209 East Jackson—Its History from Tears to Laughter

Norman Rozeff, January 2008

1915  It is thought that this is the year that the Thompson Mortuary opens as Harlingen's first funeral home. T. F. Thompson, funeral director, was born in Washington County in 12/1841. He attended pioneer schools and married Annie Bell 8/11/65. His father Alexander was from Tennessee and fought at San Jacinto as well as under Gen. Green in the Civil War. His son John was later to take over the business. John T. Thompson, the mortician and son of T. F. and Annie, was born in Hempstead, TX 12/15/80 and attended high school there. He married Edna Taylor of Waller, TX on 9/26/02. He is an Episcopalian and a Shriner.

The building at 209 E. Jackson that was for many years to become the site of the mortuary is not shown in a Robert Runyon photo of the area taken in 1915. It likely came up between 1916 and 1920. While most of the original mortuary building with its cupola remains on Jackson Street part of the complex, namely a stuccoed frame building to its east, was moved elsewhere in years past. This building was sited to the rear of the adjacent lot and served as a chapel. In front of it was an arched wall. Extending to the street was a garden. The existing building today has a unique Spanish-Moorish appearance with its domed tower and stuccoed walls painted in of sunny Mediterranean shades.

1921 John Thompson becomes one of the founders of St. Albans Episcopal Church along with nine others. Before a sanctuary is build three years later, the group meets in various locations including the mortuary.

1930  Thompson's Mortuary is active at the site. Upstairs at 209 1/2 E. Jackson lives John T. Thompson and his wife Edna. His mother Annie may also live with them. The Thompsons are to have a large family, perhaps up to 10 children. How they could fit in to an area of 1,550 to 1,600 sq. ft. is a mystery. The apartment had two bedrooms, a full living room, a separate dining room, and even a fireplace. A porch area exists in the front of the structure. Access to the upstairs is by the secondary door and stairwell in the left front of the building.

1945  It is this year that the Thompson business here for 30 years is bought out by the Kreidler-Ashcraft Funeral Home. This firm remains in the Jackson building until the new site at 1022 E. Harrison is ready for its business by 1948.

1948  The upstairs quarters are occupied by the Carruth Company owned by Paul Carruth who specializes in mortgage loans. The downstairs are the home of Mode-O'Day, a specialty women's shop, owned by Maude Thompson who may be the daughter or daughter-in-law of John and Edna. This may indicate that the Thompson family retained the building although the mortuary business was sold. The two businesses occupy the premise through 1952 or 1953.
Paul's background is of interest because of the major role he played in Harlingen business affairs. In begins in 1929 with the arrival in town of his younger brother Cecil. Paul will
follow about four years later. Cecil in 1930 was the bookkeeper for the Grant Lumber Co. in Harlingen and a year later had worked up to manager. By 1937 Carruth's business was general insurance and loans. By 1939 he was into the partnership of Carruth and Johnson Insurance, then with his brother Paul, and still later with Grant Kloopenstein as Carruth-Kloopenstein, real estate and insurance. Cecil, called Happy by his friends, is somewhat of a genius or, at minimum, his mile-a-minute mind is open to new ideas. He conceives the idea of commencing a frozen juice concentrate plant in Harlingen. This will be in the cold storage plant which he purchased from CPL in 1946 and renamed Harlingen Cold Storage. He went to Florida and learned what would be required, including over $1 million of stainless steel piping. He and partners, including Paul, then convert the large plant at 804 North Commerce in the late 1940s. Misfortune befell them when a severe freeze decimated the Valley's 1949 citrus crop. His Texas Frozen Food Corp., for which he was president and J.E. Barr executive vice president, then sought alternatives in watermelon and pineapple concentrates and even looked into freeze-dried foods. When Paul went on with others to found Tropical Savings and Loan, Cecil sought to utilize the plant by leasing it to shrimp and other packers. Squirt brand soda pop with its grapefruit-citrus flavor was even bottled there for a time. When he died at age 82 10/4/85 the property was willed to the Rio Grande Children's Home in Mission.

1954 The ground floor store is now Valley Textile Mart with Mrs. L. J. Goldstein as manager while Carruth continues on the second floor.

1956 and into 1957 The downstairs is occupied by Monty's Coffee Shop, Monty Colvin owner. Carruth continues his business upstairs.

1958 & 1959 The downstairs spaces are vacant for a while, then Great Western Loan and Trust Company with Clark Biershwale as manager moves in. This year Carruth Co. becomes Paul Carruth Co. and advertises insurance along with mortgages. Mr. Carruth this year has become president of the Tropical Savings and Loan Association. It was to open its new Van Buren building on 8/28/60. He and his wife Myra reside at 221 E. Coolidge.

1961 After many a year Carruth now has left the building leaving Great Western as the sole occupant.

1962 With Herbert "Herb" Blakley as manager the loan company has changed its name to the Great Western Finance Company.

1963-1971 The finance company continues to occupy the site through these years. Bob Bundren is its manager in 1969 and Bill Day in 1971. By 1972 the company will move up the street to 223 E. Jackson. For a year or so the premise remains vacant. This may be because the Plitt Theatres chain had purchased the property with the adjacent two lots to the east. It did so with the possibility of tearing down the old mortuary and erecting a twin screen theater at that downtown location. This did not come to fruition.

1972 It may have been in this year or soon thereafter that the old chapel building on the lot was moved to a location near Windsor Park at 1222 East Taylor. This building appar-
ently didn't get its first occupant until late 1976 when Guadalupe Villarreal was listed for it.

1974 MAT Company, locksmiths formerly at 118 S First Street, moves into the first floor. Stuart W. Matland is its owner, and he has purchased the property from Plitt Theatres. The theater chain has used both the downstairs and upstairs as a storage facility. It is crammed with used red wool carpeting, used concession counters, and the like.

1975-2002 MAT Company is to occupy the property in these years. It expands and diversifies its business by advertising Mat's Speed Equipment and offering automotive racecar parts by 1987, car audios and alarms in 1991, and janitorial supplies in 1998. About 1987 Rebecca, Stuart, and son Stuart Jr. take up residency upstairs. Stuart Sr. is to die in 1979. The business is there until it moves to larger spaces at 1034 Morgan Blvd.

2002 The 209 property is purchased this year by the Harlingen Housing Authority.

August 2003 Cossey Creations, with Mayte Zebrowski as owner, rents the store. Ms. Zebrowski, a native of Mexico but who came to the Valley from California in 1998, specializes in custom painted furniture and home décor. This self-taught artist has a folksy eclectic style of her own. After being in the store for one year she moves into more spacious quarters at 113 E. Jackson in a building constructed in 1935 for A. A. Kimmel, a farm supply and hardware firm. The rear part of the 209 building is retained by the Authority for its own use, primarily storage of appliances for its many units.

2005 The commercial part of the facility is vacant.

February 2006 Pop artist Tony Schaub and his significant other (later wife), Beverlee Vissar, come from Houston and rent the store from the Harlingen Housing Authority. They are unable to use the upstairs for living quarters until the authority constructs a second exit to serve as a fire escape. They renovate the downstairs for an exhibition space for his innovative and frequently humorous painting, assemblages, collages, and sculptures.

Schaub is a native of Pittsburgh, PA and showed artistic talent at an early age. After four years service in the Air Force he created art works in Sun Valley, Idaho. He later moved to Texas where five of his wall installations were placed in the South Padre Island Convention Center. This innovative artist blends "photo surrealism and pop imaginism".

Members of the Matland family contend that while they occupied it, the building was haunted and that spirits in it were active. With the old tiled embalming room still in the back part of the building, this may well be the case. In any event these once somber apparitions may presently bear a smile after viewing artist Schaub's playful creations.