a full-time groundskeeper, is named.⁹⁵ The apathy school district leaders felt towards southside schools seemed obvious and deliberate. Dr. Hearne remarked that “no one thought about even wanting to fix” the southside’s facilities.⁹⁶

The local civil rights group CRUCIAL (Committee for Redress, Unity, Concern and Integrity at All Levels) intervened in 1981, alleging that ECISD had “continued to operate a

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

segregated, dual school system,” and that the district “had failed to fashion an educational program that would meet the demands of its minority students.”⁹⁷ The solution put forth by the court in 1982 enraged people on all sides: the judge decreed that the previous division of the town so that the eastern, western, and southern portions of the town fed students into Permian High School, Odessa High School, and Ector High School was inherently unequal. Prior to redistricting, Permian High’s enrollment was 99 percent white, Odessa’s 93 percent white, and Ector’s enrollment was 90 percent minority students.⁹⁸ Moving forward, Ector would be converted into a junior high school and its students would be bused to the other two major high schools, Odessa and Permian High Schools while various elementary schools were to become magnet schools over the next few years. From now on, “students living east of South Sam Houston Street [attended] Permian High, and those living west of that street [were] sent to Odessa High.”⁹⁹ A map of the pre- and post-desegregation district lines along with the population density for different racial groups in Odessa is included in Appendices B and C.

Dr. Greg Williams was in the middle of his sophomore year at Ector County High School, the southside minority high school, at the time that litigation between the district and community groups reignited. He would eventually graduate from Permian High School as a member of their 1983 class, their first integrated graduating class.¹⁰⁰ Though he remembers his years in segregated schooling, he was not cognizant at the time of whether there was a discrepancy between his quality of schooling and his northside peers. “You don’t know if others are getting new books and you’re getting the old books or if this is the way it is for everyone,”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ US Court of Appeals, *United States of America*.

⁹⁸ Bissinger, *The Secret of Mojo*, 99.

⁹⁹ Sheila Welsh, “Boycott: Residents protest desegregation,” *Odessa American*, undated, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

¹⁰⁰ Greg Williams, “Interview with Dr. Greg Williams on Desegregation and Ector High School Closing,” In-person interview by author, January 16, 2019, Odessa College, Odessa, TX.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*.

he explained, though he admits that in the years since it was brought to his attention that there were funding discrepancies. He likens the racial discrimination he experienced as a child to growing up in poverty; “you don't really know you're poor when everyone around you is relatively [of] the same status...as you get older though, as you get to high school and those things, you start to appreciate some things.”¹⁰²

Few people in Odessa were happy with the court's 1982 decision. The motivations for opposing the desegregation process differed among groups. Some white Odessans went so far as to mock the efforts of the activists who fought to achieve a better quality education for students of color, claiming their activism “agitated themselves right out of a school.”¹⁰³ Groups like CRUCIAL, primarily comprised of people from the southside, felt that while they wanted a “quality education for minority children,” this opportunity “should be made available to everyone on the same basis” rather than forcing students to travel far from home to receive an equitable education.¹⁰⁴ Minority-rights focused groups like CRUCIAL were outraged by the closing of Blackshear Elementary and Ector High School and claimed that “southside minority students are bearing the burden of desegregation.”¹⁰⁵ CRUCIAL was eventually joined by MALDEF (Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund) along with West Odessa Parents for Quality Neighborhoods and Schools in additional litigation regarding the closure of Ector High. While all three organizations wished to keep Ector High School open, CRUCIAL and MALDEF did so because they did not want the southside to be robbed of an important

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Simpson, "Ector plan not popular," *Odessa American*, April 15, 1982, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Simpson, "Integration Suit settled; ruling appealed," *Odessa American*, undated, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

cultural institution; whereas, Parents for Quality Neighborhoods and Schools were primarily motivated by the desire to keep southside children (of color) away from their (white) children.

Southside advocates worried their community was being robbed of a key cultural commonality. The residents of the southside were brought together by their shared experience of attending Ector High School and many grew up expecting that their children would graduate from their alma mater as well. “Ector was an unbelievable educational place,” recalls Vesely, “they had doctors, lawyers, NFL players, they had a great thing going and that’s another reason why it was such a battle.”¹⁰⁶ While Vesely wholeheartedly agrees that desegregation was obviously the correct move and should have happened decades earlier, he recognizes that the decision was not immediately positive for the southside: “There’s a downside to everything. They lost the sense of community. They lost the education that they had...they were taking care of their own, all of those things.”¹⁰⁷

Following the news of the court’s decision that Ector would close, alums, faculty, and students alike gathered in an impromptu vigil to honor Ector High one last time. At the vigil, “the crowd lit candles and followed the lead of a young female student carrying a cheerleader’s megaphone, and – perhaps for the last time – they chanted the Eagles’ fight songs.”¹⁰⁸ The attitude was somber though cautiously optimistic about the futures that awaited students at Odessa and Permian High. One Ector student, who would graduate with Dr. Williams as a member of the class of 1983, remarked that though he wasn’t sure how he and his peers would

¹⁰⁶ Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Simpson and M. Olaf Frandsen, “Students Honor Ector,” *Odessa American*, August 3, 1982, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

be treated at northside schools, he hoped they would get a fair shot despite the fact that “in ability those people there already have something on us.”¹⁰⁹

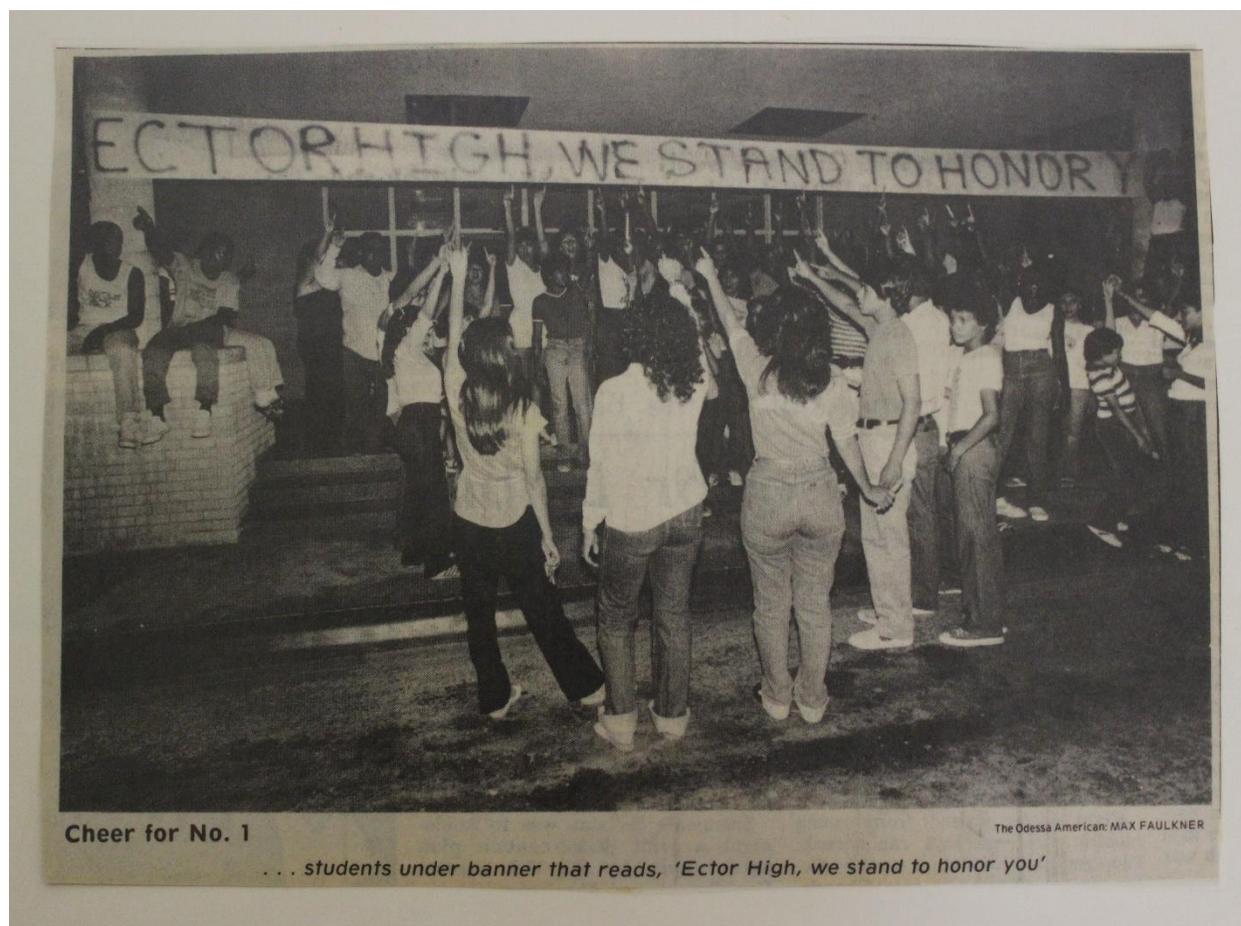


Image 2: Vigil held in honor of the closing of Ector High.¹¹⁰

White parents like my grandfather, Michael Miller, Sr., were forced to confront their internal biases regarding minority groups in the face of desegregation. Many white parents had lived in Odessa all of their lives and now had to watch their children’s education dramatically transform into something they had never experienced. Looking back on it, my grandfather remembers that “it was an adjustment. It was hard for me even as the parent even to accept

¹⁰⁹ Williams, "Interview with Greg Williams."

¹¹⁰ Max Faulkner, *Odessa American*, undated, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

equality. I wasn't a racist, but it was hard for me when [things would happen to my kids]. It was just the cultures all coming together and it wasn't easy."¹¹¹ Regarding the culture clash, my grandfather suggested that while it is "easy for me to sit here and say well those people haven't wanted to change but that's not really true. They really haven't had the opportunity or the education in most cases to change."¹¹² Soon enough, though, Odessa would be forced into an opportunity in which they would have to change.

The fear of impending culture clash permeated all of Odessa. The desegregation order would drastically change the makeup of each high school. Following the implementation of student busing, "Odessa High went from having 28 percent minority students to 38 percent" while Permian High increased its "minority attendance to 17 percent," a stark contrast to the previous single-digit statistics.¹¹³ As the first day of the 1982-1983 academic year drew closer, parents began to worry for the safety of their children. A bus boycott was organized by various westside and southside parents,¹¹⁴ who had students at Odessa High and what was formerly Ector High respectively. The boycott was planned to last for three days in which parents would not put their children on the buses to their newly assigned schools; instead, they would continue to send them to their immediate neighborhood schools.¹¹⁵ Additionally, the Ector County chapter of the Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA) requested additional security for the first day of school in anticipation of violence, with the president of the TSTA chapter going so far as to say that she feared things could escalate into a riot if left unchecked.¹¹⁶ Though the district declined

¹¹¹ Miller, "Interview with Michael Miller, Sr."

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Simpson, "Court-ordered busing begins peacefully in Ector County," *Odessa American*, Thursday, August 26, 1982, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

¹¹⁴ Sheila Welsh, "Boycott: Residents protest desegregation," *Odessa American*, undated, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Madigan and Simpson, "Preparations run smoothly."

the requests from the community for additional security calling it an unnecessary strain on taxpayer dollars, the fact that it was requested in the first place highlights the racialized fears of the community with some characterizing “trouble in the racially-mixed schools as inevitable.”¹¹⁷

As tensions rose within the community, the district made greater efforts to address citizens’ concerns. Odessa Mayor Bob Bryant declared August 22nd Human Relations Day and asked “Odessa ministers to encourage a 'peaceful transition' to the Ector County schools’ desegregation plan” during the Sunday services preceding the first day of school.¹¹⁸ Bryant maintained that desegregation was inevitable, and that the strong Christian faith of the community would ensure a peaceful transition. This request to the religious community was echoed by southside leaders like Lawrence Hurd, a minister and leader of CRUCIAL, who asked that ministers “encourage parents and students to ‘become prayerful about the integration situation.’”¹¹⁹ However, not all members of the community felt that school district leaders were listening to the concerns of people of color in Odessa, the demographic the policies were purported to help most directly.

Richard Alvarado, an Odessa attorney with experience in racial justice, was concerned by the minimal effort the district had taken to ensure a smooth transition for *all* students, arguing that “you can’t just say everybody will accept integration, whether they be white, Negro or Mexican.”¹²⁰ Similarly, Jim Moore, Ector High’s last principal (who was white), had little faith that the plan proposed by the district would have any tangible effects on racial interactions in the town. He argued that in Odessa there was “no integration...There [was] desegregation. There

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth Simpson, "Mayor asks cooperation in schools," *Odessa American*, undated, accessed January 4, 2019, from Ector County Independent School District Communications Department.

¹¹⁹ Madigan and Simpson, "Preparations run smoothly."

¹²⁰ Ibid.

[was] no integration in this community, the same as any community in America.”¹²¹ Moore’s comment reflects the key issue that is missing from Bissinger’s analysis of Odessa in *Friday Night Lights*; the racism of Odessa was only exceptional for the time because the town’s white residents had been permitted to perpetuate it for so long.

Alvarado, like many other people of color in the Odessa community felt that “people in authority [closed] their eyes to the feelings of minorities.”¹²² The closing of Ector was arguably most upsetting to the very students who were supposed to benefit most from the desegregation process. Most of Odessa’s black residents lived on the southside and thus, the student population of Ector High was “virtually all black.”¹²³ Many who lived on the southside felt that the loss of their high school would result in the loss of their community. Southside resident Arturo Flores commented to the *Odessa American*, following the announcement of the district’s education plan, that “once you close Ector High School, you close the heart of the community.”¹²⁴ The role of high schools in community building is crucial to the culture of Odessa, and nowhere is it more evident than in the fervor surrounding the cult of West Texas high school football, which “runs through the very fabric of our being in West Texas.”¹²⁵ Furthermore, high school football games, which were held at Ratliff Stadium beginning after its construction in 1982, constituted “the largest community gatherings in Odessa.”¹²⁶ Big-ticket rivalries like the Odessa-Permian or Permian-Midland Lee¹²⁷ games could sometimes have crowds made of “up to 20% of the population of the town.”¹²⁸ When remembering the stadium, Vesely, who managed the Ratliff for

¹²¹ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 98.

¹²² Madigan and Simpson, "Preparations run smoothly."

¹²³ Simpson, "Court-ordered busing begins peacefully in Ector County."

¹²⁴ Simpson, "Ector plan not popular."

¹²⁵ Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Robert E. Lee High School, or Midland Lee, is the second public high school in Midland and has had a fierce rivalry with Permian whereas Midland High School does not.

¹²⁸ Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

ten years through his role as ECISD's Athletic Director, maintains that "unless you've walked out onto the field or been in the stands to see and be a part of that," you can't fully understand what "a great celebration of our community" high school football is in West Texas.¹²⁹

Someone less familiar with the near-religious zeal of Mojo fans may wonder why the school district implemented such a complicated redistricting plan rather than busing students to every school in Odessa, but to any West Texan, the answer is obvious: high school football. Lucius D. Bunton was school board president for ECISD in 1970 when the desegregation suit was first brought by the U.S. Attorney General.¹³⁰ When asked why the district didn't make things easier for themselves when faced with the task of integration, he explained, that doing so "would have destroyed the football program, and that's why we didn't do it."¹³¹

This debate over redistricting's effects on football continues today, and as recent as 2007 southside advocates have been fighting for Ector Junior High, now Ector College Prep Success Academy, to be converted back to a high school in light of rising student populations at both Odessa and Permian High school.¹³² Advocates argue that doing so would be an obvious solution to overcrowding in the high schools and would furthermore fulfill "a promise made to the southside community"¹³³ so many years ago. Though student populations at each of the high schools continue to rise in light of the currently booming oil economy, the district has remained steadfast in its opposition to opening a third high school in large part because of the power of those Friday night lights. However, Vesely points out that to do so would resegregate the district. If the district ever wants to have a high school on the southside again, "they deserve to have a

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 99.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² David J. Lee, "The Case of Ector Lives On," *Odessa American*, March 28, 2007, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.oaoa.com/news/education/article_61bae9a9-07dc-5beb-a8a7-db52ebd615b1.html.

¹³³ Ibid.

new high school, it needs to be a pretty shiny high school,” rather than another “retooled job” like the district did with Ector.¹³⁴

Dr. Williams is currently the president of Odessa College, a community college that has become one of the best two-year colleges in the state in large part due to his vision for the college. As an educator today, Williams cannot believe what the district put its students through in 1982; “it was a form of malpractice. I wouldn't want to ever do that to anyone... You give them a transition time. It was... educational malpractice to do that to us at the time.”¹³⁵ His chief objection to the plan to this day is the speed with which the district forced its students to transform their lives without any care for how it would impact the students on a personal, academic, or social level. Williams feels lucky enough because his transition was relatively smooth due to his academic success and his ability to join Permian High’s basketball team seamlessly. Williams was one of the top ten students at Ector High and joined the Permian Senate, the elected student government body, which allowed him to become more deeply integrated into the Permian community than some of his peers. “I think my experience probably is not traditional,” Williams admits, “because of what I had done in school and where I was and the way I'd thought about things.”¹³⁶

Williams played both football and basketball at Ector, the latter of which actually had a higher number of championships than Permian football at the time, but when the time came for him to switch to Permian High, he decided to play basketball only. He felt that his relationship with his basketball coach was unique compared to other Ector transfers, something Williams attributes to his own positive attitude. It was not until after Williams graduated from Permian

¹³⁴ Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

¹³⁵ Williams, "Interview with Dr. Greg Williams."

¹³⁶ Ibid.

High School that their basketball team was able to fully reap the rewards of Ector's athletes, which Williams believes may be a result of the "tough transition" that results "when you're fusing two teams."¹³⁷ Williams never felt, because of his personal relationship with the basketball coach, that he was ever passed up for opportunities because he had not been brought up in the Permian tradition, but other coaches from this time have different views. "I always say this," admits Dr. Hearne, "if you were going to beat the white athlete out you better be head to shoulder better than he is because if you weren't you weren't going to play."¹³⁸ Hearne attributes this sad truth to the "the relationship that the coaches had" with white players and their families that was built over the years through the segregated feeder system.

Despite the immense controversy surrounding the district's desegregation plan, enthusiasm for the bus boycott fizzled out before the semester even started; the first day of school went off without a hitch, save for some delays resulting from confusion regarding the new bus routes.¹³⁹ This decade during which the school district was finally forced to desegregate is referred to on Permian High School's website as "an all-time low"¹⁴⁰ for the school due to external factors like the oil depression and political turmoil nationwide. There is notably no mention in this decade of Permian's history to the influx of new students who would irrevocably change the face of Permian High School. Additionally, *The Secret of Mojo*, a comprehensive history of the Permian football team through 1985, neglects to mention desegregation once in its entirety and all of the football players featured in the book are white even though three of the seasons covered, including a state championship, were after integration.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

¹³⁹ Madigan and Simpson, "Preparations run smoothly."

¹⁴⁰ "Permian High School – Mojo History."

The racial tensions in Odessa were clear. As Dr. Hearne described it, “those that had it in them didn't mind telling you” but there were those more discrete with their biases and “you're always going to have the folks who might feel that [way, but] they're not going to say it and they're not going to show you.”¹⁴¹ Hearne is also quick to note, however, that these attitudes cannot be understood without the context of desegregation. This crucial context sets the stage for the 1988 football season that Bissinger comes to Odessa to memorialize and it is an aspect that Bissinger fails to describe in depth, choosing instead to focus on sensationalizing the dramas between Black and white players without examining its roots.

¹⁴¹ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

Chapter 3: “Where’s That Book Writer Dude?”
The Process and Impact of Publishing *Friday Night Lights*

*The idea had been rattling in my head since I was thirteen years old, the idea of high school sports keeping a town together, keeping it alive. So I went in search of the Friday night lights, to find a town where they brightly blazed that lay beyond the East Coast and the grip of the big cities, a place that people had to pull out an atlas to find and had seen better times, a real America.*¹⁴²

In 1988, Permian High School head football coach Gary Gaines was approached by a journalist from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Bissinger told Gaines and the rest of the Permian High and ECISD leadership that he wanted to write the *Hoosiers* of football, “a portrait of the way in which high school sports can bring a community together.”¹⁴³ According to Dr. Nate Hearne, who was an assistant football coach for the Panthers at the time, Gaines never wanted Bissinger to write the book in the first place. At the time, Hearne explains, “we were coming out of a very dismal season. There was a lot happening. We needed to get focused and having somebody write a book in the middle of that was not something that he cherished, and he told him [that.]”¹⁴⁴

Coach Gaines took over as head coach from John Wilkens, A.G.,¹⁴⁵ in 1986, a year in which the team had eight wins and two losses the entire season. “I mean two games, anywhere else, at any other school, 8-2? That's a good, good, year, but at Permian?” Hearne laughs recalling that the particularly aggrieved members of the community put fifty for-sale signs in Coach Gaines’ yard at the end of the ’86 season,¹⁴⁶ to signal “that maybe it would be best for everyone if he just got the hell out of town.”¹⁴⁷ It was not the first time a Permian football coach

¹⁴² Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, xi.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 363.

¹⁴⁴ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

¹⁴⁵ Wilkens, who would later go on to be the athletic director for ECISD, was so beloved by Permian fans that they came to refer to him as “A.G.,” or, “Almost God.” See McCally, *The Secret of Mojo*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

¹⁴⁷ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 20.

would face threats from the community because of the team's performance, nor would it be the last.

At the urging of the superintendent and the school board, Bissinger was eventually permitted to join the Panthers for a season in order to write his book.¹⁴⁸ Liz Faught, who was the Permian High School registrar in 1988, recalls how much freedom Bissinger was given during his research process. "He was allowed to go into any classroom, see any party, [he] rode the bus...[that] the kids went to the games," recounts Faught explaining that at any event "that was going on in Permian" you were sure to see Buzz.¹⁴⁹ However, other faculty who were at Permian High School at the time are quick to point out that the obsession Bissinger portrays surrounding the football team is hyperbolic at times.

Martha Mitchell, then the head women's gymnastics coach, explains that "if you focus on the book, it sounds like...him being here was all that was going on," when the reality was that, "we all forgot he was around and then you'd see him and go oh yeah, that's him."¹⁵⁰ Part of Bissinger's success can be attributed to his ability to slip seamlessly into the Permian community. "I think he came out with a great plan," mused Huddleston regarding how West Texans' inclination to Southern hospitality played in Bissinger's favor; "but the one thing about West Texas I don't think he knew was that we're going to welcome you with open arms, but if you[slap] me in the face, well now you're going to see the other side of West Texas."¹⁵¹ When trying to explain how Bissinger was able to achieve such intimate knowledge of the team's inner workings, Alan Jones, who teaches a sports literature course for Permian seniors featuring

¹⁴⁸ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

¹⁴⁹ Faught, Jones, and Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faught, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell."

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston."

Friday Night Lights, admits that “a lot of the people just forgot he was there about half the time. He was just in the shadows, in the background.”¹⁵²

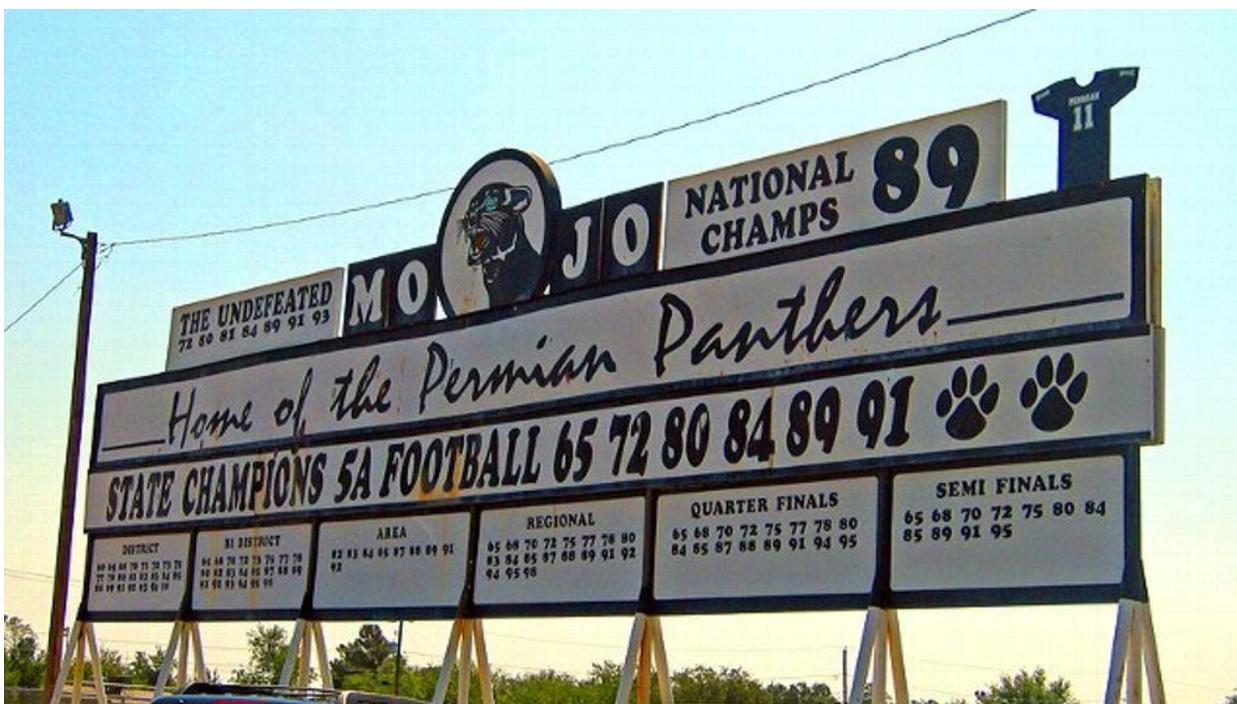


Image 3: Scoreboard of Permian Panthers football team.¹⁵³

Some people, including Doak Huddleston, thought that it was about time that someone wrote a book to celebrate the spirit of Mojo.¹⁵⁴ Huddleston, whose junior and senior year seasons earned the coveted achievement of having their years memorialized for future Panthers on the scoreboard in the parking lot,¹⁵⁵ understands and appreciates more today what the Permian football coaches were trying to impart on their athletes than ever before. Huddleston and his peers, like every other Permian football player who had come before them and would come after them, knew that there was a “standard of excellence and you had to sacrifice” if you wanted to survive. The pride in Permian football, something that is conditioned into eastside students from

¹⁵² Faight, Jones, and Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faight, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell."

¹⁵³ Buzz Bissinger, "Where Is Boobie Miles Now?" *Grantland*, April 20, 2012, accessed April 7, 2019, <http://grantland.com/features/an-excerpt-buzz-bissinger-friday-night-lights/>.

¹⁵⁴ Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston."

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

the moment they can fit into their first Panthers jersey, is what Huddleston believes is key to the teams' continued success over the decades. Having taught in various school districts over the course of his career, he has realized through conversations with other coaches who have left Permian that there is something distinctly different about coaching that makes wearing the Permian name mean something special. That fervor continues to this day with students from more recent seasons admitting in hushed and revered tones, "I've wanted to play for Permian since I played pee-wee. I just get chills thinking about it."¹⁵⁶

Not all educators at Permian High were as excited about Bissinger's project and were skeptical of his motives from the start. On one of his first visits to Permian, an assistant principal gave him a tour of the campus and introduced him to various teachers and staff members, one of whom was Todd Vesely, who at that point managed the in-school suspension reassignment room on top of his gymnastics coaching duties. After hearing that Bissinger had come all the way from Philadelphia to write a book about Texas high school football, Vesely's "response was, well, it's nice to meet you. I'm going back to work."¹⁵⁷ He then, "closed the door because I knew what [Permian] looked like from the outside and until you are in the inside and see those kids and the way they develop and the work that they do, it's hard to understand."¹⁵⁸ Vesely had had his own less than favorable impressions of the enthusiasm for Permian football when he came to Odessa and as such he doubted the intentions of someone with a vested financial interest in how the town was portrayed. "The goal wasn't to [right] some wrong," according to Vesely, "the goal

¹⁵⁶ Jeff Miller, "Gaines Returns to Mojo Land," *ESPN*, June 2, 2009, accessed April 7, 2019, <http://www.espn.com/highschool/rise/football/news/story?id=4223015>.

¹⁵⁷ Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

was to make money. He's a writer. He was writing. That's all. I think it was no more, no less than to sell a subject that was going to make it work.”¹⁵⁹

Nate Hearne had a similar impression of Bissinger when he met him, though their interactions were far more numerous due to his position with the football team. Hearne recalls his first interview with Bissinger for the book very clearly: “[Bissinger] wanted to know about the racial issues and I said to myself, he's digging for something explosive and he wants to get that from me.”¹⁶⁰ Because Hearne recognized that Bissinger’s motives were perhaps not as pure as he purported them to be, he made a conscious decision not to be the source that Bissinger used to shape his narrative. Hearne chose this not because he did not agree with Bissinger’s assessment of the racism in Odessa, but because he was concerned about the potential impact on his career and his family. “No matter how I felt or what was going on,” recalls Hearne, “I wasn't going to give that to him.”¹⁶¹ This is not to say that Hearne believed Bissinger’s motives were purely innocent or strictly misleading. Rather, he thought that once Bissinger arrived and saw the racial tensions and ugly side of Odessa on top of the power of Mojo football and the richness of their traditions, “He saw dollar signs...he didn't see kids. He wasn't loyal to them, he wasn't loyal to anybody...a lot of coaches didn't see that right off the bat but because of my background and where I came from and the things that had happened to me and the questions he was asking me, I go oh, this is not going to be the book that [he’s pitching us.]”¹⁶²

Mention *Friday Night Lights* in Odessa today, and you will be met with a range of reactions. Bissinger’s book represents a double-edged sword for the town of Odessa. It brought a spotlight on the town’s most treasured accomplishment, but in doing so shined a light into its

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

darkest and most embarrassing crevices. The book was released in September of 1990 to huge commercial success.¹⁶³ It attracted resounding critical acclaim, became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller¹⁶⁴ and remained on the list for over three months.¹⁶⁵ Twenty-five years after its initial release, the book still sold over five thousand copies every month, an achievement that not even those involved in the book's production anticipated.¹⁶⁶ The book eventually spawned a movie filmed in Ratliff Stadium and on Permian High's campus in 2004, starring significant actors like Billy Bob Thornton, Connie Britton, and Tim McGraw.¹⁶⁷ In addition, an award-winning television show emerged that ran for five seasons in which Britton would reprise her role as the coach's wife alongside Kyle Chandler.¹⁶⁸ Despite the floods of praise directed at Bissinger following the book's release, the town of Odessa was far less appreciative of his interpretation.

Just a few weeks after the book's release, Bissinger was expected to return to Odessa for a book signing with the people with whom he and his family spent a year of their lives.¹⁶⁹ However, Bissinger's triumphant return was not to be. The author was forced to cancel his visits back to Odessa following death threats and warnings that he would face "bodily harm" should he return to West Texas.¹⁷⁰ One local bookstore owner, Eric Smalley, who received multiple calls warning what fate would befall Bissinger should he show his face again, believed that Bissinger

¹⁶³ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 362.

¹⁶⁴ Buzz Bissinger, "About Buzz," Accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.buzzbissinger.com/books/>.

¹⁶⁵ The *New York Times* Book Review, "BEST SELLERS: December 30, 1990," *The New York Times*, December 30, 1990, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/30/books/best-sellers-december-30-1990.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Da Capo Press, "Friday Night Lights: 25 years later," YouTube video, 5:02, Posted [August 2015], accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mj2SE077eQ>.

¹⁶⁷ A. O. Scott, "Glory Days on the Gridiron: Young Manhood, Texas Style," *The New York Times*, October 08, 2004, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/08/movies/glory-days-on-the-gridiron-young-manhood-texas-style.html>.

¹⁶⁸ Sarah Hughes, "Why Friday Night Lights Is One of the Best US Shows of Recent Years," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2012, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/feb/13/friday-night-lights>.

¹⁶⁹ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 362.

¹⁷⁰ Roger Cohen, "Author Cancels Trip After Threats in Texas," *The New York Times*, September 25, 1990, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/25/us/author-cancels-trip-after-threats-in-texas.html>.

made the right choice to stay away given that “people here took the book as an attack on their values.”¹⁷¹ Some Odessans were embarrassed by these outspoken few who directed threats towards Bissinger. When he heard about the threats, Doak Huddleston thought these folks were “acting just like he portrayed [them],” and the better move would have been to welcome him back with open arms.¹⁷² Molly Ivins, another resident ashamed of the behavior of select Odessans, said to *60 Minutes* that the rage felt by West Texans might be drummed up to a matter of cultural difference:

Texans tend to be more defensive about their image than folks in other places. It’s partly because we do have a national reputation for being a bunch of yahoos and hicks and what-have-you, and of course you get tired of that. You know, it is funny to me though, whenever it is suggested by an outsider that we may be harboring just a few pinheaded, half-civilized dorkarados in this state, damned if half of us don’t react by acting exactly like pinheaded, half-civilized dorkarados.¹⁷³

Part of the animosity towards Bissinger was sparked by the fact that the book’s release coincided with news that the Permian Panthers would not be allowed to compete in the playoffs due to allegations that they were “conducting supervised workouts before the start of the season,” an allegation that was brought forward by Odessa High head football coach Jerry Taylor.¹⁷⁴ In fact, some Permian diehards blame Bissinger for bringing about a heightened level of scrutiny that follows the Panthers in everything they do. For example, current Permian High English teacher Alan Jones believes that the University Interscholastic League (UIL) “is always looking to get Permian.”¹⁷⁵ Jones recalls in 1993 when the Panthers’ entire season, which was on track to achieve another state championship, was wiped by the University Interscholastic League

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston."

¹⁷³ Don Hewitt, prod., "Friday Night Lights," In *60 Minutes*, CBS, November 25, 1990, accessed April 7, 2019, https://www.cbs.com/shows/60_minutes/video/f4kmXm7wM9_VOBOpKF6k0hjNHei_C9iO/friday-night-lights/.

¹⁷⁴ Faught, Jones, Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faught, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell."

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

due to a young man who continued to play despite being ineligible according to UIL guidelines. When a team in Plano, Texas committed the same violation, however, UIL “reprimanded them and that player couldn’t play,” while the rest of the team was permitted to finish the season.¹⁷⁶

Shortly after the book was released, a crew from *60 Minutes* came to film the long-awaited Permian-OHS game in November of 1990, the same season in which Odessa had blown the whistle on Permian High. Nate Hearne recalls one young man on the team who came to him the day before the game after his own father had told him that if they lost the game, he didn’t really deserve to live.¹⁷⁷ Though tensions were undeniably high, the television crew might have been disappointed by the lack of controversy surrounding the game. The Panthers went on to beat OHS for the 27th season in a row, a record that would continue until 1997. The scars left behind by Bissinger and his words, however, are clear.

One mother of a Permian player was outraged by Bissinger’s portrayal of the town: “Buzz was in my home, I served him coffee, I served him cake and I feel like he definitely betrayed all of us...he told us what he was going to write about and then he turns around and he only shows the negative side.”¹⁷⁸ While the mother did not allege that Bissinger had fabricated details about his time in Odessa and that “there was truth in [the book],” she felt that “for every negative point he gave, he could have given a positive point and he chose not to do that.”¹⁷⁹ That same week, another woman called the local radio station during the *60 Minutes*’ visit, focusing her ire on CBS itself: “to the CBS news crew, clean up your streets, and the drugs and the thugs

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

¹⁷⁸ Hewitt, prod., "Friday Night Lights."

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

and crime off of them, then you can come down here. But until then, mind your own business!”¹⁸⁰

The hatred directed towards Bissinger is almost farcical in nature. The *60 Minutes* piece with Ivins emphasized on the similarities between this award-winning author and Salman Rushdie. He published *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 and the novel was condemned by much of the Muslim world for satirizing their faith. Rushdie even received death threats from the state of Iran.¹⁸¹ Ivins admitted that Odessa had “gone and created a kind of small-town...Salman Rushdie, poor fella’s practically in hiding, getting death threats because he wrote a book. It’s pretty embarrassing actually.”¹⁸² The commonalities between the two authors do not stop there, however, in Ivins estimation as “Salman Rushdie got his death threats for insulting and committing heresy against one of the world’s great religions...[and] I think football is maybe one of the world’s great religions.”¹⁸³

A particular sticking point for many Panthers fans was the way Bissinger cast aside Dr. Hearne and his contributions to the team. However, from the perspective of every other educator who came into contact with Hearne, this description was a gross understatement of Hearne’s commitment to the team and to Permian High. Perhaps it is because of Hearne’s resistance to Bissinger’s inquiries that Dr. Hearne’s role in Permian football is so minimized in Bissinger’s final work: “Nate Hearne, a black junior varsity football coach whose primary responsibility was to handle the black players on the team, herded [Boobie] into the trainer’s room to try to calm him down, to somehow salvage what little of his psyche hadn’t already been destroyed.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Patricia Bauer, Gabrielle Mander, and Carola Campbell, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 8th ed., s.v. “The Satanic Verses,” Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., November 6, 2018, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Satanic-Verses>.

¹⁸² Hewitt, prod., “Friday Night Lights.”

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights*, 17.

“That line kind of hit me wrong,” remembers Doak Huddleston, who considers Dr. Hearne to be one of his coaching mentors. “I said you don't know Nate Hearne...he wasn't just a token African American coach.”¹⁸⁵ Alan Jones, who came to Permian High School after Dr. Hearne had transitioned into an assistant principal position, echoed Huddleston’s sentiment saying that, “this man isn't here just for the black kids, this man is here for Permian.”¹⁸⁶ When recalling his time working alongside Dr. Hearne, Huddleston became especially impassioned: “There were days out there listening to him talk about all kids, all kids...because he *knew* kids and he is a good coach and that part of that book upset me because I like Nate. He's a good Christian man...His expectations for all kids was high, in the classroom, outside of the classroom, personal life and on the football field, he had a high expectation for how you should behave.”¹⁸⁷

Hearne would later go on to write his own memoir of his life at Permian titled *Friday Night Lights: Untold Stories from Behind the Lights*, which gave more of his perspective regarding Bissinger’s portrayal of the town in addition to greater context as to his own background and how he came to Permian football. Despite writing a book discussing race relations in Odessa in the 1980s, Bissinger neglects to fully tap into the experiences of Hearne, a man who underwent desegregation in Andrews, Texas in the 1960s when he was in the third grade before coming to Odessa, Texas as an adult and witnessing students of color forced through the same transition he faced as a child.¹⁸⁸ Hearne was the first Black coach ever hired at Permian High School, and he was chosen for the position despite never having applied. Gary Gaines recognized that Permian football had a race problem and chose to use his power as head

¹⁸⁵ Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston."

¹⁸⁶ Faught, Jones, Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faught, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell."

¹⁸⁷ Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston."

¹⁸⁸ Hearne, "Interview with Dr. Nate Hearne."

football coach to bring in a mentor for student athletes of color, someone who could better relate to the students' lived experiences in a way that a white coach could not. Though Hearne was gifted in his interactions with all students, it is undeniable that he did have a special relationship with the athletes of color, the most prominent of which in the book is Boobie Miles.

Unlike some of the other coaches at Permian High, Nate Hearne was intimately aware of the traumas that had brought Boobie to this point in his life. Hearne recalled: "Boobie was abused and he had lots of challenges in his life, I knew that about him...he was very emotionally sensitive, he didn't trust a lot of us, he didn't care if you were the coach or not." Because he developed a relationship built on trust with young Miles, Hearne thinks this might explain why Bissinger dismissed his role in Permian football as just being "the handler of the Blacks."¹⁸⁹ In actuality, the relationship he had with young Miles came from the urging of his uncle, L.V. Miles, who raised him and nurtured his talent in football. "I knew his home life. Most of the coaches didn't. I knew he was in foster care. I knew he'd been abused because his uncle told me and you grow up in an environment like that and it's hard overcoming that as a child, those formative years...that never goes away."¹⁹⁰ Because of the traumas of his past coupled with his immense talent in football, Hearne took special care to try and guide this young man towards a brighter future, which in Boobie's eyes came crumbling down in the fall of his senior year.

The intimate moment between Boobie and Hearne that Bissinger captures early on in his book is one that Hearne remembers vividly. In taking Boobie aside, Hearne was trying "to save that emotional upheaval that he was going through. I could see how devastating it was for him, first of all to get hurt, secondly to have someone replace him that was phenomenal. To sit there on the sideline and watch that was like sticking a dagger through his heart every day." The

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

sentiment that Hearne wanted Boobie to take from this moment was that his injury did not have to dictate his future: "I wanted him to understand that, because he had such a gift that if he worked in rehab and got it back, he was better than 90% of the players on our team and a lot of teams even if he wasn't at 100%...but he just couldn't. The pain was just so great, he couldn't come out of it, he couldn't see over it and beyond it. He couldn't see that future thing of him being whole again. He was fractured."¹⁹¹

Boobie's athletic failures came at a crucial crossroad in his life; his athletic skills had brought him a multitude of opportunities that would be possible only if he could score sufficiently on his SATs. Boobie struggled in his courses and because of his learning disabilities, he received additional help with his studies. Ivonne Miller, a white woman, was the department chair at the time and would tutor Boobie outside of class to try and help him get a minimum score on his SATs so that he could potentially use a football scholarship to get out of Odessa.¹⁹² After his injury, however, Boobie's academic performance waned, something that he feels was because teachers no longer adjusted his grades to ensure he remained eligible to play for Permian,¹⁹³ though this has not been corroborated. The effect of Bissinger's work on Boobie's life is undeniable in the eyes of those who tried to help him. Huddleston felt that the success of *Friday Night Lights* might have added a level of pressure that Boobie did not need in his life: "He became a star and all the people were looking at him and a couple of years after the book Boobie got into some trouble. And I think [the book] kinda hurt him...there was a lot of limelight thrust on a young man that might not have been ready to handle it."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

¹⁹³ Bissinger, *After Friday Night Lights*, 20.

¹⁹⁴ Huddleston, "Interview with Doak Huddleston."

One of the key messages of Bissinger's book was that Permian football was detrimental to the lives of its players because of the damage inflicted by the town's emphasis on high school football. What Bissinger fails to acknowledge, however, is that in publishing *Friday Night Lights* he is just as guilty of using Permian High School students for his own aims. In the *60 Minutes* piece, Bissinger was given a chance to speak despite being run out of town by Odessans. In this interview, he remarks, "I feel very strongly that these kids are being used...used, perhaps unconsciously, by adults."¹⁹⁵ Bissinger not only exploited the town of Odessa, but he also exploited teenagers whose world was only as big as Ratliff Stadium and he used their blind love of a sport to advance his financial interests. The pain of *Friday Night Lights* would not just stay with Odessa for the rest of time; it came to haunt Bissinger for decades as well.

¹⁹⁵ Hewitt, prod., "Friday Night Lights."

Conclusion

Bissinger appears in the years since *Friday Night Lights*' publication to have acknowledged some of the pain he may have caused Boobie and others in Odessa. In 2012, twenty-two years after the book's initial release, Bissinger published an eBook on Amazon titled *After Friday Night Lights*.¹⁹⁶ Though the book was pulled from Amazon within a few days of publication due to poor reception and sales,¹⁹⁷ Alan Jones obtained an advance copy he was willing to share with me due to my research. In the eBook, Bissinger describes his relationship with Boobie Miles in the years following *Friday Night Lights*. He writes that he knew he would never abandon Boobie from the moment he blew out his ACL.¹⁹⁸ His relationship with Boobie over the years was strained, with Bissinger giving Boobie tens of thousands of dollars to help him try and get back on his feet. Yet, even as Bissinger laments his sorrow for the way Boobie's life has transpired, he is quickly cruel in his dismissal of Boobie's experiences asking him during one of their reunions, "Why is your life so fucked up all the time?"¹⁹⁹

Bissinger writes in his latest attempt to profit off of the Permian name, that "Boobie and I are both haunted by *Friday Night Lights*, never forgetting the wonder of it but also just wishing that it would just let us go."²⁰⁰ However, Bissinger neglects to recognize that he is partially responsible for the pressure that may have pushed Boobie to his breaking point, sending him on a trajectory that shaped the rest of his life. Bissinger gained the trust of West Texans, teenagers and adults alike, and then transformed their experiences into a hyperbolic version of the town for his personal profit. His characterization of Permian football is not a fair assessment of the

¹⁹⁶ Buzz Bissinger, *After Friday Night Lights*, (San Francisco: Byliner Inc., 2012).

¹⁹⁷ Faught, Jones, Mitchell, "Interview with Liz Faught, Allen Jones, and Martha Mitchell."

¹⁹⁸ Bissinger, *After Friday Night Lights*, 8.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

program and of the town at large, but not because he brings up its darkness. Discussing racism in athletics, including the stain it leaves when it affects young men and women, is one of vital importance that should be treated with the sensitivity and seriousness that it deserves. Rather, Bissinger fails because he only addresses that one aspect of the town. His broad-brush portrayal centered on an exaggerated version of the actions of what was at most twenty percent of the town. At its height of popularity, only twenty percent of the town's residents attended Permian football games and only for big-ticket rivalry games, like Odessa-Permian and Permian-Midland Lee. While that in and of itself is incredible, because no other event brought together that many members of the community to cheer for one common goal, it is still a minority of the town that participated. Indeed, there are far more members of West Texas who are immune to Mojo Mania than are those who have succumbed to its allure.

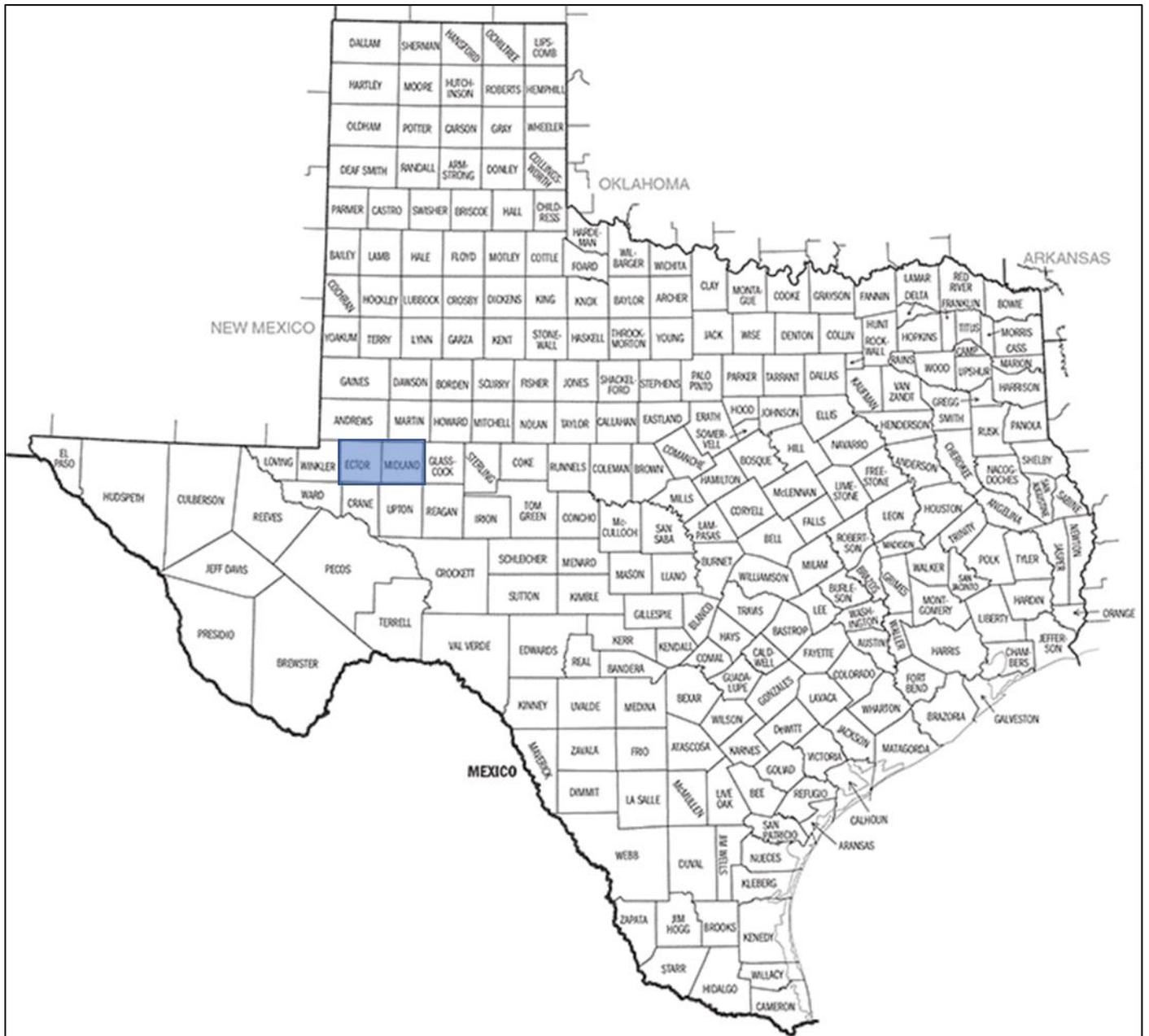
The ego of the town was so shot by the publication of *Friday Night Lights* that Permian football was never quite the same again not only because of Bissinger's words but also because the Permian program, much like Odessa, became a victim of the changing times. A recurring theme in my interviews with members of the extended Permian family was that regardless of Bissinger's work, the fervor around Mojo football was not one that could have persisted in the face of a changing world. Unlike in the past when the only alternatives to the Friday night game were going to the movies²⁰¹ or watching one of the couple dozen channels on television, people today are pulled in any number of directions. As a result, the towns of Odessa and Midland have changed and now there are ways to amuse yourself that do not involve making the trip to Ratliff Stadium.

²⁰¹ A ticket to a football game at Ratliff Stadium at this time was actually nearly twice as expensive as the average movie ticket during this time, which ranged from \$2.69 to \$4.11 between 1980 and 1989. See IMDB, "Adjusting for Movie Ticket Price Inflation," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/about/adjuster.htm>.

The presence of darkness does not diminish the fact that Permian can be a force for good; in fact, this makes it all the more imperative to have these crucial conversations about areas in which Permian may be failing. The minute that the program begins to act in ways that are not beneficial to its members is the moment it must be questioned because at the end of the day, it is the lives of young people that are most affected. *Friday Night Lights* could have been a moment for self-reflection and a chance for Odessa to examine the ways that its culture could adversely affect the lives of its residents. However, the words of Bissinger elicited such embarrassment and the people of Odessa felt so betrayed by Bissinger that they turned in the opposite direction out of shame. Rather than using the book as a moment to identify what makes Permian football great and what they could do as a program to better serve the needs of their students and their communities, ECISD responded by reducing funding for athletics dramatically without considering other alternatives.²⁰² In one fell swoop, Bissinger took away the pride of an entire community and out of that shame, the town could not grow and move forward; rather they shrunk backwards out of the glare of the Friday-night lights.

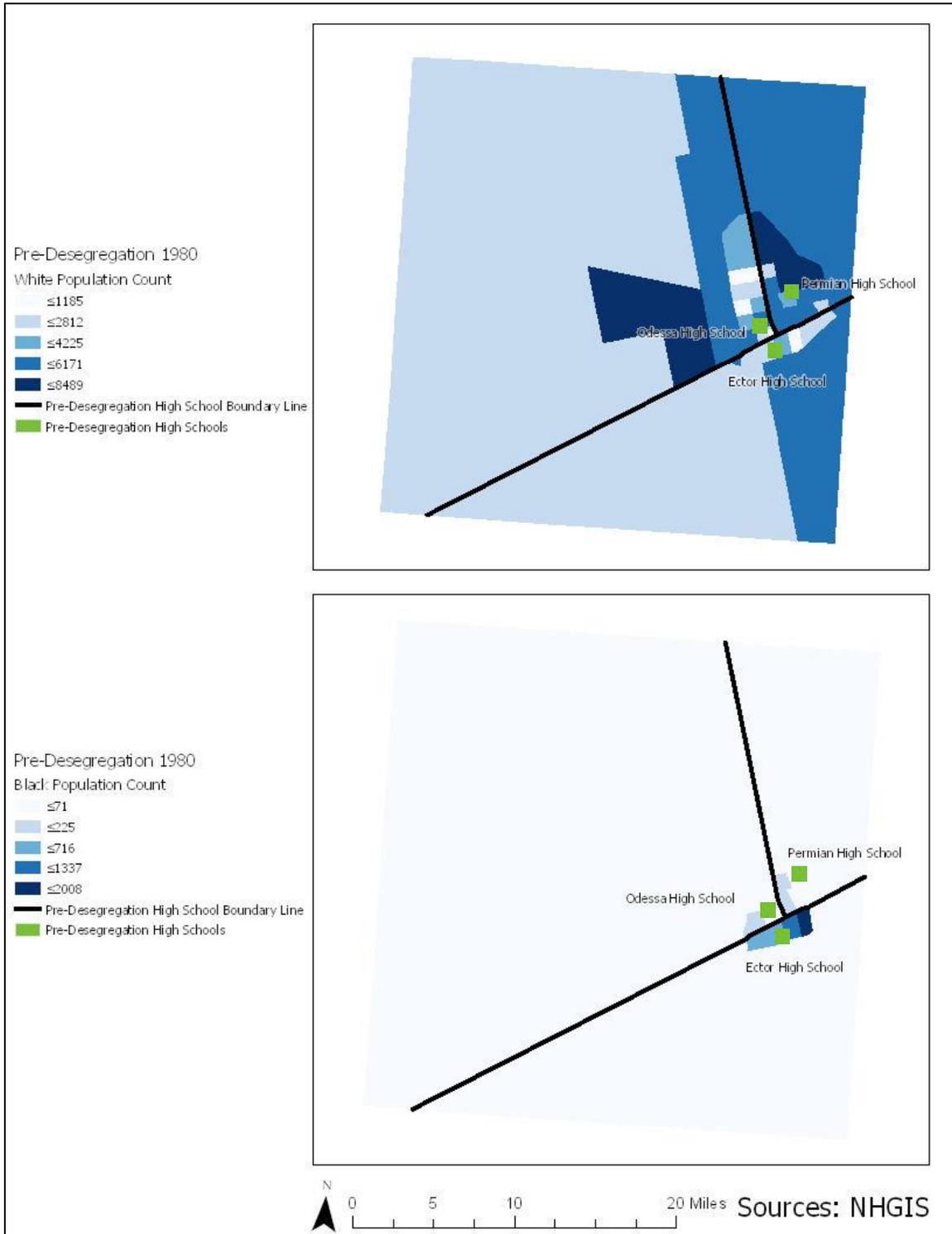
²⁰² Vesely, "Interview with Todd Vesely."

Appendix A: A map of the 254 counties in Texas. Ector and Midland counties where Odessa and Midland, Texas respectively are located are highlighted²⁰³



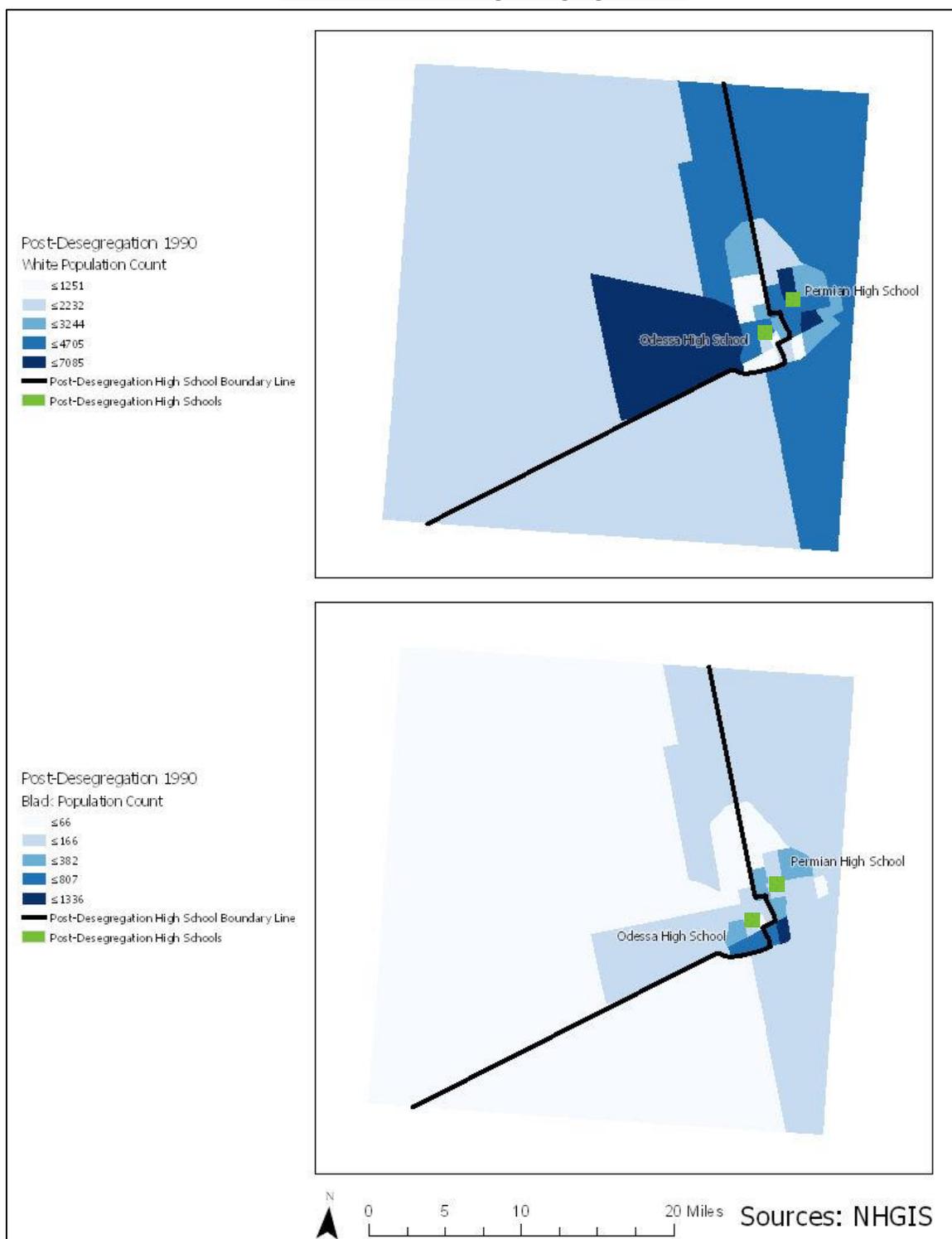
²⁰³ Thomas L. Brunell, "One Person, One Vote Standard in Redistricting: The Uses and Abuses of Population Deviations in Legislative Redistricting," 62 *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 1057 (2012), <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/caselrev/vol62/iss4/8>

Appendix B: The 1980 racial makeup of Ector County with an overlay of the high school boundaries prior to desegregation²⁰⁴



²⁰⁴ Data for construction of the racial maps were acquired from the National Historical Geographic Information System database. The school boundary lines were constructed using descriptions from the ECISD communications department.

Appendix C: The 1990 racial makeup of Ector County with an overlay of the high school boundaries following desegregation²⁰⁵



²⁰⁵ Data for construction of the racial maps were acquired from the National Historical Geographic Information System database. The school boundary lines were constructed using descriptions from the ECISD communications department.

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