After 100 Years, The Rest of the Story

Norman Rozeff

Thanks to the wonders of the internet and renewed interest in family genealogy, seemingly lost history is uncovered. Such was the case when I was recently contacted by Roy Montgomery who inquired about a family member who was in Harlingen in 1909. I was familiar with subject because Betty Murray, among others, had mentioned a troubling incident that year. Mrs. Murray, in frequently addressing Winter Texans, spoke of the death of a Seventh Day Adventist who had perished while erecting a small church building, a building that would then go on to have an important place in the community. Her facts were not quite correct, but now we know the rest of the story. The accompany facsimile of the Brownsville Herald article appearing May 27, 1909 lays out the story in detail.

In my updated Chronological History of Harlingen I now note: A settlement of fourteen families of the Seventh Day Adventist church convinces the State Mission Board of Fort Worth of that church to proceed with the erection of a house of worship, the first of its kind for that specific purpose. This first church building in Harlingen was to be a little one on the northeast corner of 4th and Jackson. Construction materials are purchased from the South Texas Lumber Co. on 5/5/09. The Rev. Mr. Montgomery and his wife were living in a tent, when the church was being built. On May 26, 1909 a rare localized tornadic winds at night partially collapsed the incomplete church building killing John Wesley Montgomery and severely injuring his wife who had taken shelter inside. For this reason the Adventists never completed their building and, in fact most members of the colony later left for California. By public conscription, the building was later completed, so people in Harlingen might have another place to worship. It was shared by several denominations who had yet to construct their own sanctuaries. Later the structure was sold to the First Christian Church in 1918 for $400. Improvements to it cost $1,500. This congregation met there until its membership grew to the point that they had to meet in the Central Ward School auditorium. The structure was later sold to the Grace English Lutheran Church for $2,500. After purchasing the property in late 1945, a Lutheran Service Center is established at 405 E. Jackson for armed service personnel here. With the war ending and the Army Airfield closed the center is discontinued 2/1/46 but used as a ELCA parish hall. Lastly, the building was sold to a private individual and moved to another site.

Between 1909 and 1912 the building served an additional and important purpose. It housed the school for Harlingen's Anglo children. Of course, its diminutive size caused it soon to be too small for the growing population and students of the town. On April 1, 1912, all the students marched to the new two-story brick Central Ward School, that is now the Matz building on the corner of Jackson and Sixth.

We learn from the newspaper article, that Roy Montgomery was kind enough to send me, that Harlingen could be subjected to tornadic activities. Fortunately many positive things evolved from this tragedy and the building served the community well for many decades. Mr. Montgomery wanted to ascertain where his family member might be buried. A search of Harlingen Cemetery records revealed no information on this subject. If anyone knows of the burial site, would they please contact me.
May 27, 1909
Brownsville (Texas) Daily Herald

DEATH AND WRECK IN STORM AT HARLINGEN

New Church Collapsed - Contractor J.W. Montgomery Killed - Wife Fatally Injured

Many Smaller Buildings Also Damaged

Dead Contractor and Injured Wife Lie for Hours Under Debris of Church - Storm Occurred Near Midnight - Damage Not Known Until Morning - All Points in Valley Felt Severe Wind and Thunderstorm, Rain Falling in Deluge at Various Points

Special to the Herald: Harlingen, Texas, May 27--The new Seventh Day Adventist church, just nearing completion here, was completely wrecked and the contractor, J.W. Montgomery, killed and his wife fatally injured, in a severe wind and thunderstorm which occurred here last night about eleven o'clock. A number of small buildings were also blown from their foundations and other buildings more or less damaged by the storm. The wind came from the west, striking the town suddenly. It was blowing about fifty miles per hour. Continuous lightning and thunder and a very heavy rainfall accompanied it. The storm continued for an hour and a half, and the entire surrounding country was deluged with rain.

The extent of the damage was not even surmised until this morning when it was found that the church had collapsed and a number of smaller buildings damaged as stated. A searching party at once began looking for the contractor and his wife, who were occupying the church while it was in course of construction. The body of Mr. Montgomery was found pinned under the timbers, which had probably killed him immediately. He had been dead for hours. Not far away Mrs. Montgomery was found. She was unconscious. Her shoulders were crushed and several ribs broken, while she also suffered severe internal injuries, from which she is not expected to recover. She was at once removed to the hotel, where medical aid was given her.

The Seventh Day Adventist church was the first church to be built at Harlingen. It was very nearly completed, the windows not yet being put in however. The storm caused it to collapse, folding it up, almost like a packing crate. Besides the wrecking of the church, a number of barns and outhouses were demolished, besides several small cottages being blown from the foundations. The new sash and door factory was somewhat damaged and a new building just built by Alf Dierkman of Houston, to be used as a furniture store, was blown from its blocks. A number of tents occupied by workmen, or by new settlers as temporary homes, while their homes are being built, were blown down, and their occupants forced to seek shelter from the storm. A large table opposite the telephone office was completely demolished. The extent of the damages is estimated at from $3,000 to $5,000.

The new cottage of A.J. Ernst, the real estate man, was blown from its blocks, not much damaged. A small house near the railroad track was lifted and carried about 200 feet away.

The rain which accompanied the storm continued for an hour and a half, fully three inches of water falling and the entire surrounding country is thoroughly soaked.