The Location of the Providencia Ranch and Harlingen’s Early Water Supply

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The Providencia Ranch played an important role in the early days of Harlingen town. The reason was that initially Harlingen had no reliable water supply. Sweet water was brought by barrels in wagons from a productive well on the Saldana’s Providencia Ranch. The ranch’s exact location had been lost with the passage of time.

This service continued until the Harlingen Land and Water Company completed the infrastructure to bring water north from the river. In August and September 1907 the first river pumps were installed and started. At the end of the following month, as the already eleven mile canal approached the Arroyo Colorado, a large wooden flume across it was being constructed. On 3/28/08 the water reached Harlingen, but it wasn’t until three years later that Lake Harlingen, then considerably larger, as a water system reservoir was instituted in a low-lying area. It was fed by a canal running north along what would be 13th Street then west into the lake.

An early pre-Harlingen plat map, dated likely around the year 1903, was fortuitously found by me in Hidalgo County Historical Commission files in the Weslaco Bicultural Museum. Jay Russell located another plat map of the same area but drawn with information probably a year earlier. Both indicated Saldana properties upon which Providencia Ranch was almost certainly located.

An area of approximately 170 acres is denoted “S. Saldana”. It is a rectangular parcel (Survey 47) with its southern boundary directly north of today’s Lincoln Avenue. The parcel runs about 4250 feet east to west and 1750 feet north to south. To its north is a similarly-sized property (Survey 46) listed as owned by E. Contreras. A third tract, Survey 45, adjacent and to the west of these two is designated F. Saldana, and it too has a little over 170 acres.

In 1880 Francisco Saldaña filed a patent on Survey 45 and officially was granted the land after occupation and improvements in 1886. Various members of the Saldaña family likely owned a total of about 510 acres south of survey 27. They called it La Providencia Ranch. Plats of about 170 acres each were numbers 45 (F. Saldaña), 46 (E. Contreras), and 47 (S. Saldaña). The "F" may have been Francisco, who was to marry Anselma Suarez and upon her death Josefa Abrego. The "S" was his son Secundino from his first marriage. E. Contreras was Estevan (also spelled Esteban) Contreras, who had married Librada Saldaña. Their daughter Josefa, who was baptized in the Presbyterian Mexican Church, Brownsville on 3/7/86, lived on the ranch until 1896-98. Another daughter was to be Anita Saldaña Contreras de Rosales. Herlinda Saldaña of the ranch family was to marry Joaquin S. Sanchez, have a son Jose, and live at 831 Curtis Street, Harlingen. Paulo Saldaña, Sr. and Jr. were other family members.
US 77/83 now traverses diagonally through the east one quarter of the old S. Saldana property, as it does the Contreras tract to the north. Harrison Avenue runs into the upper one eight of the Contreras tract. Survey 46 is also cut by the railroad track, Hwy 83 and Business 83. Survey 47 is currently occupied for the most part by the Valley Vista Mall. It is also transected by Dixieland Road. On the west side of Dixieland Road, Survey 47 is now occupied by numerous commercial businesses in strip malls and on its western boundary by Pletcher’s Wholesale Nursery. At the western boundary Tucker Road heads south to the Arroyo Colorado stopping short of the 2.15 mile distance by about .5 mile. It is on the west side of this .5 mile parcel that the 1903 map indicates the existence of a community named Castanas.

Survey 45 now has the Palm Gardens Mobile Estates in its south half and is cut by Expressway 83 and Loop 54 in its north half.

At the northwest corner of the Contreras tract, a road running southwest-northeast is shown on the old plat map. This heads toward the Paso Real via what is now the Briggs-Coleman area and eventually reaches the old Alice Road but does so by skirting the arroyo where it makes it turn to the east.

The area referred to by the Lon C. Hill family as “Salty Lonesome” was likely close to where present Highway 499 intersects with Harrison Avenue (HWY 106) and possibly within the area now designated as Ramsey Park. It is in this location that the arroyo is closest to Harrison Avenue. From here in 1903 Hill opened a sendero directly to the west along what is now Harrison Avenue.

From Salty Lonesome to the east end of the Contreras tract the distance would have been 4.5 miles. When the railroad came to Harlingen in July 1904, the distance from the new center of town to the east end of the Contreras parcel would have been just about one mile. Continuing south to the northeast corner of the Saldana parcel would have added another .28 mile. Therefore, the minimum water haul distance from S. Saldana property to the center of Harlingen would have been 1.28 miles, and if the ranch well were near its southwest corner, the maximum haul distance would have been 2.13 miles. If the well was in Survey 45 the minimum distance from the town center to the site would have been 1.75 mile at minimum and 2.35 miles at maximum.

Hill, under the entity Harlingen Land and Water Company, may have purchased all three properties in 1903 in order to assure a secure water supply for his town to be. More likely however, he bought the parcels in order to dedicate land for the Sam Fordyce Branch railroad right-of-way of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway, which would eventually reach west of Mission. The plat maps already show considerable acreage had been acquired north of the arroyo by the predecessor company called the Corpus Christi, San Diego and Rio Grande Narrow Gauge Railroad Company. To indicate how interlocking and transient the railroads were in this period other parcels north of what was to be Harlingen were owned by the Houston East and West Texas and Shreveport and Houston Railway Co.; the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad; and the Georgetown Railroad Co.
A compilation of old abstracts indicates that on 6/10/03 Hill also purchased a tract from Wenceslao Saldana and his wife Felipa A. de Saldana. He paid $500 for their 160 acre lot located directly north of Combes near the Ojo De Agua Grant and adjacent to property owned by the Dishmans and the Georgetown Railroad Company. The railroad coming south from Robstown would come through this property.

Verna McKenna, a Harlingen historian, noted Jesus Saldana as being associated with the ranch. The children of the ranch hands and neighbors were taught by eighteen year old Miss Margarita Villareal, who was later to become Mrs. G. M. Lozano. Having been graduated after eleven years schooling in Brownsville she was qualified to teach. The instruction was in English. Later the school moved into the second floor of the Pioneer Building and remained there until the school district built a facility for Mexican-American students.

Near Harlingen there were various crossing sites on the Arroyo Colorado. The most famous, of course is the Paso Real. Some others are shown on the 1903 map. The community of Tasa is mapped just south of the arroyo near where the old F Street Bridge used to cross and where the US 77/83 one now does. About 3 ¼ miles to its east, and also on the south side, was Palmital. This site is now the extreme east side of the Treasure Hills subdivision. A map of the Valley drawn in 1915-16 for use by the military stationed here at the time designates the crossings as La Tasa and El Palmital. These communities as well as Castanas may have come into existence to offer travelers shelter when arroyo waters were high, and the arroyo could not be immediately traversed. The considerable acreage between the Valley International Airport and the Arroyo Colorado is designated as the Palmetal Co. Subdivision and likely gets its name from old Palmital but with one letter changed over time.

It is also likely that a crossing existed at the south end of what is now designated as Dilworth Road. At the junction of Dilworth Road and the Arroyo Colorado are cuts in the banks on both sides of the stream, and the arroyo is shallow at this point. In the late 1800s the Gutierrez family of Harlingen owned adjacent property and operated three ranches on it. This property was just north of the arroyo and straddled what is now Dilworth Road. A 1917 plat map designates the area close to the crossing as Los Indios Ranch and near the north boundary is La Cruz Ranch. According to Rosaura Gutierrez the mapmaker has erroneously designated them. They should be La India and La Crucita Ranches. The third ranch was El Gigante. A total of around 3000 acres was contained in tracts 39, 40, 293, 294, and 295. A longtime wooden bridge which crossed the arroyo at this point was replaced in the 1990s by a wider concrete bridge.

Sometime prior to 1923 the Dilworth Ranch came into existence. R.S. Dilworth was already in the area by late 1908. It was located just southeast of the arroyo crossing. Dilworth Road took its name from this ranch. The 1923 Soil Conservation Service map spelling the ranch name with two "l"s is apparently a typographical error.
Connecting Dilworth south of the arroyo is Turner Road, which is caliche until it intersects with FM 800. Still further south it parallels Rangerville Road before eventually connecting with it. Turner Road is named for Josiah Turner, the pioneer rancher who owned the Galveston Ranch along the Military Road (also mapped by surveyors as the Military Telegraph Road) just west of Las Rucas. This important thoroughfare, now HWY 281 or the Military Highway, is how inhabitants north of and along the river reached Brownsville other than by steamboat.