

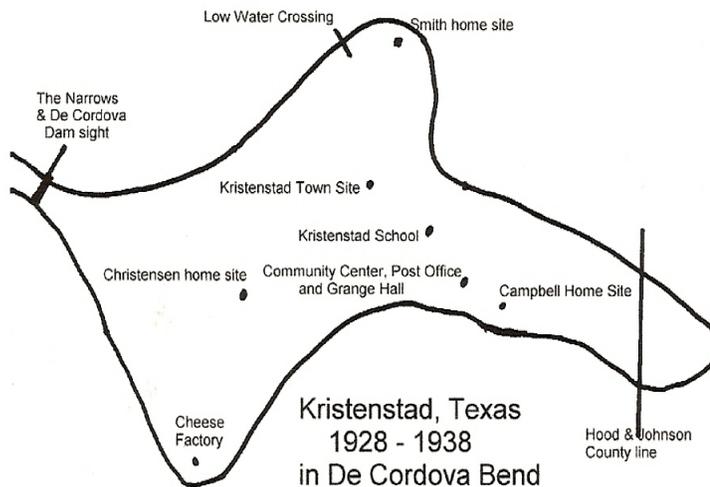
TEXAS' LOST UTOPIA

Founded in the 1930's, KRISTENSTAD drew national attention, then faded quietly

KRISTENSTAD, Texas a Utopia? No, said John B. Christensen, founder of the Hood County colony of the 1930's. "There does not exist here, nor anywhere else so far as we know, the dreamland, paradise, or "Utopia" sometimes found in open pictures of this settlement," he write to a prospective resident Al Campbell. The colony "does not claim to be a Utopia," a Dallas *News* story reported in 1933.

"Utopian," however, was the adjective applied to the community by national press writers, enthralled by the agrarian dream of Kristenstad. "Utopia," too, became an epithet used for the town by skeptical central Texas neighbors, and it lingers there today, along within the myth that the settlement was a "share an share alike, socialistic" enterprise.

Certainly there were Utopian elements in Christensen's vision of the community he founded. The original Utopia, imagined by author Sir Thomas More, was an island, and Kristensrad was founded on a near-island, some 6000 acres of heavily-wooded heights and fertile bottom land bounded by a 19-mile long loop of the Brazos River. The loop was named de Cordova Bend for early Texas entrepreneur Jacob de Cordova. (In the 1860's de Cordova had made an effort to develop a power project on the Brazos in order to establish textile mills and other manufacturing enterprises. His efforts may have had an influence on Christensen in selecting the spot. Work and exposure on the project caused an illness which resulted in de Cordova's death.)



Utopia, too had been an island which satisfied all of its inhabitants' needs. Kristenstad was to be a "farming-industrial community of home owners ... which will be as nearly self sufficient as a colony. It was to a "carefully planned economy, based on the needs of the community, the aptitudes of its inhabitants, and the natural resources of the country The plan may be said to be that of producing on the land first of all those things which the people of the community themselves need for their own living, and which are likely to find a ready market in the nearby cities of Fort Worth and Dallas, and of developing such small manufacturing industries as may find an adequate market for their products without too complicated or too expensive marketing machinery.

"And in everything, the idea will be to stress quality instead of quantity ... Its people are consciously building toward the day when they shall have everything that the people of modern cities have, with much that they do not have."

Individual land ownership, however, was the basis for the settlement, and nowhere in contemporary accounts is there any indication that the settlement was socialistic or communal. A reporter in 1931 wrote that "each individual is rewarded in proportion to his own initiative and enterprise," and Christensen called his plan "pure Americanism."

Kristenstad (literally, "Kristen's homestead") was the last dream of fiftyish Christensen, a tall, portly, white-haired second-generation Danish-American.

Graduated at 19 as valedictorian of his University of Missouri law class, Christensen gave up a career as a Missouri attorney to come to Dallas about 1913. In Texas he speculated first in short-line railroads, then attempted to build a hard surface tollroad from Glen Rose to Cleburne, only to have his financial backing fail before he could build a bridge to span the ferry-crossed Brazos.

He operated an East Texas sawmill for a time (and married a 16 year old East Texas girl during that period), then settled in the Rainbow community near Glen Rose in 1922.

There he sold timber and farmed while he tirelessly promoted three visionary schemes: hard-surface highways, a system of dams along the Brazos to provide water reservoirs and flood control, and the bringing of electricity to rural central Texas.

During his studies of the Brazos, he discovered the de Cordova Bend land. He purchased the acreage on a deferred payment plan January 1, 1928 for \$120,000 from the heirs of the pioneer Burleson family.

At first Christensen developed the property conventionally. He sold small plots, usually of 15 acres, to settlers for \$40 an acre. Gradually he developed the plan for his "industrial-agricultural" community, and his friends in Dallas, particularly *Texas Weekly* editor Peter Molyneaux, became interested in Kristenstad.

Settlers were encouraged to clear timber from tillable land and use the lumber, cut in a community sawmill, along with native stone, gravel, and lime to build homes. They were to raise foodstuffs first, then crops for market. Livestock, too, would be raised first for food, then for market. A chair factory was set up to use leftover timber to make straight-backed chairs. A charcoal factory utilized the scraps.

Cordwood, cedar posts, and dairy products, along with peanuts, pigs and cattle, were marketed to provide money for supplies imported from the outside.

The industries operated during slack farming seasons. Workers received script at the rate of \$2 per day, which they could exchange for supplies Christensen bought wholesale in Fort Worth and sold in a community store at cost. They could also exchange script for stock in the factories or for cash.

The non-profit store, the stock-purchase plan, and a Kristenstad Marketing Co-operative provided the basis for stories of a socialist settlement. The co-op, modeled after those Christensen had seen the Farmers Grange operating in the mid-west, encouraged farmers to go together, hire a truck, and sell their supplies in Fort Worth rather than on local markets.

Christensen built a slab, low-water bridge across the Brazos near Fall Creek to shorten the trip to Fort Worth. It cut 15 miles off the existing road through the land-neck "Narrows" via Granbury to the city. Peter Molyneaux had written often in the Texas Weekly of the dangers of a one-crop (cotton) economy in the state. An article in the magazine in 1931 hailed Kristenstad as possibly "the only kind of community on which it will be safe to build our future economic state."

Molyneaux and other Dallasites purchased plots in the bend, and in 1932 Molyneaux established a small print shop which circulated to a "who's who" across America. Soon the *New York Times* praised the community. Other publications picked up the story of Kristenstad.

One of those who read about it was Al Campbell, a North Dakota road contractor who was near bankruptcy and tired of Dakota winters. He corresponded with Christensen, provided name of "three representative people whom you believe will vouch for you as a loyal, law abiding, industrious person of integrity," and was accepted as a settler.

Campbell and his wife loaded their three sons and household goods into a school bus which had been converted into a truck and headed for Texas. After six days of driving, and five nights of camping out, the Campbells arrived at Christensen's home.

John Campbell, an Irving electronics manufacturer who was six years old at the time, remembers that Mrs. Christensen volunteered to supply the family with milk, eggs, and meat until the family could get settled in a place to live.

"No, thank you," Mrs. Campbell replied. "I'll just go to the market." She, and young Campbell, were shocked to learn that Kristenstad had no market.

The Campbells' built a native stone house on their 15 acres. Others build "shebang" shelters, dugouts with entry rooms, or home-made brick, native stone and rough timbers.

In early 1933 about 35 families, totaling nearly 200 people, lived in the colony. It had its own post office and a community building which served as Grange Hall, school, and, in winter, non-sectarian church. In summer, religious services were held under a giant pecan tree.

The school, according to Mrs. Clyde Roberson of Granbury, who taught nine pupils there in 1936-

1937 and 1937-1938 had "a library as good as any I've ever seen in a school"

Probably the population reached its peak in the winter of 1932. Many settlers stayed only a short time and moved on, disillusioned by the prospects of dirt farming, primitive plumbing, wood stoves, and kerosene lamps. Christensen, according to old-timers, saw that none went hungry, and he sometimes grub-staked the truly indigent from his own pocket.

Settlers, the Campbells notwithstanding, came mainly from two groups: dispossessed Texas farmers, who had heard of the near-free land, and intellectual idealists, drawn by press accounts of the "Utopia."

The first group generally survived, living off the land as did many subsistence farmers in the 1930's. The others, artisans, professors, city-bred, suffered. They also were not satisfied with the rural self sufficiency. Some, who expected some sort of division of community assets, became embittered.

The depression worsened. Farm produce prices dropped - five cents a dozen for eggs, a few dollars for a steer. A prolonged drought damaged gardens, dried up cash crops, and ruined livestock pastures. The chair factory burned. Markets for charcoal, cordwood, and posts were scarce.

Christensen, determined to rely on the community's own resources, disdained government aid projects, but as times became harder, Homer F. Mitchell, a Dallas insurance executive and banker who had helped Christensen financially, attempted to arrange federal aid for the community. The attempt failed.

Those settlers who had any place to which they could go, left.

Christensen and his family moved back to Rainbow, ostensibly so his oldest child could go to eighth grade there, in the summer of 1936. He continued to supervise the activity at Kristenstad, however, and one day an agitated malcontent threw a bottle of acid at the car where he sat.

On June 30, 1937 John B. Christensen died suddenly in his Rainbow home at the age of 61.

The post office had closed in 1935. The school would continue through spring, 1938, but Kristenstad, the dream, died with its founder.

In January, 1938, his widow returned the de Cordova Bend property to the Burleson heirs, who leased it to a Fort Worth banker. She and their five children moved to Dallas.

O. P. Leonard (of Leonard Brothers Department Store in Fort Worth) bought the land in 1948, and today old Kristenstad, renamed "Leonard's Bend," is a miles-square pecan orchard. The school building is used by orchard employees. The old print shop and Campbell's home lie in ruins.

Christensen, called variously by people who knew him as "a soldier of fortune," "brilliant, but impractical," "a dreamer too generous for his own good," "a promoter," and "a man 40 years ahead of his time," is buried in the Squaw Creek cemetery near Rainbow.

The hard surface highway he attempted to build was completed by the state of Texas some 40 years ago. Possum Kingdom Lake, first of the series of Brazos River lakes he envisioned, was formed in 1941. Electricity lines crisscross rural Hood, Johnson, and Somervell Counties.

Christensen's last dream, however, the dream which came nearest to reality under his direction, has vanished. That was the dream others called a Texas Utopia.

