Some African American History in Harlingen and the Valley

Norman Rozeff, Harlingen Historical Preservation Society, April 2007

This research essay comes about due to an e-mail from Gail M. Nelson, J. D. She sought information on her family, African Americans who had come to Harlingen with R. M. Loving when he came to manage the cotton compress here. Her family ancestors came from East Texas, possibly Sulphur Springs. It was her grand parents E. C. and Elvira Nelson who came with sons J. F., Charles, E.C. Jr. and her father Richard Loving Nelson. Before the 20th Century the presence of African Americans in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was very limited. Outside of the Black "Buffalo Soldiers" who served at Fort Brown, the Ringgold Barracks in Rio Grande City, and who were responsible for erecting the telegraph lines between Brownsville and Eagle Pass, the presence of blacks here was negligible. The reason for this was primarily based on the availability of jobs. The Valley had mostly a subsistence ranching economy and not the labor-intensive agricultural jobs available to Blacks in other parts of the South. In any case they would have to compete with readily available low-cost Mexican labor.

One notable exception was the Jackson Ranch on the river, now south of what is the city of San Juan. Nathaniel Jackson of Alabama was a union supporter, who had started ranching the area in 1857 after coming here with his family and eleven freedmen in a train of five wagons. His widow Mathilde sold about 5,535 acres on 8/8/81 to land developer and speculator John Closner years after her husband’s death in 1865. While Jackson had bought it from the Smith family (the father was a U.S. Consul in Matamoros for a time) for thirty-six cents an acre, Closner paid $1.25/acre.

Likely what may have paved the way for the Jacksons was the settlement several miles to the east of the John Ferdinand Webber family. Webber, a Vermonter and veteran of the War of 1812, had settled in the Austin colony and eventually married a slave named Silvia Hector. On June 11, 1834 John Cryer emancipated Silvia and her three children after which time the Webbers had eight more children. When new Deep South settlers resented the racially mixed marriage of the Webbers, he moved away. In 1853 he bought several leagues of land adjacent and to the west of what is now the Santa Anita Refuge. Here his family farmed in poverty. A Unionist, he fled to Mexico during the Civil War, returning in May 1865. He received a Federal pension in 1872 and died a decade later on 7/19/82.

In 1884 members of both families joined to build the Jackson Ranch Church, said to be the oldest Protestant church in Hidalgo County.

What years later altered the situation in the area was the coming of the railroad in 1904. Indeed, many of the railroad construction workers were Blacks. A few established themselves here in the employ of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway. The railroad opened the door to the economic exploitation of the region. In the mid-1920s several Black families had moved to San Benito. Among them were the Calandrys and the Lassies. The matriarch of the latter was to operate a kitchen for gandy dancers, who were the laborers in a railroad section gang. The Davis family that was later to establish itself in Harlingen had an interesting story to tell. This family was a sharecropper one in Oklahoma. In searching for a better life it decided to move on. After spending 3 or 4 years in Bishop it concluded that Mexico offered better opportunities. Upon reaching the
Valley however, the unsettled times in Mexico convinced the matriarch of the family (and she the rest of the family) to settle down in the San Benito area. Giant irrigation canals allowed the arid area to become productive. To attract land buyers four large sugar mills were erected in addition to the two small ones already existing. Blacks, most likely seasonal workers from Louisiana, were employed in the winter grinding season. They did not cut sugarcane but were mostly teamsters (carters) driving mule-team pulled wagons of cane to the mills or to the transloading areas next to the railroad. They worked at the Ohio and Texas mill north of Brownsville, the San Benito Sugar Manufacturing Company, the Hill Sugar Company in Harlingen, and the Donna Sugar Company.

After building the first house in Harlingen in 1904, town father Lon C. Hill employed a Black "mammie" nanny to care for his young children, for his wife and baby boy were to die of typhoid fever late that same year.

During the 1920s when landseekers were enticed to the Valley on low-cost train excursions, Blacks were employed as hotel staff and by developers to service the hundreds staying at various clubhouses. They are to be seen in the group panoramic photos taken of the visitors and in one famous photo of the 1929 Weslaco Anniversary Parade showing them as employees of the beautiful Cortez Hotel of that city.

As early as 1910 Harlingen had an operating cotton compress company. When the Aransas Cotton Compress Company came to Harlingen is unknown but when it did, likely in the 1920s, it greatly expanded the physical size of the facility. This was in line with the rapidly growing number of cotton gins being constructed in and around the city. The first documented item we encounter about a Loving is a news article dated 8/11/26. It reports that the city's only cotton compress facility burns down. The three-acre building and 4,000 bales burned up were worth $500,000 according to J. K. Cain, president of the Aransas Cotton Compress Co., and its superintendent R. M. Loving. On 1/14/27 plans are told to rebuild the compress for $100,000.

That the size of the Black community in Harlingen has risen in the period, but is still on the low end of the economic spectrum, is revealed in a Valley Morning Star newspaper article. To wit: 7/7/29 The Rev. Z. E. King appeals to whites to donate towards a $300 goal to pay the note on St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church (colored). [At the turn of the 21st Century it is the Corinth Baptist Church, 3700 E. Harrison that will have long-served African Americans in Harlingen along with the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church founded by the Rev. Washington.]

In the first available Harlingen telephone directory (1930) Richard M. Loving and his wife Ann B. are listed at living at 1250 E. Polk Street. No children are noted to be in residence. He is noted to be the manager of the Aransas Compress Co. located at 703 N. Commerce Street. They will continue to be listed annually through the 1942-43 directory. In the 1944 one, Mrs. Loving is no longer listed and their residence is noted to be vacant. It appears that she died in 1942 or 1943. His address is given as the compress. By 1946 Loving is gone as well as any listing for the compress company.

It is in 1934 that the Booker T. Washington School to serve Harlingen's Negro children is erected in the 800 block of W. Fillmore at H Street. As the number of Blacks diminishes over the years it will be integrated. Although an addition to it will later be made, it is to be superseded. It ceases to be used as a school in 1959. It currently is being used by the school district as a Parental Involvement Center. The Blacks in the community live in the
area of the school in modest homes. A few remain there today in what is now mostly a Latino enclave.

It is only in the year 1935 that Nelsons [c] (for colored) are noted in the phone directory of that year. Listed are E. C. Nelson and his wife Elvira. In parenthesis is (4) which I believe is the number of other residents at the address below age 18. The Nelsons are living in a building to the rear of the compress, one side of which is immediately adjacent to the railroad tracks. In this year the directory stated that there are 249 Negroes out of a total population in Harlingen of 10,032. This is 2.5%. The Black population of Harlingen has never been very large. I suspect that it is now less than 2.5% of a 66,000 population. The 1937-38 directory clarifies two things. It tells us that E. C. is E. Cattrell and that Elvira prefers to be called Vira but the directory mistakenly puts her name down as Vera. Apparently three people are living at the same resident location this year. In 1939 a separate entry lists J. F. Nelson, a resident at the compress house, as a college student.

1940 U.S. Census puts Harlingen's population at 13,306. It is characterized as 62% American, 36% Latin-American, and 2% Negro.

By 1941 E.C. and Vera (sic) are at the same site, however the 1942-43 directory lists not only them but also E. C. Jr. and J. F. Nelson together with Richard Nelson who is noted to be a laborer at the compress. This may be the year that Richard returned to Harlingen after having gone to Wichita Falls where he was graduated from high school.

The 1942-43 telephone directory is the last to designate African Americans by (c); by the 1944 directory this practice has stopped.

By 1944 E. C. and Vera are listed as well as Charles Nelson, an employee at the compress. In the next available directory E. C. and Vera remain. Charles has become an employee of the Missouri Pacific Railroad as a shop worker and is noted to be living on some railroad reserve property along with his brother E. C. Jr. who is a student. J. F. Nelson is serving his country in the U. S. Army.

There is no available 1947 directory. In the 1948 directory none of the Nelsons noted above are listed in Harlingen. (Ms. Nelson notes that her grandfather Richard Loving Nelson died at the Valley Baptist Hospital in 1948.)

4/22/49 The new Harlingen Negro Day Nursery drew 150 people to an open house. It opened this week with four toddlers and two more added soon according to Mrs. L.M. Davis of the Harlingen Day Nursery Board. It is around this time that 40 to 50 families of Negroes serving at the Harlingen Air Force Base are having difficulty finding housing in the community, and a committee is formed to look into the problem.

5/17/54 The U.S. Supreme Court rules that public schools across the nation must be desegregated.

7/8/55 The Harlingen School Board votes to admit the city's black high school pupils now attending the Washington School to Harlingen High School. They number around 11. The sixty other grade students at Washington include 10 from Santa Rosa, La Feria, and Raymondville. The Board delays a decision on their status and also that of the three black teachers under contract and surplus to the system if integration occurs. Around 1960 Charles C. Nelson with wife Margaret and son Charles Jr. are to move from his 1006 W. Mitchell Street address to 912 W. Pierce, an area in which some other Blacks reside. From 1962 to 1965 Charles, Sr. is listed as superintendent of the Southwest Cotton Oil Mill. In 1966 he is no longer listed, but his son, who appears to be a jack-of-all-trades, is noted over the years to be a handyman for McKelvey Industry, and
later an air conditioning repair man. One current resident remembers him as an immense man weighing over 300 lbs. who did plumbing work with an assistant. Charles Jr. was married to Margarite, who was from La Feria and apparently worked as a cook. Richard Nelson returned to Harlingen in his last years and was to die at the Valley Baptist Hospital in 1996.

While the number of African Americans in Harlingen has remained small their accomplishments, such as those of the Gant, L. B. Davis, and Jackson families, and notably of Dr. George McShan, educator and long-time member of the Board of Trustees of the Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District are to be recognized. The L. B. Davis family operated an office furniture store on W. Harrison Avenue for many years. After leaving Harlingen High School where he was a star athlete, Johnny Jackson went on to the University of Houston. In November 1987 in a game against the University of Texas he established the NCAA record of most touchdowns scored on runbacks (3). He later went on to play professional football in the NFL for the San Francisco Forty-niners and Green Bay Packers, winning two Super Bowl rings in the process. He is now a coach in Houston.

On 3/17/07 the city has its first Black candidate for mayor when Harlingen native Kenneth Benton announces he will run in the May 12 election. Benton is a consultant at Border Econometrics Consulting Group, LLC in Donna.

It has been the expansion of the Valley Baptist Health Center that has drawn African Americans to the city over the last three decades. Numerous African American physicians have arrived to set up practices here. Their number has likely been surpassed by foreign Blacks, largely from Africa but also from the Caribbean. Whether it is the Valley climate that appeals to them, the monetary returns, their easy acceptance here, or all of these factors and more is unknown. Regardless, they are assets welcomed to the community, not as Blacks but as productive individuals.