

Driving Forces: Ernest Hine's mayoral terms were more than fair

By Rebekah Davis
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Note: This is the fourth in a series of articles sharing the stories behind the names of some local streets.

Athens Mayor Ernest Hine strolled the grounds of Capt. John A. Turner's Round Island Stock Farm on that cool fall day in the early 1900s, inspecting the exhibits hanging from the limbs of an enormous shade tree and the watermelons and pumpkins spread on the ground. About the time Hine finished his rounds through Capt. Turner's country fair, he was struck with a bright idea: It was time for a Limestone County Fair.

"I remember Mr. Hine came to me and suggested that I buy the land owned by the late Mrs. W. J. Irvine, facing on the Buck Island road and beginning at Town Creek," Robert Henry Walker Sr. wrote in the *Limestone Democrat* nearly 40 years later, saying he paid \$900 for the 13.5-acre tract of land at the intersection of what is now Market and Hine streets. "After I had bought the land the Limestone County Fair Association bought it from me... Mr. Hine and his children added six acres more to the tract, thus giving room for a half mile race track, together with a small grandstand, floral hall and cattle, hog and sheep stalls."

The fair became a prize-winning achievement for Hine, delighting pumpkin-growers, horse-racers, and horse-bettors alike for decades, and was one of many reasons Athens ended up naming the street that ran by the fairgrounds in his honor.

Born Dec. 3, 1858, in Athens, William "Ernest" Hine was the son of William Anson Hine and Letitia Sloss Hine, a prominent couple who were leaders in the business and religious communities. He married Kate Anderson, granddaughter of a Kentucky governor, and they had two sons and four daughters. They lived in a home that had been built in 1831 on West Washington Street, near the location of today's Athens-Limestone Hospital Wellness Center, so in later years, they could watch the annual fair festivities from their back porch.

Hine followed in his father's footsteps, opening a meat market in 1884 with his friend Ben Hurd before buying his father's hardware and grocery store on the southwest corner of the Square – today's location of Bennett's Department Store – in 1891 and his father's part of the Hill & Hine hardware and builder's supply store in 1892.

Around 1900, with Athens booming and Hine serving as president of the retail merchants association, Hine called a meeting of local business owners and organized the "Commercial Club." Over the years, this evolved into today's Chamber of Commerce.

By 1912, Hine was so recognized as a community leader that he handily won election as mayor. He was re-elected again in 1914 and 1918, and it was during his second term that he worked to establish the Limestone County Fairgrounds. During his third term, Hine announced that he would send wagons around the city to pick up trash placed beside the road, thus establishing the City of Athens' first sanitation department.

In his obituary, the *Limestone Democrat* also noted, "Hine was a man of aesthetic tastes, an advocate of improved educational facilities and a lover of music. For many years he was a member of the choir of the Athens First Methodist Church, of which he was a loyal member."

On Sept. 3, 1943, after a long illness, Hine died in his home overlooking the fairgrounds. The fairs went on each fall for many more years after his death before the fairgrounds moved and the land became the site of the Limestone County Emergency Management Agency, Limestone County Extension Service, and Department of Human Resources offices. Today, you can still see those offices and that area if you take a little drive... down Hine Street.

Note: Sources for this article include Mary Mason's Scrapbook, Treasures of Athens and Limestone County, and the Limestone Democrat.

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