



*Hugh January with his son "Junior"  
standing at a Kessler Park home construction site during the 1920's.  
(Junior's eye is swollen from a recent bee sting.)*

# The Bankruptcy of Kessler Park

by Jim Barnes

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As affluent as idyllic Kessler Park appears today, it's hard to believe that its original owner, the North Texas Trust Company, went broke.

The North Texas Trust Company grew out of the fortune of George W. Owens, a former Methodist minister turned Oak Cliff businessman, who founded Owens Lumber Company, an empire including fifteen lumber yards, a home-building outfit, and a mortgage finance company. Four years before his death in 1918 Owens gave the City of Dallas a gray granite obelisk supported by three fountains (still standing at the corner of Marsalis Avenue and Jefferson Boulevard) which Owens believed would "last a century, if not longer". His sons extended the family wealth through positions in banking and finance. Led by sons Everett Owens and George W. Owens Jr., the North Texas Trust Company undertook real estate development. Kessler Park was one of its largest ventures.

The site for Kessler Park was purchased in 1923, at the time of the death of influential American city planner George E. Kessler. The subdivision and the parkway were named in Kessler's memory. Platting the subdivision and installing infrastructure progressed rapidly. Lot sales commenced about the same time the Stevens Park Golf Course opened in the spring of 1924. The North Texas Trust Company had invested a fortune in clearing wooded hillsides, paving new streets, and snaking utilities through Kessler Park; but because it was planned as a high priced "exclusive" enclave, lots sold slowly. In 1928 one of the Owens family, Mary, and her husband Dr. R.B. Spurgin built their new home at 1525 Olympia, the "castle" at the top of the vine covered hillside towering above the Stevens Park Golf Course. The "Roaring Twenties" rapidly de-accelerated until by the end of the decade Dallas was mired by the worst economic recession in American history. Real estate foreclosure became commonplace.

The head real estate salesman for Kessler Park was Hugh January. Among the clippings in his personal scrapbook are large newspaper advertisements announcing 42 University Park lots being liquidated by an Owens Lumber Company "Foreclosure Sale". Vacant parcels near the intersection of Preston and Lovers Lane were priced between \$750 and \$1,250 each. His scrapbook also includes six neatly typed pages outlining a scheme to sell-off 100 vacant lots in Kessler Park. The sales strategy for dumping the entire remaining inventory of Kessler Park aimed to minimize all the public gossip that could easily ruin the neighborhood's lofty reputation and lofty prices. Off-hours Rosemont Elementary School teachers were to be hired to canvas the neighborhood door-to-door, soliciting names of friends who might be potential new buyers. Two thousand letters were to be sent out to these select prospects, giving them "first pick" among lots whose prices were half normal market value. No prior public announcement was to be made.

The North Texas Trust Company had been declared "bankrupt" by the 95<sup>th</sup> District Court in April of 1932. Kessler Park was "going under". But, that September a meeting of one hundred investors owning debentures of the defunct North Texas Trust Company heeded expert advice and voted not to undertake any sudden mass real estate sell-off. Publicity was skillfully managed. The bankruptcy of the North Texas Trust Company was publicly reported, yet I can find only one related article in the *Dallas Morning News* where the name "Kessler Park" appears. Home-site sales calmly continued at their slow stately pace. It's possible that many residents never realized that their neighborhood was undergoing a bloody head transplant operation. Real estate salesman Hugh January's daughter, Lurlyn January Fleming, whose memory of her childhood in Kessler Park is still vivid and detailed, has no recollection of hearing talk about any "bankruptcy" or "receivership".

I doubt if this story has ever been publicly told, until now.



*Monument that George W. Owens erected after recovering from a long illness -- (corner of Marsalis Avenue and Jefferson Boulevard, with his Oak Cliff Methodist Church behind). Owens' family estate, the **North Texas Trust**, was the original developer of the first **Kessler Park** addition. Many original homebuilders in **Kessler Park**, including the official parsonage, came from this church.*