

Why a Texas community is named after Notre Dame legend Knute Rockne?

By [Peter Warren](#), Houston Chronicle Staff writer

Aug 31, 2024

Bonnie Bauer Shimek has called Rockne — a dot on the map in Bastrop County, about a 30-mile drive southeast of Austin — home for her whole life.

But the unique story behind her [beloved hometown's name](#) wasn't something she grew up knowing.

It wasn't named after a Dutch businessman like county seat Bastrop or a local family like Smithville or a railroad commissioner like Elgin. The community was named after Knute Rockne, one of the most famous college football coaches in history — and someone who never lived anywhere near the town.

"I would have been probably in high school when I really learned of the true reasoning for the name," said Bauer Shimek, a member of the Rockne Historical Association board.

LOOKING AHEAD: [Texas A&M's Mike Elko says offensive line 'has come a long way' ahead of opener against Notre Dame](#)

That history has become more known over the years.

While Bauer Shimek said the locals call Rockne a town, it is officially labeled as an unincorporated community. There is no post office in the town. The main pocket of the community is on a small stretch on FM-535. There's the Rockne Museum and bite-size Hilbig Park, the Sacred Heart Church and Cemetery, the old-school Leon's Country Store and a few other businesses.

The Texas State Historical Association says the population in 2000 was 400 people, the same as it was a quarter of a century earlier.

"It's a very close-knit community," said Galynn Fogle, another member of the board who lives about nine miles east in Rosanky. "They help out their neighbors."

But no one in the community was ever close to Rockne. He has no known connection to the town, other than the name.

What's in a name?

The community that is now Rockne was first began to form in the 1840s and 1850s with German Catholic settlers. They built the first church in 1876 and then Sacred Heart after the first church burned down in 1891.

Sacred Heart has been the tentpole of the community since the 1890s. But while the house of worship remained a pillar, the community itself went through names like a tailgater going through drinks before a cold Saturday night football game.

First it was Walnut Creek. Then Lehmanville. Then Hilbigville.

COLLEGE: [Texas A&M president Mark Welsh promises Ted Cruz will bring Aggies 'good luck' against Notre Dame](#)

The decision to rename once again, and make it official, came in 1931. But this time instead of naming it after the postmaster or a local waterway, the local pastor presented two options to the voting committee made up of students at Sacred Heart School.

They could name the town Kilmer after Joyce Kilmer or Rockne after Knute Rockne.

Kilmer was a poet who wrote the famous 1913 poem "Trees." He died fighting in World War I at the age of 31.

Rockne was one of the most famous football coaches of the 20th century. A Notre Dame alum who starred for the Fighting Irish, Rockne coached the team from 1918-1930. Notre Dame won three national titles during those 13 seasons as Rockne accumulated a 105-12-5 record.

The Fighting Irish became a national phenomenon under Rockne thanks to his style of football and his marketing tactics that brought the team all over the country.

"Notre Dame was Knute Rockne's address, but every gridiron in America was his home," famous entertainer Will Rogers once said, [according to the College Football Hall of Fame](#).

But Rockne's career and life ended earlier that year when he died in a plane crash.

Jim Lefebvre, the executive director of the [Knute Rockne Memorial Society](#) and author of a biography on the coach, said Rockne was as big as it got in American sports at the time of his death.

"He was totally at the height of his popularity when he's taken and I think that just kind of seared his career into the memory of people across the country," Lefebvre said. "Certainly, it was the golden age of sports between Dempsey and other boxers and baseball players, Ruth and Gehrig and so forth. He was right there."

The vote was split right down the middle. All the girls voted for Kilmer. All the boys voted for Rockne.

What happened next varies slightly depending on who is telling the story, but here's how Lea Ann Lee, Rockne Historical Association president, recalled it this week.

"The nuns told all the boys and girls, go home and pray about it and come back tomorrow, and we'll vote again. And the story is that one of the little girls changed her vote to Rockne," Lee said.

Edith Goertz was that tiebreaker. Her father was a fan of Rockne, according to research from the Rockne Museum, and she loved her father.

Honoring Rockne

Rockne never visited the community during his life. However, his 1924 Notre Dame squad, one of [the most famous teams](#) in college football history, did pass through Houston on their way to the 1925 Rose Bowl.

But even though Rockne never knew about Rockne, the community has helped continue his memory in small ways over the years, starting with the work of the late Minnie Bartsch.

She helped bring the U.S. Postal Service to Rockne to set up a post office for one day in 1988 to celebrate the release of a Knute Rockne stamp in honor of his 100th birthday.

Then Jerry McKenna, [a Boerne-based sculptor](#) who has created busts for the Pro Football Hall of Fame and sculptures at multiple sports stadiums across the country, later created a life-size Knute Rockne bust for the town.

Located outside of the museum, the bust first debuted in the community in 2006. It is one of around 11 sculptures and busts McKenna, a Notre Dame alum and self-proclaimed "Rocknephile" his whole life, has created that can be found around the world. McKenna's done Rockne's likeness so many times he said he could create it from memory.

"I made him very husky and muscular in that particular sculpture," McKenna said. "I hope they admire the image of his strength and personality there in bronze and are inspired to look up Rockne and see what he actually accomplished in the world of college football."

The location has become a site for some Notre Dame fans to visit over the years. Some Notre Dame alums have even given generous donations to the historical association, Bauer Shimek said, including the Rockne family.

One of those fans to visit was a third-grade girl named Rockne after the football coach. Along with her mother and grandmother, young Rockne went to the museum to learn more for a research paper she was doing.

Another one visited following a sporting event between Rice and Notre Dame in Houston and ended up buying a brick for the community's memorial sidewalk.

There might even be a few fans who stop by this weekend as Notre Dame plays Texas A&M in primetime Saturday night. Rockne is about a 90-mile drive from Kyle Field. The Fighting Irish are playing in College Station for the first time since 2001 this weekend.

As for the community itself, the town name has correlated to it being a bastion of fans wearing Fighting Irish gear and singing the Notre Dame Victory March.

Locals say it is mostly a divided community with Longhorn and Aggie fans. Rockne Grocery, a store located at the corner of FM-535 and FM-20, has a Corona banner featuring the University of Texas schedule on it. Leon's Country Store has a sign above its bar counter that says "LEON'S" in burnt orange with the Longhorns logo preceding it.

But even if Rockne didn't become a Notre Dame haven, the community has embraced the name since that deciding vote was cast 93 years ago.

"It's come to take on a life of its own," Lee said. "The name has taken on a meaning of its own in our community."