T
he Brownsville Historical Association would like to lay claim to being the oldest active historical organization in the Rio Grande Valley, so this notice should serve as a challenge to possible rival claimants. We are unaware of any.

Not surprisingly, over the years of its existence, members of the BHA have endeavored to record the history of the Valley’s premier historical organization. Much of this information comes from records kept by Mrs. Harbert Davenport and Ms. Ruby Wooldridge.

Apparently, the “Centennial of Texas Independence” in 1936 proved to be the stimulus for increased public interest in historic preservation. Members of the Cameron County Centennial Committee met in early 1946 to organize the Brownsville Historical Association and a charter application was approved by the Texas Secretary of State on January 28, 1947. One of the objectives of the BHA in those early days included the preservation of Brownsville area history and landmarks; especially the home of the city’s founder, Charles Stillman. Officers elected at the first meeting were: J.T. Canales, President; Mrs. J.K. Wells, Vice President; Mrs. Harbert Davenport, Secretary; and Guy G. Bevil, Treasurer.

The new organization tackled several projects during its first few years, including: designing and ordering Brownsville Centennial plates, helping to mark the Oblate Trail for the Oblate Centennial, and providing the city with a copy of the original contract for the construction of the city market. Mrs. Davenport wrote a pamphlet on “Historic Spots In and Around Brownsville”, which served as the BHA’s first brochure. At the same time, the BHA encountered obstacles and frustration as well. For example,
The Brownsville Historical Association celebrates seventy years this year. Anniversaries are a great time to reflect on where we started and how far we have come. You will learn from an article in this newsletter, that the BHA was created by Brownsville citizens deeply concerned about local preservation efforts and the need to safeguard archives, artifacts and oral histories. I am proud to say that this mission continues today.

This year, the Board of Directors and staff want to strengthen outreach to our community through the Brownsville Independent School District, city government, the college, the university, the Mitte Cultural District and various societies and organizations looking to improve the quality of life for the citizens of Brownsville and visitors.

Our latest collaboration with the Historic Brownsville Museum located at the Old Southern Pacific Railroad Depot, now allows us to tell the story of our local transportation history along the river, and the railroad that changed Brownsville’s economic demographic forever.

I hope that you are able to join us within the course of the year for various lectures, tours, programs, exhibits and events to learn more about the rich history and culture of Brownsville. Thank you for your continued support.

Best wishes and Happy New Year!

Tara Putegnat
Executive Director

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At the very onset of the development of the Rio Viejo Subdivision, the prevailing thought was to dedicate this parcel to the building of blue-collar housing, similar to what developer Phil Elixson had created with Central Park in the early 1940’s, right across the way and opposite the Los Ebanos Ward Elementary School. There was even more of a need for this type of dwelling, spurred on by the return of men from the war effort in Europe and the Pacific after 1945. In March of 1949, Walsh did commit to building along these lines through his Villa Verde Subdivision, off of McDavit Boulevard.

The City of Brownsville owned a tract of land which had been given the title, “Resaca Park”, fronting on Boca Chica Boulevard (then known as the Banker Cut-off), where the Philen and Pipkin homes are now, inclusive of the site of the Baptist Church and their academy. From the late 1920’s up through the late 1940’s various civic groups such as the WPA, CCC, and NYA engaged in projects to plant trees, shrubs, and groundcover in this proposed park area that was joined together with Ringgold Park and Fillmore (Lincoln) Park as a broad movement to develop natural recreational settings for the citizens of Brownsville. Aerial photographs as late as 1952 indicated that not much was actually done to improve the raw brush land that existed there by anything more than several winding nature trails and a graded dirt road.

In 1949, the City Administration voted to sell the rudimentary Resaca Park lands to Walsh & Carruth’s Rio Viejo Development Corp. for $10.00, with the pledge from RVDC that approximately $200,000 would be spent by the development company on infrastructure consisting of paved roadways, curbing and gutters, storm sewer drainage, and street lighting. Later on (1955) a small group of citizens would bring a lawsuit against Walsh & Carruth, basically claiming that the mayoral administration of that era illegally entered into this sale from the standpoint that it would have legally had to have gone the route of public election to have sold municipal parkland for private development. They also cried foul over the switch away from blue-collar housing, in

Brownsville’s Contemporary Architecture
the architecture between the 1930s and 1960s seems interesting. In Europe, true American architecture is considered to have begun in the 1940s, with the arrival of experts like Gropius or Mies van der Rohe to the United States.

Brownsville has numerous well-known examples of historic sites that follow the Border Brick, Victorian, Queen Anne or Craftsman styles. However, there are many important Mid-century Modern buildings which go unnoticed. One of our missions, as BHA members and lovers of Brownsville, is to open our eyes, so that we, in turn, can direct the attention of residents and tourists to these architectural wonders. The Brownsville Historic Preservation Office has the obligation of marketing this beautiful style, so as to rejuvenate our heritage. This year, two of the four new Primary Local Resources designations are Mid-century Modern buildings. The first designation approved by the Brownsville Historic Preservation & Design Review Board is a house designed by Caudill Rowlett, Scott & Associates (1949), located at 37 Coria Street. A participant in this design was William Peña, a pioneer in Architectural Programming in the United States, whose goal was that of present day architecture: the architect designs after determining the needs of the client. The second designation is an industrial office building designed by Bowman, Swanson & Hiester (1963) for Southern Union Gas, located at 355 West Elizabeth Street.

The buildings speak for themselves. Make time to visit these sites: we are proud of these two new historic resources.

Juan Vélez
Historic Preservation Officer (Spanish Architect & Building Engineer, Escuela Europea de Madrid, España) and BHA Board member

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favor of exclusive, high-end residential development. This argument was shot down by several technicalities, including the legal fact that the law they were attempting to hold as binding was only applicable to “Home-Rule Communities of 5,000 inhabitants or less, plus the fact that Rio Viejo had now emerged as a very positive addition to Brownsville, at a greatly beneficial tax-based improvement. The sale of the city land in this equation allowed Walsh & Carruth to develop the waterfront properties in the subject area and elevate the scale of residence offerings upward in pricing. The development company also had the burden of cost that went toward the full-scale dredging of the resacas, applying the dredged spoils to elevate and terrace the homesites. In fact, this created a marketing advantage allowing RVDC to sell “Terraced Lots.”

The Rio Viejo project drew success for the developers on a national level from the standpoints of real estate promotion as well as the concentration of “Designer Homes” that went up by the property owners, and by the fact that by the close of the 1960’s Rio Viejo was almost completely sold out. This subdivision today remains the premiere subdivision for upper-scale residences, even from a sales point of view. The subdivision’s location in a historic area far from the main stream of development exacerbated its success, allowing a marketing advantage when compared to other subdivisions that were not as well situated.

Join us in celebration of Texas History Month with a sampling of wine, beer, liquor and food pairings unique to the Lone Star State. Fundraising efforts for this event help support BHA programming. Sponsorships available — Call Us at 956-541-5560. Tickets $50.00. Cost: $50.00. Where: Laureles Ranch House Museum, 1501 E. 7th Street (Linear Park) Saturday March 25, 2017. When: 7th Annual Taste of Texas of Brownsville Museum Site Manager and Old City Cemetery Coordinator Eugene Fernandez

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