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Olmos Park and the Creation of a Suburban Bastion

Char Miller
Pomona College

Heywood T. Sanders

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6. Olmos Park and the Creation of a Suburban Bastion, 1927–39

Char Miller and Heywood T. Sanders

Suburbs offended Gus B. Mauerman. As mayor of San Antonio during the mid-1940s, he frequently vented his anger over the existence of a series of small incorporated “satellite cities” — Alamo Heights, Olmos Park, and Terrell Hills — that lay on the northern edge of the city’s legal limits. Hoping to pull them closer into the orbit of San Antonio, the City Council used its powers of annexation in August, 1944, to incorporate several thousand acres of property and streets surrounding the suburbs; they became like so many Vaticans within Rome.¹

Mauerman did not treat them with great reverence, however. He immediately proposed creating a city dump on newly acquired land between two of the suburbs, its noxious odors to be a sign of his disrespect. His next maneuver really left the communities fuming. In 1945, he brought suit against Olmos Park and Terrell Hills to force their annexation. The suit was filed when it became known that the two towns had no mechanism by which to levy taxes to support a new city and county hospital. Charging that neither community had a “real city government,” that both were only inefficient “volunteer associations,” Mauerman argued that the suit would finally “breach their legal defenses” and bring these “two lucrative sources of taxes” into San Antonio.²

Mauerman’s aggressive tactics and expansionist tendencies were foiled in this case: the city ultimately dropped its suit in the face of stiff opposition. But the mayor’s actions, his supporters declared, were not solely motivated by a desire to replenish city coffers. After all, the *San Antonio Express* editorialized, he was battling for a greater good: as a part of “economic San Antonio,” the “suburban residents can only prosper as the community grows and prospers,” a mutually beneficial state that could be realized through a “unified municipal program.” The continued existence of insular suburbs retarded metropolitan progress.³

The very idea of bedroom communities was also an affront to a booster’s vision of the character of urban society and a responsible citizenry. A town could not be a town, Mauerman and the *San Antonio Express* agreed, if it had “no parks, no libraries, no health department, no fire department, nor anything else.” Since the citizens of Olmos Park and Terrell Hills enjoyed none of these privileges or protections, their political status was only partial and their communities “dormant.” Only annexa-

tion could rectify this unfortunate situation; only then would the "full benefits of citizenship" accrue.⁴

But were these communities as poorly conceived and as inefficiently organized as Mauerman's antipathy would suggest? Their dormancy may have clashed with his political principles and urban boosterism, but his perspective is a poor vantage point from which to explain the context in which these suburbs were created and sustained. As an extended analysis of the history of Olmos Park reveals, there was a certain logic to being an "inactive" suburb. A town could be not a town.

An examination of this small Texas community will also cast light on the larger world of which it was a part. The development of Olmos Park, then, was inextricably bound up with and reflective of the political machinations and social problems that dominated San Antonio in the first decades of this century. As Mauerman understood, the suburb *was* a fragment of the urban whole, an observation that needs to be pushed one step farther. The forces that shaped Olmos Park and determined its relations with San Antonio were also part of a national pattern, of tensions generated by the explosive urban and suburban growth in early-twentieth-century America.⁵

The legendary aura that surrounds the site on which Olmos Park would rise, and the background of H. C. Thorman, the man responsible for its development, are an improbable combination of faded Old World elegance and brash New World ambition, a combination that, no doubt, had a certain appeal for the community's early residents.

The sixteen hundred-acre tract of land, which in the 1920s would become a posh suburb, was, in the late nineteenth century, owned by Ladislaus Uhjazzi, an Austrian count. Uhjazzi built an elaborate mansion surrounded by gracefully landscaped grounds, and his estate—legend has it—was the scene of countless soirees and cotillions. The funds that sustained the count's magnanimity, however, were derived from rental income from family lands in Austria, funds that dried up when the Austrian government prohibited profiteering by absentee landlords. This prohibition forced Uhjazzi to return to his homeland. Not long after his departure, fire consumed his sumptuous home. When H. C. Thorman purchased the land in the mid-1920s, it had for some time been known simply as Uhjazzi, a small reminder of European grace in South Texas.⁶

The life of Herman Charles Thorman, on the other hand, is the stuff of an American legend, of the rise from rags to riches. Although details of his early life are sketchy, Thorman apparently grew up on a small farm in northwestern Ohio, arriving in San Antonio in 1909 with little capital. Apparently, too, he sank what money he had in an oil exploration venture in Luling, Texas, that paid off handsomely, the proceeds providing him with the funds he needed to speculate in San Antonio real estate. By the

middle 1920s, he had made his mark on the city, having developed middle-class neighborhoods in the Highlands and Fredericksburg Road areas, southeast and northwest of the city, developing, too, the Country Club Estates, middle-class housing that bordered on the San Antonio Country Club to the northeast of the city's central core. In 1925, after fewer than ten years in the business, Thorman claimed to have constructed more than twelve hundred homes, a substantial number at a time when most suburban development in the United States was on a smaller scale. Further evidence of Thorman's successful rise was the home he constructed for his family on part of Uhjazzi's former estate. Indeed, it rivaled the count's edifice. Set amid a vast grove of oak trees, complete with a two-and-a-half story glass dome foyer, the colonial mansion alone cost in excess of fifty thousand dollars. Clearly, the farm boy had made it big in the city.⁷

H. C. Thorman's success was due in part to individual initiative, but he did not operate in a historical vacuum. He was able to capitalize on the city's pattern of suburban growth, a radial pattern that the streetcars and railroads established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one that the automobile quickly extended and began to fill in laterally during the second decade of the century. Thorman's developments to the west on Fredericksburg Road and in the Highlands district are prime examples of the new kind of suburb that the automobile made possible. Olmos Park was no exception to this trend, as both the community's physical location and spatial design illustrate.

The former Uhjazzi estate, for example, was set on the northern edge of the city limits, a location that would enable Thorman to exploit one of the most significant public works projects in San Antonio history—the Olmos Dam. At first blush, the dam would seem to have little to do with the development of a suburb, for its fundamental purpose was to establish for the first time a reliable means of flood control. Throughout its history, San Antonio had been devastated by rising waters in the San Antonio River, especially in its chief tributary, Olmos Creek. On the evening of September 9, 1921, the level of damage finally reached unacceptable proportions. After a sudden and violent storm, floodwaters rolled down the creek, rapidly spilled over the riverbanks, and inundated residential and commercial areas of the city, killing sixteen people and causing millions of dollars of damage. In the storm's aftermath, the city decided it must begin to control the San Antonio River's watershed and, in 1925, began construction of a 1,941-foot dam that spanned Olmos Creek. Its completion in late 1926 marked an important advance in public safety.⁸

The dam's completion had far-reaching economic consequences as well. As the *San Antonio Express* noted, Olmos Dam quickly "stabilized property values throughout the city, and has given San Antonio a new standing among large investors of capital," investors whose funds began to reshape the downtown business district even before the dam was finished. Indeed,

the newspaper predicted that the dam would in the end pay "greater dividends than any other expenditure which has ever been made by the city," a point with which H. C. Thorman fully agreed, but for somewhat different reasons. His interest in the dam lay not with its economic impact on downtown real estate but with the role it would play in the development of the large piece of property he had purchased just west of the dam, land he bought as soon as he learned that the dam would be erected. For him, the dam served as a vital bridge, for atop it ran a road that provided "a new crosstown thoroughfare linking Alamo Heights on the east with Laurel Heights on the west." Thorman's land was situated between these two developments. He suspected that the new road would reorient traffic patterns along the city's north side and, in so doing, make accessible (and profitable) land that had been previously undeveloped.⁹

Prior to the dam's construction, Thorman declared in an interview that "no facilities existed for some considerable distance for crossing between the east and west divisions on the north of greater San Antonio." This meant that residential development in metropolitan San Antonio had to "spread out to the north from downtown something after the manner of a fan." The dam changed that outward radial thrust, Thorman concluded, by "encouraging the filling in with residential development of some considerable proportion of the underdeveloped territory within the fan." That the Olmos Dam and the automobile were integral to the creation of Olmos Park is made clear in one of Thorman's advertisements for his new development. The advertisement did not focus on the Olmos Dam's flood control potential, but rather on its use as a highway: a cavalcade of cars is seen rushing west across the dam from Alamo Heights and toward a banner emblazoned with the words "Park Hills Estates," one of the names given his subdivision. Thorman stands under the banner, waving the cars on, presumably ready to make a deal.¹⁰

The automobile did more than simply transport potential buyers to Olmos Park; it also helped determine the community's spatial design. The automobile was indispensable to the community's life, for Olmos Park was served neither by streetcars nor by anything so pedestrian as a sidewalk. That dependence could have led Thorman to replicate the gridiron pattern that characterized most of San Antonio's streets, a pattern that would have obscured the natural contours of the land for the sake of convenience and efficiency. Instead, he designed Olmos Park to rein in the automobile, to provide a sharp break—visual and physical—from the relentless gridiron. After having given "careful thought to the planning of these Estates [such] that the great natural beauty and splendid position of this property would be enhanced," he embraced what he called the "parkway system of development." This system, which no doubt drew on the landscape theories and practices of Frederick Law Olmsted and J. C. Nichols, laid down broad avenues and drives that wound among the native oak trees and rolled

gently over the hills. This restful environment would be a natural tonic for the harried urban dweller.¹¹

The community was further protected from the surrounding city by natural and artificial barriers. To the east and north of Olmos Park lay the Olmos Creek floodplain, land forever uninhabitable now that the dam had been built; in the future, the floodplain would be used for a city park. To the south lay additional parkland and a quarry, and portions of the western section bordered on the Missouri Pacific rail lines. Each of these helped prevent and encroachment of undesirable development and, when combined with the centripetal force that the "parkway system" exerted on movement in the community's interior, set Olmos Park apart from its environs. Physical harmony and physical exclusivity went hand in hand.¹²

Social exclusivity was also an intrinsic part of the new development and deeply imbued the legal codes governing the lives and affairs of those who moved to Olmos Park. As with other upper-class suburbs developed in the early twentieth century—such as Roland Park in Baltimore, Houston's River Oaks, and the Country Club District of Kansas City—Olmos Park adopted a rigorous and restrictive covenant to ensure racial segregation, the maintenance of high property values, and the perpetuation of these well into the future. Thorman and other developers across the nation had turned to restrictive covenants when, in 1917, the U.S. Supreme Court had declared segregation by zoning illegal. Nine years later the high court effectively sanctioned restrictive covenants when it refused to hear *Corrigan v. Buckley*; consequently, the popularity of these covenants soared. The Olmos Park covenant was thus part of a national trend and a close examination of it will suggest the complex role such documents could play in the creation of suburban bastions.¹³

In the early twentieth century, elites throughout the United States began to abandon the inner city suburbs that had arisen in the nineteenth century, seeking refuge from the steady advance of the city and its presumed social and racial ills in more distant communities. Those in San Antonio were no different, and H. C. Thorman addressed their concerns in the restrictive covenant he put into effect in Olmos Park in January, 1927. This covenant not only shaped the community's racial character, but it determined land use patterns and the kind of housing possible. These racial and economic sanctions in turn played an important role in the selling of Olmos Park, for they were prominently displayed in newspaper advertisements designed to lure those who valued such restrictions and the exclusivity they provided. In this, they were no doubt successful, for land sales in Olmos Park were brisk from the outset, and purchasers were invariably members of powerful San Antonio families.

The covenant made it clear that Olmos Park was for whites only, for no portion of the property could be "sold, conveyed or leased to any person who is not of the caucasian race." Any violation of this stipulation

was punishable by law, indeed, would "work as a forfeiture of the title to the particular subdivision of property," a clear indication that the community's right to racial segregation superseded the rights of the individual property owner. This power transcended time as well: the covenant did not apply just to the original owner but was made "running with the land," and therefore applied to and was bound upon "the grantee, his heirs, devisees, executors, administrators, successors or assigns." As Thorman declared, the restrictions would "forever stand good." This covenant, as with others created around the nation, acted as a "social compact" that, in Thomas Philpott's words, "symbolized and guaranteed community solidarity," a solidarity that erected and enforced racial boundaries.¹⁴

Racial segregation was only one element in the Olmos Park covenant, however. It also stipulated that the new community could only be residential in nature. As the warranty deed for Olmos Park Estates puts it, "Neither the [original land] grantee nor any subsequent owner or occupant of said property shall use the same for other than residence purposes." Beneath this innocuous statement lay a host of concerns about what kind of community this would and would not be, a point addressed by the first advertisements for Park Hills Estates in late 1926: "The property has been blanketed with restrictions in order to assure development of the character which this reality warrants. It has been restricted against apartments, hotels, and business of any character." Another advertisement put it more bluntly: the restrictions were "sensibly designed to protect your home and every home from the encroachments of inferiority."¹⁵

This quest to produce a noncommercial haven consisting exclusively of "truly fine homes" extended even to the kinds of building materials that could be employed in construction. No residence on Stanford Drive in Olmos Park Estates, for example, could be "erected . . . except of brick, brick veneer, rock stucco or hollow tile construction," materials that characterized domestic architecture on the vast majority of the community's streets. Architectural uniformity was especially pronounced in Park Hill Estates due to the large number of homes designed by Bartlett Cocke, chief architect for H. C. Thorman's development company. But whether or not Cocke was the architect of record, each residence in Olmos Park had to comply with a series of more minor restrictions that determined, among other things, the placement and construction material of outbuildings and fences. The latter especially underscores Thorman's desire to create a physically harmonious environment: "No fence or wall other than an ornamental iron fence," the warranty deed stipulated, "shall be erected on said premises higher than three feet above the natural ground level." This stipulation suggests that the developer not only desired clean sight lines and no clutter, but something more: the community's wealth was to be framed, not obscured.

The restrictive covenant of Olmos Park was not simply concerned with

the area's physical appearance or ethnic makeup, of course. Economic restrictions reinforced those that helped determine the community's residential character, all the while distinguishing Olmos Park from other suburban development in San Antonio in the 1920s.

Olmos Park's primacy in this regard was tied to three interrelated restrictions, those concerned with the size of building lots, prices per front foot, and the minimum cost established for buildings erected on the property itself. From the first, it was clear that the developer of Olmos Park wanted interested buyers to understand how different this suburb would be from other contemporary developments. Not for Olmos Park the relatively small plots of land that characterized most middle-class or upper-middle-class suburbs in San Antonio: "Sites in Park Hills Estates are much larger than those offered in other sections of the city. They are not parceled out in 50-foot units, but carry a minimum footage of 75 feet." Most lots, in fact, extended 100 feet or more, and could be as deep as 300 feet, providing the kind of expansive "grounds that are demanded by those families who build fine homes."

That such grounds were valued in their own right is clear, but there was an additional ramification—only a very few citizens of San Antonio could afford to purchase such sizable lots. The minimum price per front foot in Olmos Park, for example, was \$30 and extended upward to \$80, resulting in base prices for land ranging from \$2,250 for a 75-foot lot to \$6000 for one of 250 feet; these figures could soar to more than \$20,000, depending on the lot size and location. The expansive grounds of Olmos Park, in short, can tell us much about the economic standing of those who chose to live in the community.¹⁶

Impressive as these figures are alone, they take on greater significance when set against the context of San Antonio real estate in the mid-1920s. A comparison of average lot sizes reveals that H. C. Thorman could indeed boast that with few exceptions his property sites were the largest of the contemporary developments. Furthermore, the cost of the land was strikingly higher—Olmos Park's minimum cost of thirty dollars per front foot was the ceiling for the vast majority of other developments advertised in the San Antonio newspapers, and none came within forty dollars of the maximum that Thorman set for his land.¹⁷

There was one final cost involved that further distinguished Olmos Park from its contemporary suburbs in San Antonio and, more generally, in Texas—the minimum expenditure allowed for housing construction. "Neither the grantee or subsequent owner or occupant shall erect any residence of any kind on said property at a cost less than \$7,500.00," the warranty deed states, a figure that Thorman repeatedly emphasized in newspaper advertisements. That figure is remarkable on a number of levels. First, no other contemporaneous development publicly proclaimed any minimum figure, let alone one of such magnitude; that Thorman saw this

as a means by which to generate sales illuminates another dimension of the exclusivity of Olmos Park. Moreover, by way of comparison, this figure more than doubled the deed restriction governing the construction of housing in Alamo Heights, an exclusive suburb to the east of Olmos Park that was initially developed before World War I. Finally, it was \$500 higher than even the restriction imposed on housing in that most exclusive Houston suburb, River Oaks, which the Hogg brothers developed in the mid-1920s. Olmos Park, then, could be ranked as one of the most restrictive (and restricted) suburbs in the state and, by extension, in the nation, a status that is nothing short of extraordinary when one takes into account the general poverty of San Antonio. The elites were taking no chances.¹⁸

Who moved into the community that H. C. Thorman considered his "masterpiece"? Green Peyton, a novelist and journalist, offered his impressions of Olmos Park and its citizens in his *San Antonio: City in the Sun* (1946). "The expensive, independent community [lies] just outside the city limits on a hill north of San Antonio," Peyton wrote, a topographical elevation that reflected the community's social hauteur. It was in Olmos Park that the "rich oilmen and cattle ranchers live," Peyton noted, remarking as well that one would not therefore "find many sheep and goat men living in fine Olmos Park mansions. They do not have the social pretensions of the old cattle families," preferring instead to "congregate in the garish lobby of the Gunter Hotel, in shirtsleeves, still wearing their ranch hats and boots." Clearly, some people's money was more refined than others.¹⁹ It was that sense of refinement that Thorman sought to project when he initially developed the community in the 1920s, a sense that is strikingly revealed in a comparison of the image of the ideal buyer in Olmos Park and in Spanish Acres, a contemporary development to the west.

Spanish Acres lay within what its developer considered "the Arc of Opportunity," a band of land that radiated westward along Fredericksburg Road in what is known as the Woodlawn District. Potential buyers were bombarded with appeals to the booster spirit: "Mr. and Mrs. Woodlawn District are Progressive Folks," one advertisement trumpeted, "the kind you like to have for neighbors—citizens who gladly shoulder their personal and community responsibilities." And they were youthful shoulders that bore those responsibilities in Spanish Acres. In one 1927 advertisement, a young childless couple, dressed in flapper regalia, is portrayed gazing longingly upon a row of modest homes built closely together. The message is clear: Spanish Acres and other Woodlawn developments were for those of youthful and rising expectations; it was for those whose future seemed bright but not assured. Spanish Acres was, after all, within an "Arc of Opportunity"; it was an area and a people on the move.²⁰

The contrast between the image of Spanish Acres and that of Olmos Park is vividly captured in one of Thorman's first advertisements. In the foreground is gathered a conservatively dressed, mature audience; one man

wears a monocle, most are in evening dress or business suits, and the women are as fashionably attired as the men. In the background, facing the audience, is H. C. Thorman in an evening jacket with satin lapels. He is gesturing toward a map of Olmos Park that is encased in a solid, enscrolled frame that is in turn set within heavy velvet drapes. The vista that unfolds on the map echoes the richness of the setting: amid rolling hills, substantial homes unobtrusively line the community's winding drives. There is, in short, nothing modest about the entire ensemble. Only people of substance would purchase property in this community, the advertisement suggests, and the magnificence of their homes would reflect their status, a status that had little to do with the expectations of youth. Rather, a home in Olmos Park signaled, as it had for H. C. Thorman, that the owners had already made it, that they had already arrived.²¹

This impressionistic evidence of the social standing and economic status of those who moved to Olmos Park is sustained by analysis of the San Antonio City Directory. Olmos Park, it seems, appealed to a growing group of San Antonio's wealthy commercial and business elite, who lived in areas either without such effective protections or that were threatened by the enlargement of the downtown business and commercial sector. Indeed, the appeal of Olmos Park signified the coming of age of the automobile and the incipient decline of the older streetcar-based subdivisions. Among Olmos Park's earliest residents, for instance, was Britain R. Webb, who moved to the suburban community from the earlier exclusive block of West French Place, which had sheltered a number of leading citizens in the early 1900s. Webb neatly symbolized both San Antonio's economic growth and the rise of the auto; he was a vice-president of the City Central Bank and Trust and regional manager for the Buick Motor Company. He was joined by such residents as Raymond Woodward, owner of Morgan-Woodward, a local Ford dealer; Joseph Edwards, an auditor for the city's Packard distributor; Clarence Gardner, treasurer of the Mountjoy Parts Company, which specialized in automobile engines; and J. Benjamin Robertson of the Luthy Battery Equipment Company. On many levels, Olmos Park was an automobile suburb.²²

The coming of the automobile to South Texas had created a new group of commercial entrepreneurs quite distinct from the city's traditional economic elite. These new auto men were joined in Olmos Park by a new commercial elite created by the city's growth and expansion. Carl D. Newton combined a role in the City Central Bank and Trust Company with ownership of the community's Kodak outlet, Fox Photo. George Piper was a manager at the downtown Stowers Furniture Company, while both Morris Richbook and Charles Eidelberg operated Richbook's Department Store, and Alfred Beyer owned a local appliance company and later a downtown Mexican restaurant and a string of parking lots.

One final group attracted to Olmos Park closely resembled H. C. Thor-

man himself in terms of economic success and business interests. Henry Catto made his fortune in oil and later established a major insurance company; Urban Wagner headed the Kelwood Company, a local building and contracting firm, and shared an interest in urban development with R. Thomas McDermott, who headed two firms dealing in real estate and construction.

The initial appeal of Olmos Park was thus not to the city's traditional wealth. The growth of San Antonio and its development as a market center for a large South Texas hinterland had enlarged opportunities in retail trade, construction, and real estate. And this new wealth was attracted to the exclusivity of Olmos Park. The physical move to the new community rarely involved a substantial distance or dislocation. The bulk of new residents moved there from large homes in nearby Monte Vista. Indeed, the appeal of Olmos Park was probably not in the distinctiveness of its general location or its architecture; Monte Vista was a very similar area of large, albeit slightly older, homes. But by moving to Olmos Park, these individuals were to take advantage of a much higher degree of restrictiveness regarding land use and development and to escape the city. Olmos Park lay just beyond the historical city limits, and new residents thus avoided both city taxes and direct participation in San Antonio's governmental and political affairs.

The creation of Olmos Park as an exclusive and homogeneous upper-income preserve was readily accomplished through a series of private controls on property, building, and ownership. But the community existed in a larger political orbit and was far from insulated from the political forces affecting San Antonio and Bexar County.

The advance of suburban subdivision had been clearly facilitated during the 1920s by the spread of streetcar transportation and the coming of the automobile, as well as by the city of San Antonio's willingness to extend its services and efforts to areas outside its corporate bounds. The character of the larger city's politics provides a clear indication of the costs of growth and annexation. The dominant political organization or machine was able to control and bargain with a fixed and largely controllable electorate. While the votes of east side blacks and west side Hispanics often required a direct financial investment, they were a known (and purchasable) quantity. The middle-class Anglo residents of the growing suburban tracts were far less predictable and manipulable. They thus represented a threat to the existence of the "City Machine" and its supporters, rather than an opportunity for community growth and expansion. And the need to serve the outlying areas with expensive capital improvements and facilities was seen as a serious cost to and financial burden on the existing city of San Antonio. As a result, the city trod lightly on the issue of annexation and expansion in the 1920s and 1930s. The first serious efforts at corporate enlargement were not actually effected until 1940.²³

In the absence of serious pressure from the larger central city, Olmos Park could manage comfortably simply as a subdivision with no specific public powers and no peculiar demands for public services. It was thus quite different from the other newly developing exclusive communities that took the form of independent polities. Beverly Hills, California, for example, was originally developed by the Rodeo Land and Water Company in the early years of the twentieth century. The Beverly Hills Hotel, constructed as a "draw" for the new community in 1912, served as both attraction and proof of exclusivity and wealth. The community's social standing and its position among the elite of the motion picture industry were confirmed by the purchase in 1919 of "Pickfair" by Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. Beverly Hills's exclusivity as a community was enhanced by its existence as an independent polity very early in its physical development. The city was incorporated in 1913. It also moved to secure its independence in terms of municipal services, providing its own police and fire protection and acquiring its own water in 1924.²⁴

Similar efforts at social and governmental exclusivity in the Los Angeles area followed the Beverly Hills model. Palos Verdes Estate and Rolling Hills both incorporated as cities coincident with their actual physical development in the late 1930s, and even went so far as to use guarded gates to prevent access by nonresidents. The link between suburban exclusivity and independent local government was also maintained in a number of emerging Texas communities. Highland Park incorporated in 1913, securing its independence from Dallas. And Bellaire incorporated as a municipality in 1918, asserting its distinctiveness from Houston.²⁵

The path leading to municipal incorporation for these exclusive subdivisions and suburban developments varied. Incorporation provided one sales tool for the promoter in assuring community distinctiveness and quality. Status as a municipality also guaranteed the advantages of local polity: some direct public control over taxes and public services. In the face of a desire by a larger central city to acquire high-value residential property, incorporation provided a bulwark against tax increases and efforts to soak the wealthy. And city status provided popular direction of and choice about basic city services.

The desire for low taxes and readily controlled public service clearly drove the incorporation of Beverly Hills and its later efforts to resist annexation by Los Angeles. Jon Teaford notes that "in Beverly Hills Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Tom Mix, Rudolph Valentino, Harold Lloyd, Will Rogers, and Conrad Nagel all joined hands to defeat annexation, thereby guarding against Los Angeles' higher tax rates while preserving the Beverly Hills police force with its tolerant attitude toward stellar peccadillos."²⁶

By no means all exclusive residential enclaves chose to incorporate and lead an independent existence within the metropolitan area, as River Oaks

in Houston and Munger Place in Dallas indicate. But where suburban incorporation did come about, it was most often very early in the development of the enclave, as part of the developer's promotional strategy.

Olmos Park stands as an intriguing exception to this general pattern of exclusive suburban development. The physical community was well protected by covenants, deed restrictions, and Thorman's ability to pace its residential development. The subdivision could draw on public services for facilities such as water and police from the adjacent city of San Antonio with little difficulty. The city provided services to outlying areas free of charge, despite the obvious drain on its own revenues and tax base. The explanation for this seeming fiscal irrationality was rooted in the machine politics and petty political duels of the larger city. Based on a generous use of city jobs for patronage purposes, city politicians appear to have been willing to provide services without the political complications potentially caused by a group of upper-income and reform-oriented voters. Outlying subdivisions could maintain the image of independence from the city while accepting its readily proffered services.²⁷

The incorporation of Olmos Park was thus *not* rooted in some desire to secure immediate control over the enclave's future. Its development during the 1920s and 1930s proceeded without governmental status or special public services. Incorporation was, rather, the product of reaction and community fear and uncertainty well after it was developed, a direct response both to the national agenda that the New Deal set and to local reform politics. These forces would reshape San Antonio's political landscape, altering, as well, the status of Olmos Park.

The massive federal aid of the New Deal era had brought a great deal of civic improvement to San Antonio, including the improvement and beautification of what is now the city's River Walk, the paving and improvement of streets, and the construction of a new post office and athletic stadium. The period also saw an increase in activity by community elements favoring political reform and an end to machine rule. Indeed, the infusion of federal aid and the emergence of an active reform movement in San Antonio were intertwined; the former served as patronage to bolster the political standing of the latter. The reformers were given a sharp boost when Mayor C. K. Quin was the focus of a series of revelations about and indictments after the temporary hiring of city workers coinciding with the date of the Democratic primary election. The defeated incumbent Democratic congressman, Maury Maverick, led an effort to oust Quin and his commission supporters at the next city election in the spring of 1939. In a race crowded with four tickets and competition for the claim of "most good government-oriented," Maverick ran for mayor with his "Fusion Ticket."²⁸

The platform of the Fusion group called for elimination of the Quin machine and the eventual change to a city manager system. Maverick also

called for lower taxes, reasonable hiring practices, and a more efficient delivery of city services. But his image as a New Dealer and charges of communism were rarely out of the newspapers. His promise to construct a number of expensive physical improvement projects, such as parks, on the "colored" east side, projects funded by New Deal revenues, fueled such charges. Maverick clearly represented not simply a threat to the venerable city machine, but also to the accustomed way of doing governmental business in San Antonio.²⁹ In the election on May 9, 1939, Maverick and most of his Fusion Ticket beat Quin and the machine organization.

But Maverick's campaign and political triumph had a more immediate impact on the Olmos Park area. On the same day as Maverick's victory, attorney Albert Negley filed an incorporation petition for Olmos Park with the County Commissioners' Court. One local newspaper quoted Negley as arguing that "the desire of the persons living in the area to be united" was the reason for seeking municipal status. Yet the residents of Olmos Park had lived for an extended period in unincorporated limbo with no indication of a pressing desire for unification. The recollections of Olmos Park residents and the coincidence of timing suggest that the real reason for the 1939 incorporation effort lay with the threat of annexation by the city, an annexation sought by now-mayor Maverick as a means of increasing the city's wealth and tax base.³⁰

The petition proved to be the opening step in a rapid incorporation effort. Olmos Park's 1,550 residents were allowed the opportunity for a vote on May 23, and they overwhelmingly supported incorporation by a vote of 237 to 6. The shift of Olmos Park from simple community to independent polity was in accord with its beginnings. The move was endorsed by its developers and early landowners, and the election was held in the rear of Thorman's office.³¹

The incorporation effort followed by about two weeks a similar successful effort in the nearby area of Terrell Hills. And it set off a spate of incorporation attempts in neighboring subdivisions on San Antonio's north side. The fear of annexation was widespread, and concern over the lax policies of city service delivery were well founded. Less than two months after the election, members of the Fusion Ticket were pressing for a radical change in the provision of fire and police services. Fire and police commissioner Louis Lipscomb threatened to end service to the incorporated suburbs unless they made some arrangements to cover the costs of service. Mayor Maverick declared that "the city of San Antonio would no longer carry the burdens for these areas beyond the city limit."

Maverick's efforts proved less than totally successful. While he headed off other attempted incorporations, Olmos Park remained outside the city and managed to secure fire protection through a contractual arrangement with the city. Indeed, Olmos Park's incorporation demonstrated substantial variance from the model of the suburban polity as provider of special

or unique public services. Its elected officers served without salary, and the city itself did not impose a tax or directly raise revenue. The costs of the incorporation effort and the May election had to be borne by donations, as the city had no means of apportioning or imposing a tax.³²

The government of Olmos Park remained a shell, with no responsibilities for providing public facilities or functions. It did so because its residents sought only to escape the taxes imposed on San Antonians and were not obliged to tax themselves to maintain the benefits or exclusivity of the community. Indeed, it was this very lack of governmental activity that would encourage another reform mayor, Gus Mauerman, to seek to annex these suburbs in 1944.³³

Olmos Park reflects and refracts the American suburban experience. Its formation, for instance, depended on many of the same forces that had begun to reorder the economic and social structure of American cities since early in the nineteenth century. With the emergence of the streetcar and other forms of mass transit—which did not arrive in San Antonio until late in that century—cities expanded physically, following the rail lines, which encouraged the growth of streetcar suburbs. These early suburbs not only were separated geographically from the central core, they were also segregated, a segregation that was at once racial, ethnic, and economic. The tightly clustered, heterogeneous walking city was no more.³⁴

But the streetcar suburbs were not all that segregated; fixed rail transit made it difficult to create and maintain large-scale exclusive suburban communities. Such could not emerge without a more exclusive form of transportation, the private automobile. The automobile, of course, extended the convenient distance between the fringe suburbs and the central core. But more than that, the car encouraged lateral mobility, which enabled well-heeled residents to avoid both the congested central city and its less desirable citizens. By 1970, this pattern of widespread, highly differentiated communities had become the norm: the United States was a suburban nation.³⁵

Texas cities (and their suburbs) were also powerfully affected by the advent of the automobile. Highland Park in Dallas, Houston's River Oaks, and Olmos Park in San Antonio came to depend on the automobile, just as they came to represent a form of exclusivity, restriction, and economic segregation that catered to a new affluent urban elite. As one long-time resident of Olmos Park remembered, Olmos Park "was really a little town on the edge of a big town and was situated where it was 'out of the way'—and because of the street layout, nobody went thru' it or even came into it except us." This memory of separateness could have been voiced by those who moved to any number of elite enclaves constructed in the 1920.³⁶

But within this general framework, Olmos Park offers some unique insights. It was created and came to life as an exclusive development within

Texas' poorest major city, thereby enabling the metropolitan area's business and civic elite to remain aloof from its political and social battles. This detachment was profitable, of course: they benefited from access to an urban economy and exploited that advantage, never having to pay taxes to support the larger community of which they were a part.

There are two ironies in this disengagement. The first is that it was fully supported (indeed encouraged) by San Antonio's political machine, which was only too happy to supply free urban services such as water and fire protection so as not to be troubled by Olmos Park's affluent and politically powerful inhabitants. The other irony involves the governance of Olmos Park itself. Its early residents not only wanted to be disconnected from the surrounding metropolitan community, but they pushed that tendency to the extreme when they created their own town in 1927. By not incorporating for twelve years, the residents were able to pare the town's functions to the absolute minimum. It took the threat of annexation in the late thirties and the forties to force those who lived in Olmos Park to begin to create a polity, to act like citizens.³⁷