

# A West Texas Town and Her Fairy Tale Beginnings

By Cheryl Lewis, Hamlin, Texas

The year was 1921, and the dual county community of Hamlin, Texas with a population of around 1,700 forward-thinking and determined citizens, was experiencing a year of infrastructure stability and growth, along with beautification enhancements and the development and construction of recreational facilities that would be among the best a community could possess. *The Hamlin Herald* was in her 16<sup>th</sup> year of publication, while the Opera House was busy presenting plays, vaudeville, and showing moving pictures. Later in the year, the popular Morgan House would enlarge and change its name to The Morgan Hotel, a favorite dining place of Texas Governor “Pa” Ferguson, who frequented Hamlin on several occasions for business and pleasure. Central Nazarene University, located in the southwest portion of Hamlin, was still progressive in its educational and faith-based endeavors, along with expanding the talents of her students, in addition to including the general public with the frequent arrival via the local passenger trains bearing many doctoral guests who led revivals and performed both faith-based and classical music concerts. Revivals and public baptisms in the Orient Lake by the local congregations were almost a weekly occurrence, while on the darker side, the nearby Ku Klux Klan was applying pressure with threatening letters to the editor inciting the bootleggers within the community to cease their illegal business dealings.

February’s local news article for that same year featured a foretaste of a potential mascot possibility for the school and community without even realizing it at the time due to an article by N. M. Acuff titled: “How to Kill Rats”. Just five years earlier in the March 1916 local paper, an eye-opening and rather grotesque announcement was published: “in an effort to rid Hamlin of rats and destructive rodents, a fund headed by J. J. Waggoner and J. W. Scott is on deposit at the First National Bank. Two and one-half cents will be paid for all rat tails taken from rats in the city limits. The whole tail must be presented.” What brave souls to actually go through the process of obtaining those tails, and for those who received them, to individually count them out in order to literally “pay the piper”! Later, the November 18<sup>th</sup> local paper featured an additional article titled, “War on Rats Declared by the U. S. Government”. The article stated: “There are as many rats in the country as there are men, women, and children. Two hundred million dollars’ worth of foodstuffs are devoured annually in America by the rat.” With all of the rat news, plus residing in town named Hamlin, how many additional clues would be required to put two and two together to come up with a mascot?

Hamlin’s city projects for the year included installing a new sewer system, constructing a drinking water plant, obtaining financial support for operating the public school system, installing one dozen ornamental lampposts within the downtown district, and securing property for the construction of a new and commodious city park to accommodate areas for picnics, camping, fishing, swimming, and sporting events. In the spring of the year, the City of Hamlin purchased approximately eighteen acres of land from Mrs. R. D. (Henrietta) Moore, Sr. for the almost immediate construction of what now serves the citizens of Hamlin as the current city park on S. W. Avenue E. According to a May 13, 1921 article in *The Hamlin Herald*, “the Ball Park will soon be ready for play” when the Hamlin men’s team will host Anson. The

first pitch in the new ballpark stadium, our “Rock Field” prior to the addition of its rock wall by the WPA in 1939, was on June 21, 1921 with an estimated 1,000 spectators in attendance to watch the game! Little would Hamlin residents realize they were having the opportunity to observe and cheer on Hamlin’s forthcoming football coach, math teacher, and high school principal by observing the play of the Hamlin team’s second baseman, J. C., “Clark”, Tittle, II. He had been traveling back and forth from Aspermont to play with the “Hamlin Hyenas,” whose team name would later change to the “Hamlin Hornets”. According to a post in the August 26, 1921 local paper, “J. C. Tittle, who has been holding down 2<sup>nd</sup> base for the Hamlin baseball team the last few weeks, has resigned his place and will go home for the rest of the season. He will return to this city in September and accept a position in the high school. He taught the previous year in Aspermont.” The *Aspermont Star* included the following statement in the Hamlin paper: “He has impressed everyone here that he is a first class gentleman, and that all true sports should be played clean and manly. Clark is a brilliant young man.”

Sporting events for the Hamlin school system in the early days consisted of baseball for the young men and basketball for both the young men and women. Nearby Stamford began the attempt with adding football into its school activities in the years 1913 and 1914, with only one game each season, but by 1915, began playing regularly. Anson added football to their schedule in 1915, and at some point in the late spring or early summer of 1921, Hamlin schools tossed their hat into the ring to initiate a football program for the students. The 1924 edition of the Hamlin school’s annual, *The Cyclone*, stated the following: “Mr. Tittle came to Hamlin in the fall of 1921 when he assumed the responsibility of trying to build a football team out of green material and in a community that, due to their lack of knowledge of the football game, did not support this form of athletics.” To add to the challenge of transforming a town’s outlook on an unwanted sport, it would be discovered that only one of the young men coming out for the team had even witnessed a football game; that young man was none other than a senior student named Newman Bender. Coach Tittle had established the following rules for the new athletes: “Only those making passing grades in their work will be allowed to participate in the several departments of athletics this term.”

A letter from Coach Tittle to Hamlin’s Superintendent, H. D. Neff, was published in the September 5, 1921 edition of *The Hamlin Herald*: “I shall arrive Friday afternoon or evening on the Katy. I will meet all the boys interested in football at some time Monday. Will you kindly have Mr. Pope insert, as a news item, a notice to the boys to meet me at a time that will not interfere with your plans? I wish to get the boys at work as early as possible as well as to arrange for equipment. Thank You. Sincerely yours, J. C. Tittle.” Who was this man who had accepted such a challenge in coming to Hamlin? Tittle, the youngest of five children and of Irish decent, was born in 1891 in Morgan, Texas. J. Clark Tittle, II was a 1911 graduate of Meridian Academy, and then continued his studies at Meridian College where he was an outstanding athlete in both football and baseball in spite of his small stature of only reaching 5’9”. Clark played quarterback for the college squad, and was mentioned in the school’s 1914 annual, *The Bosque*, as “one of the fastest men that ever played on our team, and one of the best.” The 1916 yearbook reports “Clark is a little man in weight, but in grit and endurance, he has no equal. His quick side-steps and fleet-footedness in a broken field running, and also his alertness of mind won for Meridian College the distinction of having the best quarterback of any Junior College in the State of Texas. In addition for his football success, he proved himself as an excellent right field baseball player, runner, and hitter. We indeed mourn our loss as we lose Tittle this year.” Prior to his graduation from the college, he was already serving as the principal at the Academy as well as teaching history and math.

Clark was offered a dual scholarship to SMU for both football and academics; however, he was unable to play due to a sternum injury, so instead, he enlisted in the U. S. Army to fight for his country in World

War I. "He became gravely ill during basic training, and his heart was weakened to the point that the Army gave him an honorable discharge in June 1917 for poor health. He returned home for medical treatment, and "determined to defend his country as soon as his doctor was able to help him return his heart to strength, he enlisted again. He was then promoted to 2nd Lieutenant of Infantry, and he trained soldiers in Ohio. He was again honorably discharged in August of 1918. His speed and athletic ability brought a professional baseball offer to his door, but the sternum injury kept him from following that career." However, following a brief time in Aspermont, J. C. Tittle, II, would rise to the challenge of educating our athletes and students within the Hamlin school system by initiating a football program, teaching life skills and math, serving as the school's principal, and eventually bestowing upon the team, the school, and the community a mascot name and identity that has received recognition throughout Texas, the United States, and even destinations across the oceans and seas.

It would also be Clark's destiny in Hamlin to meet his future bride, Miss Lillian Ware, in the fall of 1923 in her first year as the English teacher serving the Hamlin schools. Lillian was a 1923 graduate from Mary Hardin Baylor and served as a student assistant in English, along with being Vice-President of her class. Lillian was "a brilliant woman who had racked up honor after honor for her academic accomplishments," along with being an excellent athlete in her own right enjoying tennis, skating, basketball, and baseball. The two would marry on Christmas Day 1924.

An announcement in the local newspaper dated September 20, 1921 reads as follows: "Stamford School vs. Hamlin – Down at the ball park this afternoon will be the first battle between the Hamlin football squad and the Stamford school. It will be interesting to all who will attend. To make the boys well equipped, the businessmen have contributed liberally to the purchase of the same." No mention in the following week's paper was made regarding the outcome of that game; it would not be until a year later in November 17, 1922's paper where the score for that first game against Stamford was recorded, and only because Stamford once again defeated our team 13 – 0; Mr. Bowen Pope, editor of *The Hamlin Herald*, recorded "it was a great improvement from the 1921 game score of 108 - 0."

It would not be until mid-November that the Hamlin team would realize its first and only win for the 1921 season in a second battle against Merkel with a score of 13 – 7; the 1921 season ended with a record of 1-4-1. By now, there was a general consensus among the students and citizenry that a mascot was needed to give a name and direction for the Hamlin schools. Additionally, the late Arlie Cassle, one of the charter members of the squad, had related to me in an interview that the team's original colors were black and orange, which I readily accepted; however, only within the last two years, I was made to wonder as to the accuracy of those reported colors as archival materials in the way of a graduation announcement and a Hamlin High School "Memory Book" from the early 1920's came into my possession. I noticed within those two documents, that ribbons of black and gold were placed in both. Perhaps Arlie had been color blind to an extent or, had what now appeared to be a gold colored ribbon once been orange? The exact team colors and the naming of our mascot were acknowledged and officially confirmed in a December 16, 1921 local news article titled: "Football Boys Entertained Properly – Coach Tittle hosted the team at the high school building artistically decorated with the team colors of black and gold. A Victrola furnished music of the evening. Vance Littleton was elected Captain, and 'Pied Pipers' of Hamlin was decided for the next year and the name of ed [sic] upon. Lively games were held, and students Roy Wilson and Velta Pardue served delicious fruit from baskets covered in black and gold crepe paper. Superintendent Neff spoke and noted that Mr. Tittle was an ideal host." The school colors of green and white either came in the 1922 or 1923 football season per a notation in the 1924 school annual, The Cyclone, in Coach Tittle's remark of charter member, Floyd Carlton: " 'Fatty' has been with us three years. The success of the team on the field was due largely to his leadership. On the defense he was a

terror to his opponents, on the offense, he was always dependable. This is his last year to don the Green and White, and his going will be felt both in spirit as well as in actual play. Somebody's college is going to get a mighty man."

In visiting with Coach Tittle's granddaughter, Janice Utterback, I queried as to how "Coach" arrived at naming Hamlin the Pied Pipers? She related to me that he was a "well-read man," and that having read Robert Browning's 1842 narrative poem, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin, A Child's Story*, he felt it was the perfect fit for a team from Hamlin, Texas. In perusing Coach Tittle's published instructions to his athletes for the 1922 season, his ninth point read as follows: "My slogan is: - 'Remember the Pied Piper of Hamlin, he walked off with everything.' " This closing century of Hamlin Pied Piper history has created the distinction of being unique and well-recognized among the travels of her students and alumni, in addition to being one that sports writers, magazines, and news media usually mention in various mascot commentaries or contests. In October 1999, *Texas Monthly* named the Hamlin Pied Pipers as their favorite mascot in the State of Texas, and in 2011, The Bob Bullock State History Museum in Austin displayed our mascot's costume in an exhibit by Joe Nick Patoski titled "Bigger than religion: Texas High School Football". The 2019 Pied Piper football team successfully reached the state playoff finals in Arlington, TX for the first time in school history as they faced the Mart Panthers in a gridiron battle that will be long remembered and cherished, even with the five-point deficit at game's end; it took them ninety-nine years to achieve this goal.

Per his granddaughter's writings, one of Coach Tittle's "unique coaching principles was that he insisted that all his players respect themselves and others. Each game, each player's error was always a lesson in respect and self-control." The 1924 Cyclone recorded: "Mr. Tittle began work, and by the end of the first year had instilled some of his knowledge of the game into his men. Along with this he showed them the advantage of clean sport and living. Mr. Tittle has been here three years, acting as head coach. During this time he has built up football and baseball teams that rank well in this section of the state, as the record shows. Mr. Tittle not only knew the game of football, but had the ability to win the friendship and respect of all who were connected with him." Those life lessons for the Pipers of the 1920's, with additional admonition from other educators the following years, continue to serve Hamlin's alumni well as each steps into leadership roles within their own family unit and the communities and cities they call "home".

The community of Hamlin did embrace the Pied Piper not only as the school's mascot, but the town's as well. Numerous businesses over the years promoted the Pied Piper in their business name, with some still in operation today. At least three students within the school today have the name Piper, and even charter football team member, the late Richard Harold Harden, has a great great granddaughter whose middle name is Piper. It is yet undiscovered the exact year for adopting the mascot name of the "Mighty Mice" for the boys junior high 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade athletic teams; however, an early 1950's photograph of one of the teams has been discovered with the team name written on the photo. The "Mighty Mice" were still in existence as of the early to mid-1970's, yet the mascot name seemed to vanish following the loss of the grand and majestic junior high building to a devastating fire in the spring of 1975. Over these last one hundred years, Hamlin has been well represented in the various U.I.L. events by achieving individual 1<sup>st</sup> place medals in State contests, winning multiple awards in the F.F.A. program, and winning several State team or individual titles in track and field. The school's band program for many years was well-respected and admired wherever the destination for their performances would take them. The 1974-1975 Hamlin High School Stage Band was even designated as one of three jazz bands within the United States to travel throughout Europe presenting concerts over an almost two week period. Hamlin has achieved much through her student body of yesterday and today.

On September 8, 1962, Coach J. C. Tittle, II was invited to address the Hamlin Ex-Students during the Homecoming's noon luncheon and business meeting. He told of his "former school days in HHS, and how he gave the football team the name "Pied Pipers." Twenty-one of his former players returned to hear him speak after some thirty-nine to forty-one years from stepping on the field as Pied Pipers. Coach Tittle served Hamlin for the seasons of 1921 through at least the majority of 1923 before accepting the coaching position in nearby Rotan, where he would also be recognized as "the father of the Yellowhammer football team." The web site, [www.texashighschoolhistory.com](http://www.texashighschoolhistory.com) shows Coach Tittle as Rotan's coach in 1923 with a record of 1-4-0, while, the same web site shows his 1923 record for Hamlin as 6-2-0. Hamlin's school annual for the 1923-'24 year displays the Piper's opponents and scores for the 1923 season here as 9-2-0, and states the following: "Mr. Tittle will not be back next year and every football man and lover of the game will hate to see him go." Following his years in Rotan, Clark Tittle moved his family to Austin and entered the oil business as a successful drilling contractor. "J. C. Tittle, II passed away in 1977 from a heart attack after battling some years of poor health at his home in Austin. He would be so honored today to know that descendants of those that he loved coaching and teaching at Hamlin High School would consider him worthy of honor today, 100 years after he began his career there."

The year is now 2021, and the Hamlin, Texas of today still has many forward-thinking and determined citizens who are working to better the community as were those early pioneers in 1921. The population for the community now stands at approximately 2,067. Hamlin is battling back from the destructive Memorial Day flood this year where a total of 191 structures suffered some type of flood damage, with thirty-three of them being major. A new church facility is being constructed in the old Primary Building many of us attended. The public school system is now the Hamlin Collegiate I.S.D. offering many more avenues in future careers and educational programs for our students. Some of the local industries within the community are expanding, downtown Hamlin is getting a beautification facelift, and even the prospects for infrastructure improvements in the way of new sewer lines will soon be realized with monies received through a generous community grant. As far as the rat population goes, Hamlin will ALWAYS need a Pied Piper!