

Courthouse fans give their best

Group of 'friends' spruces up site ahead of Bayfest

By John Mies

STAFF WRITER

Tina Garcia was married in the old Nueces County Courthouse in 1942, and the image of the once-elegant building is still fresh in her mind.

"It was beautiful," Garcia said. "The new courthouse is pretty, but it's nothing like this."

Love for the courthouse has kept Garcia coming back to clean it inside and out since it closed in 1977. On Saturday, she and a handful of friends braved fire ants, stubborn weeds and oppressive humidity to spruce up the courthouse grounds.

"We're getting ready for Bayfest, so it will look nice," said Margaret Walberg, president of Friends of the Courthouse Inc. She said several people - including investors from Germany and Sweden - have expressed interest in buying the historic building.

Built in 1914, the structure served as the Nueces County Courthouse until 1977, when the courts moved to a new building on Leopard Street.

It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 through efforts of Friends of the Courthouse and the Nueces County Historical Society.

The county sold the building to a group of lawyers in 1978, who then sold it to S. Charles Bennett III. Last month, a district judge granted a judgment against Bennett for back taxes, clearing the way for the building to be sold at auction.

Until the building changes hands, the Friends of the Courthouse have committed themselves to keeping the structure and its grounds looking their best.

"It's really a great project, and we want to get more people involved," said Dr. Clotilde Garcia, a director of the historical society.

Garcia said she was particularly interested in improving the grounds for local celebrations of the Quincentenary - the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World - in 1992.

OLD COURTHOUSE UNSUNG HEROES

Ernest Cantu *
Charles Davis *
Kjell Engstroem ***
Dr. Clotilde Garcia *
Dr. Dalia Garcia *
Ray J. Garcia *
Charles & Barbara Gravett *
Joakim Kruger *
Margaret Ramage **
Judge Mike Westergren ***
Todd White *
Margaret Walberg *****

The star indicates three hour service cleaning the courthouse lawn.

Thanks also to paid workers - J.C. Diggs, Tina Garcia, Mary Perez, City, County and State employees.



JUDGE MIKE WESTERGREN on his Vintage Tractor mows the OLD COURTHOUSE LAWN.

CCNB CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION

The exhibition opens to the public on Friday, November 2, at 10:00 a.m. Cactus Pryor will be entertaining from opening to 2:00 p.m., on the hour. The exhibit will be open until November 30, from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. daily. We hope you will be here to welcome Cactus Pryor and view our exhibit.



SOUTH TEXAS ROADWAYS

SECRETS OF "OUTBACK NUECES COUNTY"

On occasion I travel south and southwest of Corpus Christi where the highways fan out to Encinal, Laredo, San Ygnacio, Zapata, Roma, or Rio Grande City. In between those points are such places as San Diego, Freer, Benavides, Realitos, and Hebronville and, although most of it is barren country, I relish every mile of it. It's vast, and it's Texas.

What I see from the car window is the flat terrain sectioned with fences, dotted with prickly pear and laced with mesquite. Hawks fly overhead and an occasional roadrunner races along a fence line. Now and then we pass a side road leading to an oil field, a sprawling ranch house or a small jacal, and always the ancient sun-baked cemeteries, brilliant with plastic flowers — red, yellow, purple.

This is the land that Jimmie Picquet, Director of the Connor Museum in Kingsville, calls "Outback Nueces County." At one time it was Nueces County. Today, this "outback" includes all, or part, of a dozen counties — Jim Wells, Duval, Webb, Zapata, Jim Hogg, Brooks, Kleberg, Kenedy, Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy, and Cameron.

At the September meeting of the Nueces County Historical Society, Picquet shared some of the secrets of this desert-like area. She brought it to life like opening the pages of a pop-up book.

"How many of you have ever been to Randado?" she asked. "From Hebronville south to Zapata and up the Rio Grande to San Ygnacio and all the roads in between are some of the darndest things you'll ever see. Randado is out there in the middle of almost nowhere."

The Hinojosa ranch in Randado is still in the hands of the descendants of the original Spanish grantee. What amounts to five generations of housing is on the ranch. The earliest construction is a *sillar* house made of blocks of caliche which are sawed out of rather damp environment. The blocks are then set out in the sun and, when they are dry, are melded together with a solution of quick lime. Such houses stand forever and have the advantage of being extremely cool. When the sun is blazing and the thermometer on the porch reads 105 degrees, inside the temperature is a comparatively cool 85 degrees.

On the same ranchland is a well twenty feet deep and lined with *sillar* blocks. Water is such an important factor at Randado that the early inhabitants built the well, a large cistern, and a dam for holding water that comes from a spring.

It is said that when Stephen F. Austin rode across the Nueces strip, he said that the land wasn't worth colonizing. It had no water and no trees. No one would want to settle in such a barren area. In spite of this, two cultures did make their homes in this outback area. The melding



by E'Lane Carlisle Murray

of these people is a tribute to their strength and ingenuity.

All along the highway and on the ranches are fences called *corrals de lena* an invention of necessity. Wood is scarce and available only in small pieces. The taller posts were set at intervals, opposite each other, filled in with small limbs and branches to make a strong, thick fence, and then plastered with caliche. These old fences are still standing and new ones are being built.

The blessing of the corral de lena was that it kept the mamas and the baby calves warm when the spring northers blew in. The curse was that it cut off the breeze for the men who worked the cattle inside — another melding of the two cultures.

In using the term "barbed wire fence," I remember that in my childhood we always said, "bob-wire." Everyone knew that when a blue norther swept in there was "nothing between Texas and the North Pole but a bob-wire fence." I miss feeling free to say, "bob-wire."

The last stage coach hold-up on record in Texas occurred about 7 miles from Randado in 1908. Records indicate that the church in Randado was built in 1830. It is still used every time a priest is in the vicinity. At one time the little town had a post office, about 300 people, and its own baseball team. Its people often rode horseback to Hebronville and caught the train to San Diego and other points north.

A year or two ago, plans were begun at the Connor Museum for a major Quincentenary project tentatively titled, "A Conflict of Cultures." A group of national museum representatives, anthropologists and sociologists, became involved with, and excited about, the possibilities. If an implementation grant is approved, an exhibit will be created to travel to Spain, Mexico, and northern cities in the United States.

The goal of the exhibit will be to show how, along the international border between Texas and Mexico in the original ranching areas, two cultures met. In this unique environment, these cultures merged, borrowed from each other, and found the best of both worlds.

NUECES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

DOYLE WILLIS has completed organizing the society's photograph collection and has placed the photographs and captions in deacidified plastic sleeves in protective cases which thereby preserves our valuable historic collection.

Our slide collection still needs to be organized. We extend our sincere appreciation to Doyle for his meticulous work.

Our photograph collection began in 1980 under the direction of Margaret Walberg, Sally Robeau and Anita Eisenhauer who were the picture researchers for "Corpus Christi. The History of a Texas Seaport" by Bill Walraven.

They donated their time, all photographs and money received for their expertise to the historical society.

Currently an exhibition of these photographs is on display in the Nueces County Commissioners Courthouse, on the 3rd floor of Nueces County Courthouse. Monday thru Friday 8:00 a.m. - Noon and 1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Bus trip to historical sites

Texas A&I University anthropologist Joe Graham will act as tour guide on a bus trip next Friday to historic sites in the Zapata-San Ygnacio area.

The bus, which will start from Corpus Christi and pick up additional passengers in Kingsville, is scheduled to visit structures dating from as long ago as 1790. They include a monastery, family cemetery, earthen dams and numerous houses.

The fee for the trip is \$40 per person and includes a box lunch and barbecue dinner. For more information, call the John E. Connor Museum in Kingsville at 595-2810.