Considering the fact that it originated in ancient Egypt, bowling was a Johnny Comelately upon its arrival in Harlingen. Some time in 1938 a bowling alley was the first to be constructed in Harlingen. It appeared as a business enterprise in the 1939 telephone directory as the Harlingen Bowling Alley. Whom its owners were is not known but R. H. Davis is listed as associated with the 118 North A Street facility. By 1941 he will have left this job to go into vending machines. In 1941 C. E. Stuart is noted as manager. The following year has E. H. Strehlow, F. H. Lehman and V. V. Lehman as owners of the lanes. Strehlow is the manager also. The Lehmans own a Buick automobile agency at 906 W. Harrison.

With the army air field and gunnery school in full swing, the bowling alley likely was well-attended as soldiers sought outlets for recreation. This may be why the 1942-43 telephone directory shows a new second bowling establishment. This is the Valley Amusement Center at 521 West Jackson. M. D. Browder is its owner.

In 1944 the facility will be listed as the Valley Bowling Center with J. R. Fitzgerald owner and Phil Edie as manager. The latter is a restaurateur whose Hi-Way Inn on north F Street will become one of the most popular eateries in town. This same year the Harlingen Bowling Alley will be under the ownership of M. A. Pickens, a Weslaco resident.

By 1946 things remained the same for the two alleys except that Fitzgerald's one resumed the name Valley Amusement Center.

By 1948 the two bowling alleys were no more. In their place Phil Edie had opened the Hi-Way Bowling Center, Inc. and hired Charles Slaughter to manage it. It was located at 806 W. Harrison Avenue. Two years later Merle Huston would be listed as operator and proprietor of this facility. Some time later he would go on to become the airport manager.

A small but significant change to the sport occurred in 1948. Brunswick introduces dots and arrow markers to lanes "dramatically improving accuracy for most bowlers."

In 1952 Harold E. Stenehjem would be its manager. When the business changed hands by 1956, Elmer Schoening became its owner and manager.

It was in 1952 also that a major innovation was made to the game. It was that the American Machine and Foundry Company commenced selling pin setting machines after purchasing the patent rights the year before.. Soon the historic use of "pin boys" was a thing of the past. The game was sped up and the very tedious job of hand setting pins was no more.

The year 1952 saw a major boost to the sport when a Chicago TV station started showing a one hour taped bowling competition. Bowling programs went national in 1954 when ABC Television started airing Championship Bowling. The pro-bowlers tour was telecast by ABC in the 1960s and helped to promote the popularity of the sport.

During 1957 Schoening was to construct a new lane facility at 235 E. Blvd. 77. This street address would later be changed to 1502 N. 77 (Sunshine Strip). By 1958 he had closed the Hi-Way Bowling Center and opened Rio Grande Bowl at the above address.
He was not without competition for long, for in 1958 another alley arose. This was Seventy Seven Lanes at 2701-05 S. Commerce. This address would also be changed later to a 2701 S. 77 Sunshine Strip one. It was the partnership of Dave Ayoub, Ed Ogdee, Jim Grether, Elmer Walk and Otto Walk that erected this facility. They apparently had purchased the site from Dr. Gallaher who had also provided land across the street to Dave Ayoub and other partners to erect the Seventy Seven Sunshine Strip Drive In cinema. By 1965 the partners were Ed Ogdee, Elmer Walk and Otto Walk. Leo "Frenchy" Potel was the lane manager. The facility had twelve lanes.

By 1966 George R. Creasey Sr. was to enter the bowling lane business. He had purchased the Rio Grande Bowl and renamed it Creasey's Bowling Lane.

The two competing alleys continued to operate into the 1980. In 1980 the owners of Seventy Seven Lanes were noted to be A. H. and B. H. Hunter and Aristo Ochoa. Both places advertised additional enticements for people seeking recreation. Seventy Seven in addition to the requisite snack bar had billiards and a pinball arcade. It should be noted that Brunswick not only competed with AMF for bowling alley equipment but were also manufacturers of billiard/pool tables. Creasey's, with its twelve lanes, featured a snack bar and a Pro Shop along with apparel for sale. Not to be overshadowed 77 also began to sell equipment, advertise "learn to bowl classes", and video aids. In 1984 it promoted itself as "Home of Winter Visitors".

In 1985 Creasey moved his business to a completely new, recently constructed, and more spacious facility, this being at 644 N. Ed Carey. This facility opened in January 1986. For five years he and his family ran the old site as a skating rink until it became too much effort to run two businesses at the same time. His large old building on North 77 Sunshine has since housed an evangelical church and an events center.

The new facility, among other things, has 24 lanes, electronic scoreboards, storage lockers for regular patrons, video games, billiards, food bar, and even an adjacent bar for adults only. AMF automatic pinsetters sit at the ends of stripped hard maple flooring. The new lanes of Creasey's may have been the handwriting on the wall for the aging 77 lanes. By the end of 1997 it had closed its doors forever as its owner left to join his brother who ran a bowling alley in Houston. In the mid-2000 decade the IRS redid the spacious building and relocated to it from its cramped E. Monroe Avenue offices. The building sustained significant damage from Hurricane Dolly in July 2008 and was vacated.

Perhaps some old timers or their children can provide some feedback on the number of lanes available in the very earliest alleys. That would add to this history. If Rip Van Winkle and his bowling Dutch compatriots of New Amsterdam were to return today to a modern bowling alley, can you imagine the seemingly magical scene they would encounter?

Bowling in Harlingen Feedback

Norman Rozeff

Several readers called to offer additional information to last Sunday's bowling article. James Matz offered that his grandfather on his mother's side, Charles Ochsner, had one of the earliest bowling alleys in the area. Ochsner was a Swiss emigrant who had come to
the Valley in 1929 to farm an orchard that he had purchased. He had left his lace factory behind in New Jersey. He soon quit the orchard to open a restaurant in La Feria called The Snappy Café. Around 1934 he and his family would move to Harlingen. At first they lived on E. Madison but by 1939 resided at 1026 W. Harrison where the directory listed him as a café owner in Mercedes. By 1941 he would open the Swiss Chalet Restaurant at 1022 West Harrison near where Boggus Motors would later establish itself. According to Matz the restaurant had an open air beer garden in its rear. When young James was brought to the restaurant by his mother Eleanor, his grandfather, who was very proud of his American citizenship, would ask him to sing "God Bless Americas" for customers. Charles' wife Freda, now 92 years old, believes that the family had a bowling alley on Jackson Street or somewhere downtown in the 1930s. It may have had four to six lanes. The facts have been misted with time. What she recalls may have actually been the one with an unknown owner described below.

Claude Marzenell, 81 years old, of San Benito volunteered detailed information on one old alley. In the years 1945 into 1947 his father Claude Marzenell, who always went by the nickname "Bus", leased the alley at 118 N. A Street. It was across from the Acadia Theater and would later be the site of the first Luby's in Harlingen. Claude recalls that bowling at that time was exclusively a man's sport. The windows in the front, he relates, were painted black as if the activity within were somehow illicit. The cost of bowling was 10 cents a line of ten frames. The pin boys were "wetbacks" who received all of 1 cent for every line bowled. They slept in a room to the rear of the six alleys. On one side of the alley was an elevated "crow's nest" from which an observer could call out any fouls by the bowlers.

When the lane lost its lease the flooring was recycled. It went into the family garage on N. 2nd Street. Some was laid out in the back yard to serve as a dance floor.

The son Marzenell went into the service and upon returning to Harlingen in 1947 became a typesetter for the Valley Morning Star. His pay was a handsome $100 a month. When he came upon a job offer in South Dakota for $125 a month he jumped at the opportunity to earn more. He lived and raised his family in that state for 30 years before returning to the Valley. As a typesetter who had to have some command of the English language along with knowledge of punctuation and hyphenation, he bemoans the fact that computer programs that are used today don't quite do the proper job, get confused with homonyms, and hyphenate one syllable words.