

BHA Banner Newsletter

Brownsville Historical Association

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Brownsville Historical Association

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Remembering Fort Brown

Fort Brown played an integral part in Brownsville history as the two coexisted for most of a century until the border post closed permanently in May, 1944. During this time the old fort and Brownsville shared both economically and socially. Soldiers would come to town and spend money which helped the local merchants. Soldiers, often with their families, visited the local movie theaters, shopped in the stores, and ate at the restaurants. Fort Brown soldiers also participated in social events including locally held dances, which sometimes led to budding romances and marriage. Descendants of these military soldiers and local girls still live in Brownsville today. Since there was no school at Fort Brown, army children living on base attended school in Brownsville at both public and private institutions. They arrived each day by army truck, sitting in the back upon wooden benches.

At times, the Fort Brown military complex hired civilian workers which also helped the local economy. Fort Brown and the surrounding communities shared experiences such as holidays and special events. Fireworks were ignited on the Fort Brown peninsula and the public was invited to attend. During the Cinco de Mayo and Charro Days celebrations Fort Brown and the local community, including Matamoros, intermingled. The Fort Brown cavalry and regimental band joined the festivities. On other occasions, the community was invited to watch a baseball game or an occasional boxing match held at Fort Brown. The public also enjoyed polo matches held on the large, open parade grounds located within the fort. Brownsville citizens would rise early in the morning to the sounds of the Fort Brown bugler playing reveille and retire at night to the notes of military taps.

Although Fort Brown closed during World War II, the old border post is not forgotten.

Jim Mills

BHA Board Member



From the Executive Director...

With the arrival of spring and students looking forward to the end of another school year we may be thinking about the warmer weather and fun activities. Like schools, we too will be closing our doors to visitors the last week in June for cleaning and maintenance and reopen after the 4th of July holiday. Once again, BHA staff has worked hard to fill our quarterly calendar with our monthly Historical Happy Hours, a Garden Talk, book signings, an Old City Cemetery tour, a historical marker workshop and other programs.

In March we had a very successful fundraiser, the 6th annual Taste of Texas, at the newly restored Laureles Ranch House. I am especially grateful to our sponsors and attendees. The house, located in Linear Park, will be open to visitors soon and will help the BHA tell the story of South Texas ranching and its importance in our local history.

I would also like to welcome all of our newest members to the BHA family. Your generosity and support helps ensure historical awareness for future generations.

Happy spring! I hope to see you at the BHA.

Tara Putegnat
Executive Director

On-Going Progress For Resaca Revitalization at Old City Cemetery

On March 22, 2013 Brownsville's PUB launched the Resaca Restoration Project, and their Phase I element centered on cleaning up the Resaca behind Old City Cemetery. What one witnesses today on a drive up Old Alice Road behind the Gladys Porter Zoo is testimony to prove that their intentions were far more than idle or hollow. From the development of an elaborate dredging process, to a complex series of public outreach meetings, we can now see the culmination of intensive work to completely revitalize what once was a shabby stretch of waterfront, bordering a swamp infested with stagnant water and all manner of discarded trash.

The total project cost (inclusive of three more segments of Town Resaca) topped \$7 million. The leg behind Old City Cemetery is finishing out by about April 15th at approximately \$700,000, and by anyone's estimation is money well-spent.

The water depth was improved from barely one foot to about six feet. Literally tons of trash was removed, and the shoreline was scalped of the invasive "canizzo" (river cane). An environmentally-friendly chemical agent was introduced to the cane beds to eradicate it completely. A well-planned landscaping package was drafted to incorporate scenic re-introduction of native shade trees, palms, and groundcover plants that will reduce erosion of the banks. That operation in particular will serve to reduce the particulate matter that joins the waterway as run-off from rains. This lessens the turbidity and in turn lessens the depositing of silt.

On the second week of March, a landscape sprinkler system was installed to maintain healthy growth of the stock that has been invested into this project.

Beautify Brownsville Committee Volunteers Paint Tombs On Two Rounds

On January 18th about 100 youth volunteers from Brownsville's schools and institutions of higher learning descended upon Old City Cemetery for the purpose of cleaning and painting a variety of tombs therein. All totaled, they accomplished the refurbishment of thirty-seven of these venerable structures. Rather than just opting for the simple whitewash approach, the



painting was done in light pastel shades, which is actually historically correct for the Victorian Period, uniting with their concept of "Beautiful Death". To prove this fact, the old paint that was removed possessed various layers, some of which were indeed pastel shades.

On this past March 5th, Saturday

a second round comprised of fifty such volunteers completed round two of this project, mainly focusing on applying grey paint to the roof vaults of these tombs. Their help was greatly appreciated, and the ring of youthful laughter was a nice touch for these sacred grounds.

Eugene Fernandez
Old City Cemetery Coordinator

Preserving Brownsville's Past

This past November, I had the pleasure of attending a conference in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a nonprofit group that works to save America's historic places for the next generation. Not only did it refresh my interest in Brownsville's valuable architectural history, but it also served as a reminder that we aren't doing enough to preserve our historic places.

It is often said that Brownsville is the second most historic city in Texas, right behind San Antonio. Unfortunately, though, many of our historic buildings and homes are being torn down, are undergoing shoddy or illegal "remodeling" efforts, or are simply suffering from a lack of maintenance, commonly referred to as "demolition by neglect."

While some of that is driven by economics, awareness also plays a big part. Now is the time to reverse course and begin a concerted effort to save our past. Currently, all exterior remodeling, repairs, and new construction of properties located within the historic district require a permit. This is not meant to prevent individuals from making repairs to their properties, but rather, to encourage them

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to take proper measures to ensure that the repair or remodel has a sustainable design component and is performed with the utmost respect for the historical characteristics of the property.

Generally, historic structures are valuable not only from a cultural perspective, but have also proven to be strong drivers for economic development. Various studies have shown that districts with rehabilitated older structures thrive, providing an avenue for art and culture, new jobs, and ultimately create heritage tourism, something that has brought millions of dollars in revenues to other cities throughout the nation.

Through innovative and careful reuse, design and retrofitting of our downtown buildings, homes and vacant structures, Brownsville can actually fulfill its goal of a downtown revitalization. Our past is our future. We must all support revitalization efforts and do our part to make Brownsville a destination.

Trey Mendez

Chairman, City of Brownsville Historic Preservation and Design Review Board

Board Member, Brownsville Historical Association



The Hunter Room Private Collection Being Sought For BHA

After a period of almost three years of dedicated following, BHA is entering into negotiations with Texas Southmost College to receive the priceless collection that was started as a life's wish by librarian Yolanda Gonzalez and then formally set as an endowment by the Hunter family of Brownsville in honor of the love that John H. Hunter had for our local history. This is the world source for publications, maps, and documents pertaining to the Mexican-American War, the South Texas involvement in the Civil War, and various other extensions including old Spanish land grant activities. Upon acquisition, it would be housed in the BHA Market Square Research Center.

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