History of 322-324 West Van Buren

As compiled by Norman Rozeff, February 2012

1909 Julian Villarreal and his brother Placido buy two lots at the northeast corner of Van Buren and "C" Streets. They open a dry goods store there. Later he will have a confectionery store, become a deputy constable, and reside at 421 W. Taylor with his wife Emma. The Villareal family had lived at the Los Muertos Ranch east of Combes (before it was Combes) until a long-standing drought drove family members into urban living.

The lots are 13 and 14 in Block 61 of the Lon C. Hill Town and Improvement Company. They were conveyed to J. Villareal and brother on 2/6/09.

The Sanborn Fire Map of 1919 shows that 312 West Van Buren (this is currently 324) on the corner with Winchell Street (later to be renamed C Street) had a 50 foot frontage and ran in depth about 2/3 the length of the lot. Adjacent to it on the east at 313-314 is a dance hall that is fronted by two small stores of 25' frontage each. The one to the east is a confectionary store. A history note tells us: 2/27/16 Julian Villareal and his wife Emma are doing some remodeling and will later open their confectionery store at 322 W. Van Buren. They will reside at 421-423 W. Taylor by 1930.

By February 1925 the Sanborn map shows that 312 has been split in half with the rear section now being used as a dwelling while the general store continues to occupy the front half. 313 and 314 are two stores in a structure now occupying the front ¼ length of the lot. The dance hall is no more.

The July 1929 Sanborn map now has 312 numbered as 323 and once again the whole building is being utilized as a store. Adjacent 321 and 319 to the east are now shown to be open together as represented by a broken line between the two. They are still denoted as stores.

The July 1952 Sanborn Fire Map sees a major change having taken place over the decades. 324 (as 323 has now been designated) is noted as a store but has been reduced in depth and three narrow stores fronting C Street are to its north plus a restaurant northmost on the lot. 322 remains with the two stores but a small extension starting at the partition line has been added to the east-most store. The change is explained by the following having taken place in 1934: The Julian Villareals, descendents of a land grant family, tear down the frame store built in the city's early days and replace it with a Spanish colonial style building at 324 W. Van Buren. Julian's widow, Emma, runs a grocery store/meat market here for many years.

In 1930, the date of the first available Harlingen telephone directory, the tenant at 324 is shown to be El Modelo, a jewelry store operated by Ambrosio Nuniz-Brouno Nuniz, while the Villareal's operate the confectionary store to its east.
1931 sees both of the above still operating but they have been joined at 324 by the Villanuevo Café operated by Libreto and Luciano Villanuevo.

By January 31, 1935, 322 is used solely as the Villareal residence, as the confectionary store has apparently closed. 322 ½ holds the jewelry shop now run by Rafael Sierra, who is married to Guadalupe. The restaurant is now named the Mexico Café and is operated by Mrs. Rafaela Espinosa.

The 1937-38 directory shows that the Mexico Café has moved to the next block at 402. The occupants of 322 and 322 ½ remain the same.

By 1941 Emma Villareal had been widowed. She opened a grocery store at 324-324 ½. El Modelo remained her neighbor, but La Reynera Bakery operated by Feliberto Rodriguez, who with his wife Margarita and five children, also lived there, were at 322. The following year this family moved to Rio Hondo where they opened a store.

In the war year 1942-43 Mrs. Villareal continues to sell groceries and resided behind her store. Sierra continued with his jewelry shop, but at 322 1/2 had come the Victoria Furniture Store. It was managed by Melchor Cantu, who was married to Matilda. This arrangement continued into 1944, by 1946 Mrs Villareal was the sole occupant of the complex as she would be until 1950 when the Mares Café run by Clara Mares came into being as well as Gregorio Zuniga with his 2nd hand clothing store. He and his wife Josefina and three children resided at 1028 W. Madison Avenue.

By 1952, however, Mrs. Villareal was again the sole occupant of the buildings. This continued at least until 1969. Sometime between that year and the next Mrs. Villareal passed away.

In 1971 son Julian Villareal operates the grocery store at 324. He had a grocery store on T Street that he ran for many years and then placed in the hands of another Villareal relative. By 1977 Julian closed the store forever.

It was vacant for a time, then the Harlingen Finance Company in 1978 rented 322 ½. F.F. Pena was its owner and Paul Valadez its manager. It would be in 1982 that Jorge's Shoes, a shoe repair business, would come to occupy 324. Both would continue to rent these premises until 1992 when Harlingen Finance moved elsewhere.

In 1994 Maria C. Alvarado lived at 322 but only for this period. Jorge's would continue in 324 until 2005. From 2006 on at least until 2010 both 324 and 322 were vacant.