A Brief History of Harlingen as Presented to the Tourist Club, Harlingen by Betty (Mrs. Menton J.) Murray on November 17, 1970

It is a real privilege for me to be here today to extend our thanks to God for our being in our Magic Valley. Being the daughter of two who came from the North as land seekers, stayed here to make their home, and reared their children to love this place on earth, I am grateful that I can share some thoughts with you about Harlingen's beginning.

On May 31, 1909, in an appeal to a group of Seminary Graduates in Richmond, Virginia, in describing the potential of Harlingen, Dr. S.L. Morris said, "Now this rich country is a crude frontier where people who are pouring into the country are laying the foundation for great wealth; but there is little opportunity for organized religious worship—Here is the greatest opportunity for Christian service to be found anywhere."

It was Samuel McPheeters Glasgow who arrived to take charge in answer to the above appeal. He described Harlingen in 1909 as a mud town, no paved streets, or roads, or sidewalks—coal oil lamps, not a plumber in the entire Valley—burros, or horses, or mules were the chief means of transportation, and he estimated the population to be about 200.

On the site of (today's) Heritage Manor (the former Reese-Wil-Mond hotel), seventeen charter members, led by Rev. Glasgow, gathering in a gospel tent on a vacant lot, organized the First Presbyterian Church of Harlingen, second only to the First Baptist church, which had been organized a few months before. These churches have continued to grow to the present time. A Catholic Church was built in 1910 on "C" Street, and the First Methodist Church was established in 1911. The first church building in Harlingen was a little Seventh Day Adventist Church on 4th and Jackson. It was constructed in 1909. A tropical storm that year partially collapsed the incomplete church building, causing the death of their pastor. For this reason the Adventists never completed their building. By public conscription, the building was later completed so people in Harlingen might have another place to worship. It was shared by several denominations.

Dr. Edgar Graham Gammon followed Reverend Glasgow and said, recalling his first impressions of Harlingen, "Everything looked strange—flat land, small trees, the birds, the very atmosphere; the coyotes running and screaming through my yard at night was music. I decided in my mind that I'd stick it out for three months—then six months—I stayed five years and then hated to leave." A full report of progress in 1913 by Edgar Gammon lists Mr. and Mrs. H.H. Burchard as members that year. It is their only child, Dorothy, who is to be one of the hostesses in the Tour of Homes. She is now Mrs. Charles A. Washmon.

Dr. Gammon believed in physical fitness for the young boy. During his stay here he took the boys swimming in the Arroyo under [what is now] the Hiway 83 Bridge [This was where the Arroyo was forded by people going to San Benito or Brownsville.]. He organized a boy's club, inspiring the young men and boys to a worthwhile life. A tiny clubhouse was built to hold their meetings.
Reverend Gammon built a small house, which stood at the corner of Van Buren and 6th, for his bride. At that time he was favored with a Ford Runabout. Prior to the Ford, he had walked or borrowed a horse.

After graduating law school, Lon C. Hill practiced law in Beeville—his law practice often brought him to Brownsville in the Valley. Mr. Hill bought the tract on which Harlingen was located from Mrs. Henrietta King, of King Ranch fame, for $2.50 an acre [the correct figure is $2.00 an acre]. Starting without capital in 1900, with 41,000 acres, with his Arroyo Camp his approximate center (200 feet north of where Heritage Manor is today) Lon C. Hill sketched his plans in the dirt for Colonel Sam Robertson. With a stick in the dust he sketched where he would build his canals, and where he would begin his city, its heart to be where they sat. Mr. Hill began getting options on enormous tracts of land all fronting the river [Not necessarily the case, for he had purchased parcels of land to the north also]. Many owners were descendents of original Spanish grantees [also not necessarily the case, since by this time much of the land had already passed into possession of Anglos]. Land went from one dollar to two dollars an acre. Although hard up for cash, Hill never for a moment had any doubt about the outcome of his plans. He envisioned a railroad, the initial development of an irrigation system, a deep water port for Harlingen on the Arroyo. All of these he helped to bring about. In the charter, the town was designated 25 miles north of Brownsville on the Arroyo Colorado. Since Holland was crisscrossed with canals, Mr. Hill studied the map of Holland and chose Harlingen as the name for his new settlement [The actual story of the name's origin is a bit more complicated]. His first attempt of putting water on Valley soil was carried out with the aid of a wood burning boiler and pump.

In 1903, Lon C. Hill moved his family from Beeville to the new country, taking them first to Point Isabel, then to Brownsville. Twelve [fourteen in Kate Hill's account] wagons brought possessions and a family of a wife and nine children [along with several other families as well]. Four [three actually] sons herded the livestock. A chuck wagon was part of the wagon train.

On July 4, 1904, the first train came to Brownsville—just a month before Mr. Hill had bought the season's first two bales of cotton. He sent one to the World's Fair and the other to Houston, thus inaugurating the tradition of shipping to Houston for auction. The coming of the railroad boosted prices of the raw land from $2.00 to $75.00 to $125.00 an acre.

Tragedy stuck the Hill family when Mrs. Hill and a son died in November of 1904 of Typhoid Fever. So about three months later, Mr. Hill took his children to the partly completed ranch house at Harlingen. Only the three South rooms were roofed at the time. It was called the "hill" because it was six feet higher than the adjacent land. [Mrs. McKenna's account puts the move-in date as January 1905.] They lived there until 1919. This is the home the Junior Service League has restored and was the first home in Harlingen and is now located in the Museum complex. During the bandit attacks, the Hill home became an arsenal. One room (locked) downstairs held a sizeable stock of
ammunition. Mr. Hill had a brick plant along the bluff on the Arroyo in present Finwood Heights [the area south-southwest of the Coakley School]. Original bricks from this plant are still about, but numbered. Dr. Shepard's home is noted as having some. A sugar mill was located on the site of the present baseball diamond at Fair Park. Mr. Hill is a said to have laid a foundation which is an inspiration for future generations to build upon. Lon C. Hill was honored on his seventy-sixth birthday in 1932 as Father of Harlingen. On May 5, 1935, his powerful heart stopped.

History tells us that occasional brick buildings crowed between wooden shacks formed the business district, but life in the frontier town was still hard in the Valley between 1904 and 1914. The Valley was often described as "Heaven for men and mules, but Hell for women and horses." [A quote from Harbert Davenport] One of the earliest merchants was Santos Lozano, who moved here from Alice in 1903 [the correct date is 1905]. At the corner of Jackson and "A" Streets the Lozano Building [or brick Pioneer building] was erected to house the Lozano and Son General Merchandise Store,[It replaced a wooden structure built by the Lozanos in 1906.] At 323 West Van Buren, F.H. Pena owned a Variety store. A candle lantern was hung on a post to light the front of the store in 1910. This lantern was hung on a post, was bought for 2.50 Mexican Money in Brownsville and is still a keepsake. The earliest pictures show the Moore Hotel as the first. Harlingen's second hotel was built in 1908, called the Ogan Hotel. Nearby was the first Real Estate office. Mrs. A.H. Weller organized the first cemetery in 1906—the Harlingen Cemetery Association. In 1912, at the corner of Jackson and Commerce, a building was constructed by Dr. C.W. Letzerich, which house his office, the office of a dentist, and the Harlingen Pharmacy. In 1909, Harlingen had a telephone exchange with twenty subscribers. In 1910, Harlingen had a population of 350. The first electric light and water systems were built in 1911 and 1912.

Fifty civic minded citizens bought a steel lamppost each, primarily to light the city streets, however, they used them to shackle bad actors before taking them to the County Jail in Brownsville, if the need arose. Around 1907 the Taylor Lumber Company was opened.

From 1914 to 1917 the virgin lands of this Valley were unbelievably rich and many crops could be grown, but the irrigation systems, marketing systems and citrus industry were all in their infancy and were not yet functioning consistently and efficiently, so Harlingen and the Valley were tied to a one crop economy—cotton, which could not be marketed because of German boats, thus cutting off European markets. Also locally in 1915 was the problem of bandits. Skirmishes along the border and the killing of people of both countries brought militia and regular Army troops to the frontier. In Palm Gardens, just west of Harlingen, on August 10, 1913 the cavalry patrol was fired upon by the bandits, and a Private L.C. Waterfield was killed.

Between 1918 and 1923 Harlingen began bursting out at the seams. A brochure published in 1923 said, "Harlingen points with pride to her commercial and industrial activities and advantages. Our diversified agricultural interests naturally require ample marketing and transportation facilities. These facilities are unsurpassed anywhere in the Valley." The
oldest known copy of the Harlingen Star, forerunner of the Valley Morning Star was December 14, 1923. Harlingen had her first fire pumper on March 6, 1922 when it accepted delivery. The first police chief was E.[Elmer] W. Anglin. Business boomed in the 20's. The Harlingen Canning Company was opened. The Harlingen Chamber of Commerce was organized in 1919. A.A. Kimmell was the Chamber's first president and J.B. Challes was its first Secretary-Manager. In the 20's a Valley Mid-Winter Fair was held in December of each year. A queen was crowned and local clubs gave dances to entertain her court. Parades were held and ribbons were prizes for the best of products. As early as 1923 one anchor wrote, "Harlingen is the principal icing station for carload vegetable lots from other Valley points and is the point from which the railroad distributes carload freight to other Valley towns on local consignment. On account of her advantages location as well as other reasons, Harlingen has played an important part in development and shared most generously in the prosperity experienced in the Valley in recent years." The First National Bank came into existence in 1922. It was first located on Jackson Street. Later, it occupied a new home at the corner of Jackson and "A" and in 1951 moved to its present location and is now Nations Bank [by the late 1990s it became Bank of America]. In 1945, the Harlingen State Bank was chartered with Elmer G. Johnson as President and D. B. Dunkin as Vice-President. The Harlingen State Bank became the Harlingen National in 1956. Two more banks were added just in the last two years, the Plaza National and the Harlingen State Bank. In 1927, Hygeia Milk Products Company came into existence with a 60 gallon per day milk capacity in their first home, 215 North "A".

In the entertainment field, the Rex Theater was built and existed from 1910-1915. Movies soon arrived, Lyceum tours and Chatauqua series were a part of the excitement. In 1920, the Rialto was built and opened in 1921. In the 20's, the Municipal Auditorium was built and Valleyites heard such greats as John Phillip Sousa, Madame Schumann Heinck, Galla Curchi, "George White Scandals", "Rio Rita". Baseball was from Harlingen's beginning. Football's first team was in 1913. Golf came to Harlingen in 1928. Always there was horseracing on Valley ranches, but horseracing came to Harlingen in 1935, when a race track was built at Fair Park; betting was legal at that time. After one race, betting was ruled illegal again. Flying began early in Harlingen. The first plane was owned and flown by Leman Nelson and Clay Rader in 1923. Later, Bill Williams and Leman Nelson opened a flying school in Harlingen.

The Harlingen Study Club was organized in 1920 with a group of women who were largely responsible for founding the library and provided for its support for six years. The Music Lovers Club was organized in 1925 and federated later that year. Our own Junior Service League was organized in 1947. These are only a few of the worthwhile organizations in this city.

In March, 1941, the Harlingen Gunnery School was opened with Colonel John Morgan in command. Miss Angela Murray was the first civil service employee.

In the interest of agriculture, an article in 1908 in the Gulf Coast Magazine reported that Lon C. Hill met with such success raising mid-winter tomatoes on his Harlingen
farm that next year he will plant thirty acres in this vegetable alone. John Closner about that time wrote that the cost of clearing land is about $6.00 an acre. "Our field labor is Mexican. Good farm hands are plentiful at fifty cents per diem the year round. At present, there are fourteen pumping plants in operation and under construction. One of these under construction will have such vast pumping capacity as to all but stagger the human mind – 270,000 gallons per minute – a veritable river itself, bodily lifted from the channel of the Rio Grande and made to run wheresoever the mind of man wills, to make fruitful, to blossom and bloom as the roses of my fair lady's garden, thousands upon thousands of acres of what has been for centuries a desert waste."

Certainly I would be remiss if I did not mention our Medical Center in Harlingen. The Valley Baptist Medical Center began in June of 1925 as a twenty-five bed hospital on "F" Street. Dr. C.M. Cash of San Benito headed this effort. It was enlarged several times and then a new Valley Baptist Hospital was built in 1956 on 77 Bypass. Presently there is a large building project in the process of being built. Also the Harlingen State Tuberculosis Hospital, now Harlingen Chest Hospital of South Texas was built and the keys of the newly completed hospital were turned over in January 1956. On this same day, the new Valley Baptist Hospital, now Valley Baptist Medical Center, was used for the first time though it was not formally dedicated until May 18th. Soon Ed Carey Road became a medical center with many doctors building their offices along the strip. In November 1955 the Base Hospital at the Harlingen Air Force Base was completed. This is now the Center of the Rio Grande Valley Mental Health Clinic. Finally in July 1959 the Valley Baptist Hospital Nursing School was opened and the first class of future nurses was enrolled.

Enthusiasm for the Valley isn't anything new. Here's a sample from the January 1909 issue of the *Gulf Coast Magazine*. "There is a charm about the Valley of the Lower Rio Grande which all may feel but none can well define. The majestic flow of the river as it winds like a great serpent in the course to the sea—the blue skies; the never ceasing song of the birds; the flowers blooming at all seasons of the year—the matchless groves of lofty palms—all combine to fill the heart with rapture and inspire poetry and song."

"If thou would wander in enchanted land. Go linger by the winding Rio Grande. It is the land of plenty and of peace, where flowers ever grow and songbirds never cease."

On December the 8th, three outstanding homes of Harlingen will be shown.

First to be shown tonight complete in their Christmas finery will be the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Washmon on Riverside Drive. The house is Southern Colonial architecture situated on two and a half acres on the Arroyo Colorado and is within the city limits. Furnishings are in Early Victorian, French, English and American. The Christmas tree is an accumulation of jeweled velvet balls which have been made by Mrs. Washmon herself through the years.

The Joe McGill home, 909 Little Creek Drive, was built only two years ago. It is of contemporary design with choice pieces from Mexico placed artistically in a chaparral
setting. Tijinas tile and a screen done by the Mexican artist Lugo give this home an old world look. From each west window throughout the length of the home one can look upon the patio and the garden which overlook the Arroyo.

The gardens of the Dial Dunkin home [at 1009 East Parkwood]are tantalizingly delightful.

Old gold and antique green in a traditional setting best describes the home of Dr. and Mrs. Frank Shepard at 1102 Ferguson. Three wood burning fireplaces lend such warmth [while] the old stained glass doors take your breath away as you enter the dining room. The majestic grandfather's clock in the entrance hall and the chopping block in the kitchen would make a person green with envy except that these things couldn't be owned by nicer people. And don't forget to see the bricks from the early brick factory.

The newly completed country club is an answer to our dreams. Its beauty both inside and out shows much planning to the minutest detail.

Proceeds from the home tour will go to the Hill Home Restoration Fund. The Junior Service League has as one of its projects the restoration of the frame building to its original appearance. The League has purchased some of the original furniture and the Hill family has given other pieces of furniture and objects to be used to make it authentic.