A Postcard Exploration of Early Downtown Harlingen

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Most of the Harlingen-topic postcards from the 1910s through the 1960s are promotional in nature. They picture public buildings such as the post office, municipal auditorium, schools, and the Casa del Sol among others. Additional cards show churches, hotels and motels. Then there are the numerous cards exploiting the merchant sections of Jackson Street.

When an acquaintance e-mailed me a postcard photograph which I had not previously encountered, I was excited at what I perceived to be a structure not visually documented elsewhere. Nearly in the center of the photo is seen a dark one story building sandwiched between the beginning of North B Street and Commerce. The darkest spot is actually a shaded overhang while the building is painted black or dark brown with its window frames in white. I immediately thought that this was the town's first city hall.

The building which served as Harlingen's first city hall was small and rustic. Its erection was started in March 1910 by the Harlingen Commercial Club, similar to a chamber of commerce, and pretty much completed by the start of June. This organization expended $290 for the lumber, fixtures and other items used in its construction. The club's first unpaid secretary was H.D. Seago, who would later go on to serve many years as Cameron County clerk. In the second half of 1910 the City Commission began to rent the facility in order to conduct business meetings there. In 1926 the city moved into a new combination city hall/fire station facility at 202-204 East Van Buren Street, a city block almost empty even at this date. The old city hall was torn down. The small triangular lot was cleaned and planted. On 9/1/26 its site was dedicated as a small park to honor Gordon Hill, son of founder Lon C. Hill. Gordon, who had died of influenza in the pandemic of 1918, was a promoter of the city, served it in several capacities, and pushed for city park development. Few know it as such, since it appears today little more than a medial strip.

When, in December 2004, an individual donated 20 old Harlingen subject postcards to the archive room of the library, the "A Bird's Eye View of Harlingen" postcard was among them. The Kodak AZO print was considerably clearer than the e-mail reproduction. Sitting clearly atop what I had taken as city hall was a sign reading "Battery and Oil Station." Having been established in 1920 this was Harlingen's first drive-in automobile service station. It was operated by William Witt, son-in-law of G.P. Brandt, who ran the blacksmith shop at 202 N. Commerce. Brandt's occupation would later evolve into an automobile repair firm, the Harlingen Body Works, at 208 N. Commerce.

The photograph appears to have been taken in 1923 from atop the newly-constructed 3-story structure of the A Street Wittenbach Building put up by C.H. Wittenbach and A.J., his grocer son. It would later have an attached five story wing. To the immediate southeast of the service station is seen the 2-story cream-colored brick, over 5,500 square foot structure built in 1921 for Edwin R. Templeton. An outside staircase is to be seen rising
to the second floor. That area played a significant part in Harlingen history for here met such organizations as the fraternal Woodmen of the World, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Masons, and also DeMolay, Rainbow Girls, Labor Temple for union members, and dance groups. The building currently housing Grimsell's has yet to be built but to the east of its lot, a sign on the building advertises the Hall Bro's (sic) Garage. No signs identify the occupants of the new-looking one story building north across the street from Templeton, but later it will house the Valley Drugs and Sundries Co.

Along Commerce we see the Rio Grande Hardware and Machine Co., successors to Ewing-Phillips Hardware, in a store later to be occupied by Harlingen Hardware and now Broadway Hardware. Next to it is the still one-story feed store of James W. Rhone. In January 1925 it will be purchased by F.G. Jackson. North of it is the Lockridge Millinery shop and Edelstein's with the very same logo the present-day company retains, followed by the warehouse built in 1920 for the Fulton Jones Moving and Storage Co. and adjacent to it is A.L. Brooks' early strip mall housing various commercial enterprises. In the distance up Commerce are the Taylor Lumber Co. (opened 1907), the cotton compress, and the Farmers Gin Co.

Along Jackson Street heading east is the Letzerich Building occupied upstairs by the brothers Drs. Casper W. and Alfred M. Letzerich. It was constructed in 1909, possibly by Charles H. Waterwall. It is likely Harlingen's oldest existing brick building. For a time Hugo J. Letzerich runs the Harlingen Pharmacy on the ground floor. He had arrived as mail clerk on the first train here in 1904. The triangular one-story addition to the Letzerich Building appears to have been added before 1930 for in this year The New York Store is listed as its occupant.

Next to Letzerich Building is the spacious premise of A.A. Kimmel and Company Hardware and Implements at 212 W. Jackson. It got its start in 1918. Kimmel, in 1919, would have the honor of becoming the first president of the newly organized Harlingen Chamber of Commerce, the one that presently exists as the Harlingen Area Chamber of Commerce. Johnson's Cafe and the E. B. Thompson News Stand abut Kimmel's. Next to them is the New Manhattan Cafe run first by the Daiments brothers and then sold to G.J. Corris and B.P. Nakes. Sandwiched between the Manhattan Cafe and E. Manautou, a branch of a Brownsville dry goods store which would leave Harlingen before 1930, is a small Photo Studio. The Famous Store would later occupy Manautou's old site.

Across the street is the former Planters State Bank which purchased the lot in 1917. Mack Crenshaw's little wooden barber shop had stood on the site at the southeast corner of Commerce and Jackson. The handsome bank building will be, in 1924-27, home to the Valley State Bank then hold the offices for the Cameron County Irrigation District No.1 from 1927 to 1965. In 1986 the building was awarded a bronze plaque as a Recognized Texas Historic Landmark. Around 1910 two false front wooden buildings, straight out of the old west, once sat next to the barber shop. The first was James Lockhart's general merchandise store which he ran with his oldest sons James Jr. and Brad. In November 1903 the Lockhart family came to the Valley. After managing Lon C. Hill's rice plantation near Brownsville for a short time, Lockhart moved his family to what would become
Harlingen. For a time the family lived in tents along the north bank of the Arroyo Colorado. Lockhart commenced the clearing operations for the community-to-be. Upon the arrival of the railroad Lockhart was the community's first postmaster in its city hall location and acted as the unofficial law enforcement officer before the town was incorporated in 1910. The Lockhart store would be taken over by C. H. Ritter. For a time Ritter had to contend with August M. Weller's bustling saloon next door. Weller was the first to purchase lots offered by the Town and Improvement Co. of Lon C. Hill. Weller, after making good money operating other saloons around town, would gain respectability when he purchases the Harlingen State Bank and moves its office to A and Jackson Streets. The building seen in the photo next to the bank building will shortly house Morris Edelsteins's Edelstein's Furniture Store at 217 W. Jackson. It will here from an earlier location next to Jones' Transfer on Commerce. To its east will be the City Barber Shop, then an empty lot likely owned by Weller.

The black smoke in the left background may have been generated by the Lon C. Hill sugar mill.

The exploration of this seemingly non-descript post card turns out to reveal unexpected history. Sometimes it's there for the looking.
A second similar photo but at street level: