

# BHA Banner Newsletter

Brownsville Historical Association

Volume 3, Issue 1

January 2017

## Inside this Issue:

BHA Celebrates 70 Years	1
Executive Director	2
Contemporary Architecture	2
Sow's Ear to a Silk Purse	3
Contemporary Architecture	3
7th Annual "Taste of Texas"	4
Sow's Ear to a Silk Purse	4

## Brownsville Historical Association

1325 E. Washington Street  
Brownsville, Texas 78520  
956.541.5560 Fax: 956.435.0028  
Email: [info@brownsvillehistory.org](mailto:info@brownsvillehistory.org)  
[www.brownsvillehistory.org](http://www.brownsvillehistory.org)

## SPONSORS:



**Gilberto Velasquez  
& Associates**



This year, the newsletter will provide a series of articles commemorating 70 years of the Association. This is the first part of story:

## BHA Celebrates 70 Years: Part 1

The 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,

*Continued on Page 2*

## From the Executive Director...

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 Putegnati  
Executive Director

the organization tried unsuccessfully to purchase the old Opera House and urged the city to preserve the Fort Brown Quarter Master's Fence, but both were ultimately demolished.

In 1951, the BHA obtained a 25-year lease for use of the "Little Chapel" (Building #2 at Fort Brown) as a museum and meeting place. The building provided a home for historic artifacts pertaining to Brownsville's history which were donated by local citizens.

The Association was actively involved in the preparations for the new Jacob Brown Memorial Civic Center by providing historical information for talks, inscriptions, and the auditorium mural. The BHA held an "open house" at the museum in conjunction with the dedication of the complex on January 24, 1954. The Association continued to provide historical information to local radio and television stations, as well as to The Brownsville Herald.

The BHA took the initiative in publishing historic information. Mrs. Davenport researched much of the material for Chauncey Stillman's book on Charles Stillman and the Association reprinted *The Twin Cities of the Border* (1893), an essential primary source on early Brownsville history, still available in our gift shops today.

BHA members may justifiably take pride in the outstanding accomplishments of their organization on its 70th anniversary. This is only a portion of the story... more to come in the next issue!

Anthony Knopp  
BHA Board Member

## Brownsville's Contemporary Architecture

Generally speaking, Europeans prefer Classical rather than Contemporary architecture. Historic centers in European cities are at least four hundred years old, so the closeness and stability of the buildings has been a constant in their lives. Through the gables, the classical columns, and the ashlar stone, every European is immediately linked to that Greek and Roman world from where his culture came.

However, for a European architect, the opposite is true: architecture does not start until the 1920s, with the help of Le Corbusier. That is why when an architect sees a design that resembles what he learned at the University, he knows immediately if the work before him is that of a good architect. An example is the Johnson Wax Headquarters (1939), designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, where the verticality of its tower is reinforced by the horizontal presence of the rest of the building, and by the transparency of its façade that retraces the massive element to the very axis of the (small) skyscraper, giving the impression of a greater height. It is the scale, the measured contrast, and the rhythm of the tower brick bands that create the architecture of this masterpiece. Scale, Proportion, Rhythm, Volume: Architecture.

Historic architecture anchors the roots of towns, cities, entire countries, in an age where distances were long and insurmountable. But it is Contemporary architecture that facilitates the incorporation of the car; it links and explains our current way of life. Perhaps that is why

*Continued on Page 3*



The second designation is an industrial office building designed by Bowman, Swanson & Hiester (1963) for Southern Union Gas, located at 355 West Elizabeth Street.



## From a Sow's Ear to a Silk Purse *continued from the last newsletter*

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

*Continued on Page 4*

## 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*

**Brownsville Historical Association**  
 1325 E. Washington Street  
 Brownsville, Texas 78520  
 956.541.5560 Fax: 956.435.0028  
 Email: info@brownsvillehistory.org  
 www.brownsvillehistory.org

Non-Profit Org.  
 U.S. Postage

**PAID**

Permit No. 47  
 Brownsville, TX



**7TH ANNUAL TASTE OF TEXAS**

**When:** Saturday March 25, 2017

**Where:** Laureles Ranch House Museum  
 1501 E. 7th Street (Linear Park)

**Cost:** Tickets \$50.00

Sponsorships available – Call Us! at 956-541-5560

Join us in celebration of Texas History Month for a sampling of wine, beer, liquor and food pairings unique to the Lone Star State. Fundraising efforts for this event help support BHA programming. Sponsored in part by L & F Distributors.

*From a Sow's Ear to a Silk Purse continued from page 3*

favor of exclusive, high-end residential development. This argument was shot down by several technicalities, including the legal fact that the law that 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 & Caruth 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 of homesites. This subdivision today remains the premiere subdivision for upper-scale residences, even in as far as there has been a disturbing trend for homeowners to buy property there and demolish classically designed older homes to build newer ones in their place with what appears to be an abrupt departure to the original theme.

Eugene Fernandez  
 Historic Brownsville Museum Site Manager and Old City Cemetery Coordinator