James Henry Dishman and His Mother, Georgiana Berryman Dishman

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An individual who directly abetted the successful establishment of the town of Harlingen was James Henry Dishman. A considerable right-of-way mileage through his extensive holdings was donated by Dishman, thereby making the extension of the railroad to what was to become Harlingen a reality. This pioneer Anglo rancher has an interesting story. I'll begin by paraphrasing and supplementing the 1993 Texas Historical Commission marker on him in front of the Dishman Elementary School that is located in Combes between the intersections of Dishman Street and Madeley Avenue and Tamm Street and Madeley Avenue.

James Henry Dishman was born 2/22/1858 in Cherokee County, near Alto East Texas. His forefathers had migrated to this country from England to Virginia before the Revolutionary War. James was forced at age six to assume a man’s role after his father’s death in the Civil War in 1864. He was educated in public schools and the Masonic Institute.

He eventually moved to Kaufman County and developed a successful ranching operation. He sold his ranch in 1892 and headed to the South Texas Gulf Coast in search of lucrative ranching opportunities. For whatever reason the Corpus Christi area did not entice him. He would adventure further south to become one, if not the first, of the Anglo settlers, outside of the Brownsville environs, in Cameron County.

The Georgetown Railroad Co. had on January 20, 1879 acquired 640 acres from the State of Texas under the law awarding land to entities which would initiate a railroad. This land now encompasses what became Combes. The railroad company did nothing with this land, so it reverted to the state. James Dishman was to purchase it as homestead and State School Land in December 1893 for $1.50 an acre or to be exact $936. It was all of Survey 22. He, under the law, had to homestead it for a minimum of three years. This northern section of Cameron County was remote and undeveloped. He built a homestead and by 1895 had established a working ranch named Santa Elena. Within a short time Dishman gained a reputation for industriousness and uncommon generosity.

He certified in the spring of 1901 that he had satisfactorily homesteaded when he noted that two homes on the property were valued in total at $250, a well $75, a windmill, $100, 20 acres of cleared land $200, and three miles of wire fence, $175. Once state law changed, he moved to purchase Survey 23 since the water in 22 was of poor quality. Lastly, he purchased Survey 24 therein giving himself a contiguous property one mile wide and three miles long, east to west.

In May 1897 while seeking to identify cattle rustlers he was involved in a shootout and gravely wounded by several apparent outlaws that he had encountered. He sustained wounds to his left arm, chest, and back but still managed to kill one of his attackers. Aided by brothers Dr. Fred and Dr. Joe Combes of Brownsville, and subsequent surgery, he was able to recover in six months. During his recovery he taught school at the Las Alames Ranch.

In 1904 Dishman donated acreage for the railroad right-of-way that would, two decades later, lead to the creation of the town of Combes. On 11/4/24 he donated one and a half
acre to the Combes Community as a site for a Baptist church, the community's first permanent one. It became the Combes Missionary Baptist Church which later became the Sardis Primitive Baptist Church and today's Baptist Church of Combes. Four and ½ acres were given for a cemetery. In 1926 he sold a 40 acre block to a Harlingen consortium to lay out a town. He gave lots in it to deserving friends. Later he was to serve it as a city commissioner, Democratic committeeman, and deputy sheriff as needed. During World War I, Dishman served on many wartime committees.

In 1926 Combes voted to go into the Harlingen School District and the original section of a school was constructed with the promise of additional rooms to be built. "Uncle Jim" donated money and the 300' by 600' site for the school and presented it a $1,000 gift for books. Despite his reluctance, the school was named in his honor. By 1928 an extension had been constructed and dedicated by Thomas S. Pickens, Superintendent of Instruction of Harlingen Schools. A new elementary school was completed in 1950. When, on 1/27/64, its new wing became operable, John H. Morgan, superintendent HISD gave the dedication speech.

When Dishman died in a Temple Texas hospital, 7/30/1934, his body was returned here, and he was buried beside his mother (11/2/1835-12/26/1922) at the Harlingen City Cemetery. He had never married and had no direct descendents. At the time of his death he had only 850 acres left. He had given some of it to relatives such as the half section (320 acres) east of Combes that he gave to his niece Lena and her new husband Sam Grant as a wedding gift. In 1904 it was 400 acres to the new St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway as a right-of-way. It was on 7/24/28 that he sold, for a token amount, five acres of property to the Harlingen Independent School District trustees in order to have a school extension built in Combes. He had however sold the bulk of the land, commonly known as the Dishman Tract, over a period of years through the Valley Development Company. Before his death at age 77 he was busy farming cotton. It was written that he delayed treatment for his health problems, insisting "that he had to wait until the cotton crop had been taken care of. Ten families of Mexicans living on his land needed his help, he said."

Combes farmer E. J. Billings came into the possession of an eight page manuscript compiled by area pioneer Ewing Madeley in 1968. It fills out some of Dishman's local history. Madeley wrote of the area: "It was good, rich land but was covered with a dense growth of brush, poorly located so far as American people were concerned, and in its present state was fit for nothing but ranching. It could be bought for $1.50 an acre with one-fortieth of the price down and one-fortieth each year for 40 years with interest of 3% on deferred payments." [another source puts this at 1/32 down, 30 years to pay at 3% interest.]

Madeley continued by writing that on his homestead Dishman "built a one-room house about 14 feet square with dirt floor. He next had the brush grubbed from about 10 acres of land… to raise corn when there was enough rain (and he) brought a few head of Mexican cattle and started ranching." Madeley goes on to describe what ensued when Dishman was seriously wounded in May of 1897. Dishman was riding with a 15-year old boy who was a witness in a cattle rustling case. Ewing Madeley describes the confrontation with two Mexicans: "The Mexican pointed a Winchester at Dishman and fired. The Winchester was so close to Dishman that he thought he could knock it away with his left hand, but instead the bullet went through his wrist, shattering it and entered
his left side in the vicinity of his left lung. After Dishman had been shot, he pulled his own pistol and killed the Mexican who had shot him. About that time, another Mexican shot Dishman in the back and escaped into the brush."

Historian Jean Clore neatly sums up Dishman's life of accomplishments. She writes "Jim Dishman saw the potential of Cameron County and because of his vision, many others families moved to his area. He realized that even such a scattered settlement could not meet its full potential without the civilizing influence of schools and church and that the area could not profit farmers if their produce could not get to market. He gave to accomplish these ends."

Georgiana Murdock Berryman Dishman, James' mother, has an equally fascinating history. Her father was in the first class graduated from West Point after its establishment under President Monroe. Her mother, Helena Dill (Berryman), was said to be the "first Anglo child born in Texas (1804)", at the time Fort Nacodoches under the rule of Spain. Her father, Captain Henry Berryman, was military alcalde there. Georgiana was one of five children, only three of whom survived to adulthood. After her father died her mother raised 30 orphans.

After James wrote glowingly to his mother about his new South Texas home, his mother, in 1895, left Kaufman County and came to the Valley with her daughter and son-in-law, Edwin Madeley, their four children, and eight year old granddaughter Helena "Lena" Templeton. Georgia M. Dishman then purchased 3 ½ sections (2,240 acre) immediately to the west of James' property. She bought this land from Mexican-Americans who had homesteaded the land. It extended from what is now Hatchett Road east to Combes. On more land she had acquired east of present Combes, she established La Nopalara Ranch. The name derives from the Spanish for a prickly pear cactus. She would go on to build a one and a half-story frame house on this ranch. It was just west of present-day Bouldin Road on a road that parallels FM508 and was north of this highway.

Mrs. Dishman also deeded land for the railroad right-of-way. She would live to see many descendents and the great expansion and settlement of an area that she first encountered as sparsely populated and harsh.