The Restored Courthouse and Judge Oscar Dancy

On October 26, 2006, Cameron County celebrated the (very expensive) restoration of the historic 1912 Courthouse. While the structure was out-of-service as the official courthouse, it had been named the “Oscar Dancy Building” in honor of the long-serving late county judge. On that pleasant fall evening the restored and again official Cameron County Courthouse was rededicated to Dancy, with his portrait presiding over the (new) commissioners’ courtroom. The main address of the evening was given by Dancy’s grandson, Dan Kennerly, a man whose charm reflected that of his ancestor. Some years previously I had obtained tapes of radio broadcasts made by Judge Dancy, and I now provided copies to his grandson. When the judge’s voice first reached Kennerly’s ears, his face lit up with delight at hearing a voice he had not heard for many decades.

Judge Oscar Dancy served nearly 50 years as Cameron County Judge, from 1920 to 1970, with a two-year interruption during the Depression. Born in a log cabin in North Carolina in 1879, Dancy gained his early political experience by making speeches for William Jennings Bryan during the 1896 presidential campaign. After serving in the Spanish-American War, Dancy was chosen as mayor of a town in his home state, but his wife’s illness compelled him to relocate to South Texas in 1909. Dancy practiced law for a time, was appointed county attorney in 1917, then elected county judge as the political machine of “Boss” Jim Wells finally faltered.

An enduring characteristic of both Judge Dancy’s public policies and his personal life was his commitment to frugality. The judge did not waste money on liquor or fancy living, never owned a car, and lived in a modest residence. Although he frequently travelled to Austin, Washington, and Latin America on behalf of the county, he always strove to save the taxpayers’ money by staying in second class hotels.

Continued on Page 2
As we draw the year to a close and begin the busy holiday season, I invite each of you to take advantage of the many programs, tours, exhibits and lectures we offer. The BHA staff is excited to offer great activities this fall.

The past few months have brought some changes to the Brownsville Historical Association. In September, we said good-bye to our Program and Education Coordinator, Craig Stone, and wished him well in future endeavors. We now welcome our new Coordinator to the BHA team, a long-time volunteer at the Old City Cemetery Center, Mr. David Parsons. It is always encouraging to work with dedicated staff and meet volunteers and community leaders who share the same goals in telling the story of our local history.

This Christmas season, consider giving friends and loved ones the gift of a BHA membership or stop by our museum stores for your gift shopping needs.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of the sponsors, volunteers and board members who made our Paella Festival Cook-Off Competition a great success.

Enclosed in the newsletter is our calendar of events. We hope to see you soon.

Happy Thanksgiving and Merry Christmas!

Tara Putegnat
Executive Director

Anthony Knopp
BHA Board Member
The Coahuiltecan Indians

The Coahuiltecan Indians were the native peoples first encountered by the Spanish in what would eventually be referred to as the Rio Grande Valley. A nomadic people, the Coahuiltecan culture had many subgroups including the Payayas, Tamiques, Carrizos, Bobole, and Aranamas. Surviving in a harsh environment these groups ate what nature provided; mesquite beans, cactus, deer, skunks, rabbits, spiders, ants, and even such things as rotted wood or dirt. Truly, the Coahuiltecan race existed in starving times on the very brink of what the human anatomy could digest. Their minimal clothing came from nature as well, as they made sandals from local materials and a type of loincloth sundried from materials including deer, coyote or rabbit. Portable shelters were similarly made from hides or matting.

Little changed in Coahuiltecan society and as a result they are sometimes referred to as a “fossil culture.” This can be in part due to the fact that few outside tribes ventured into this semidesert area causing isolation, teemed with the reality that these peoples spent their time merely surviving, and experienced little progress or advancement.

Nevertheless, they certainly exemplified talent. The Coahuiltecans possessed an ability to create an intricate weaving for netting, and used an impressive relay system to chase down certain prey. They utilized an alcoholic drink from the agave cactus, and consumed the hallucinogenic peyote cactus for religious purposes. Coahuiltecan religious traditions also believed that everything, even man-made objects, had a soul.

By the mid nineteenth century the Coahuiltecan way of life had virtually disappeared due to the encroachment of the Spanish who brought disease and warfare. However, Coahuiltecan blood exists today through assimilation. Many elements of the local culture including food, medicine and language, still reflect Coahuiltecan traditions.

Jim Mills
BHA Board Member