Faded History Comes to Life

Norman Rozeff

Several weeks ago Cheryl LaBerge of the Chamber of Commerce alerted me to what she thought might be a bit of past Harlingen history. While removing a building façade on West Harrison construction workers had revealed a former use for the building. In large lettering, framed on either side by Hygeia Milk and Ice Cream ads, were the words Chuey's Super Market.

It is the year 1939, after their father dies, that Jesus J. Rodriguez and his brothers Tony and Joe leave the San Raphael Ranch east of Santa Rosa and come to Harlingen. Their family has been leasing 2,000 acres in the Adams Garden Tract for the depression era price of $200 per year. Besides their ranching operations they have been raising cotton. They open the Rodriguez Brothers grocery store at 403 W. Harrison. On 11/4/41, a month before Pearl Harbor, J.J. enlists in the U.S. Army, selling his share of the store to his brother Tony for $1,000 but with the stipulation he can repurchase it upon his return. His is discharged with the rank of sergeant on 11/24/45. In 1946 following his discharge he borrows $4,000 from the First National Bank as a GI loan and repurchases the store. It relocates to 407 W. Harrison by 1948. It is in 1954 that Jesus J. "Chuey" Rodriguez opens his Chuey's Red and White Grocery and Market at 222 W. Harrison in the building that once housed Harlingen's first Ford dealership. This was the Hollingsworth Motor Company which built this two story structure and then used the top floor for family housing while exhibiting cars downstairs. The company was to build the handsome art deco building across the street at 221 in 1930. No. 222 had been vacant for numerous years until the Valley Motor Mart occupied it in the years 1944-46. The Red and White refers to the large San Antonio wholesale supplier which furnishes merchandise to small grocers around the state. Chuey will occupy this site until 1962 when the business opens as Chuey's Supermarket at 607 W. Harrison. He has purchased this building from Attorney Lloyd Stiernberg. Rodriguez renames his business Chuey's Discount Center in 1968. After the store experiences a fire in 1972 Chuey's family, with knowledge of the competition from the national chain Kroeger and the increasingly aggressive H. E. Butt stores, urges him not to reopen. He then begins a long career (still continuing at age 87 in March 2005) as a real estate salesman associated with Tom Mason. In 1958 J.J. becomes the second Hispanic elected to the City Commission. When, on 12/14/60, Fred Paschall, owner of a retail store, is elected mayor, Rodriguez is reelected a commissioner as is R.W. Liston. In his peak business years, J.J. is a member, officer, and strong supporter of the Chamber of Commerce.

An equally intriguing piece of signage came to light several months ago, and once again I had been alerted by Cheryl. At 210 N. Commerce Street Bill DeBrooke's crew was blasting loose paint from the side of a brick building in preparation for a new paint job. What should be revealed but older painted signs along the top of the structure. One seemed to want to cling to life, saying "Don't let my memory fade away!" In 30" letters could be discerned "USO CLUB" overpainted with as sign possibly reading "Ayers Brothers Motor Co." USO is the abbreviation for United Service Organization. In World War II, as it
continues to do today around the world, the USO provides recreational, entertainment, and other services for military personnel.

The club at this location was sponsored by the Salvation Army. With the Harlingen Army Air Field and its gunnery school gathering momentum, the club opened on 7/15/42. A Mr. Watts served as its first director, but he was replaced three months later by William C. Block. The motto of the facility was "A home away from home." Indeed it had a lot to offer.

By August 1944, it possessed a music room, a home-like reception room with davenports and easy chairs, game tables, games, books, magazines, and papers, an information desk, typewriter, a long distance telephone, a piano and a library of music. Its rear room included a check room, free shave and shower bath facilities, snack bar, a game room fitted with table tennis and shuffleboard, bowling alley, punching bag and various other games, a dark room, sewing room, writing room, and a conference room along with easy chairs and reading material.

After two years in operation the club was proud to publicize its accomplishments. It boasted that it had distributed 5,716 brochures on religious matters; 188,952 writing pads; loaned and distributed 828 books; opened the special facilities and showers, iron and board, and photo dark room to 8,333; checked 24,513 articles; had participants in special events, trips, club movies, etc and the like totaling 34,570; and provided accommodating services including meeting trains and busses, shipping packages to 11,912. In all club attendance had totaled 378,227 over the two year period.

Naturally the club had to adjust to an increased number of military service personnel as the HAAF grew to train more bomber gunners. It redecorated and added many new features. These included free picture shows, talent shows, radio shows, classical music and library concerts, programs by civilian talent, game nights and tournaments. Monthly attendance rose from 4,000 to 30,000. This large increase brought national USO recognition and the additional of another assistant, making the club a three-worker unit.

Its success was made possible in part by local volunteers who included both senior and junior hostesses. Saturday nights saw home-made cookies, punch, and coffee provided by the different lady organizations of Harlingen.

Part of the reason the club became a success was the fact that service personnel could ride into town on the bus service established on 9/1/41. On this date the Harlingen Airfield Bus Co. received a state permit to operate. It has been organized by State Senator Rogers Kelley, atty. J. Cullen Looney, both of Edinburg, and Vance D. Raimond of La Feria to transport military personnel and workers the four miles to and from the city to the new army airfield. Its first bus was a 1941 Ford milk delivery truck purchased from Hygeia Dairy for $350 and outfitted to seat passengers. Three months later one Ford school bus having a capacity of 28 was purchased for $2,100. On 2/24/42 the company grew when it received a permit to commence service from Moore field northwest of Edinburg to Mission, McAllen, Pharr, and Edinburg. Its name then changed to the Valley Airfield Bus
Co. Fourteen years later, having changed its name in 5/48 to the Valley Transit Co. (VTC), it operated across the Valley with more than fifty coaches with 37 passenger capacity.

The club also served the men on the post by working with the chaplains, Red Cross, and the Special Services Departments on the base. While it was listed in the 1946 telephone directory it was soon to be phased out for this year William E. Ayers placed his Nash dealership in the building. By 1954 William H. Ayers was managing the business which stayed at this location until 1961.

This seemingly modest building holds many happy memories and played an important role in sustaining morale during some tough times. Perhaps some lively ghosts still dance in it to the airy, lively strains of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Artie Shaw music along with the syncopated rhythms of the Andrew sisters.