Lon C. Hill and The Hill Sugar Company, Harlingen

Norman Rozeff
As excerpted from his book Sugarcane and the Development of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1875-1922

Part I: Hill Family Origins and Settling in the Valley

Lon C. Hill, Sr. certainly has to be characterized as one of the most dynamic of the non-Latin pioneers in the Valley. His era seems to have been peopled by men of vision — men capable of bringing their dreams to fruition.

That Hill became interested in sugarcane was probably evolutionary. He needed productive crops to attract farmers to the lands which he had purchased and to buy the water from the canal companies he had created and acquired. The successful growing of sugarcane by other pioneers no doubt influenced him.

In 1973 Hill’s great-niece Kate Adele Hill compiled a hagiographic biography of him. While informative in family matters, it is hardly definitive in business and economic ones.

We learn from her that Leonidas Carrington Hill was born 7/31/62 in Travis County on Gilleland Creek about eighteen miles northeast of Austin. His parents had come to Austin from Williamson County, Tennessee in November 1852.

Hill, after completing schooling locally and being tutored at home, attended Add-Ran Christian College in Thorp Spring, Texas. There he met Eustacia Dabney, whose family was from Kentucky but of early Virginia stock. Six months after being graduated they married in December 1882.

After managing a store in Manor, Hill studied law at the University of Texas and attended the University of Virginia. Obviously his family, to be able to subsidize his education, had some affluence by this time. In Virginia he received a license to practice law in September 1870 and later in Texas in March 1891.

He moved to Beeville, Texas a month later and for twelve years practiced law with a partner, Jim Dougherty. Hill, who now went by the preferred first name Lon, was an excellent criminal lawyer and on at least three occasions defended accused murderers.

In a series of excerpts from the Beeville Bee newspaper quoted by K.A. Hill we are able to trace the gradual transition of Hill from a Beeville lawyer into a Valley pioneer.

3/29/01 L. C. H. returned from two weeks in Brownsville where in the vicinity he has lately acquired some river lands which he is preparing to put into rice.... Speaks in high terms of that section which is badly in need of a railway for development.... [Hill had also acquired 6,000 acres of the Rincon Ranch north of Brownsville. By early 1901 his foreman, Greg Woods, had cleared 50 acres of it.]

7/20/01 Returned from his rice farm where he has been for the past several weeks. He reports prospects bright for a good yield of the cereal. [His farm manager at this time was Elmo Coleman. In 1901 seventy-five acres of Hill’s rice fields had yielded fourteen sacks/acre. In 1902, 300 acres yielded 14-20 sacks/acre, a sack weighing 200 lbs.]

10/25/01 A Brownsville Herald item reprinted in the Bee reported that Hill, fronting a large syndicate [a favored word at the time], would purchase 15,000 acres of land from the Hicks and
Landrum property, out of the Espiritu Santo Grant. The land will be irrigated and devoted to the production of sugar, rice, and other cereals. Terms were not known yet.

5/16/02 Hill returned from Brownsville; noted the steamer *Manteo* has recently been put into service between Point Isabel and Galveston.

6/6/02 Mr. and Mrs. Hill and several of their children embarked for Brownsville for several weeks. Ordered a fine automobile to be used for traveling over the lower Rio Grande in looking after the large land interests of himself and parties associated with him. [The auto purchase with few passable roads in the Valley at the time indicates Hill’s progressive nature, adventurism and optimism, if nothing else.].

9/5/02 L.C.H. reports rice harvesting under way with yield very satisfactory [By the end of November 1902 Beeville was already calling Hill a resident of the Valley].

11/28/02 After interviewing him, the Bee stated that L. C. H. over the last fifteen months had purchased for himself and others 300,000 acres of land including the Jim Wells ranch of 50,000 acres. [With 640 acres to a square mile, 50,000 acres is 78 square miles. It approximately encompassed an area south of present day Mercedes from along the Military Highway 6 miles wide and running north about 13 miles.] One partner noted in the article was a Mr. Brooks of Beaumont with whom 80,000 acres had been bought.

Hill was a progressive farmer willing to experiment with new equipment and techniques. He was also an early promoter, since he handled the sale of farm equipment and hardware. A commercial building at the corner of Elizabeth and 11th Streets, Brownsville was owned by him. In late June 1902 he invited Brownsville reporters to visit his farm in order to witness his steam-powered, tracked machine capable of pulling four 14" sulky plows at one time. At the time, the use of steam plows was revolutionary for the Valley.

Allhands had written that Hill, around July 1903, after purchasing the 45,000 acre ranch from Jim Wells put 200 men to work clearing and grading a canal on the property. He formed the Capisallo Town and Improvement Company, the proper noun Capisallo having come from Jim Well’s Capisallo Ranch. Hill named the town site Lonsboro after himself. However, he soon sold out to the American Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company, and it built Mercedes on the site Hill had selected for Lonsboro. In this year Hill had spearheaded the movement to bring a railroad to the Valley as well as extending it west to the Starr County boundary with Hidalgo. The success of his endeavor was made possible when after he personally guaranteed a bonus for land dedication of rights-of-ways others followed his lead

Returning to the Bee Interview we learn that he planned to put in 10,000 acres of rice and 2,000 in corn, alfalfa, and other crops. Hill shipped his rice to Galveston at a shipping cost of 20 cents/100 lbs. He boasted of hauling his rice from the field to Brownsville, a distance of ten miles, for 14 cents/sack, and his labor costs were 20 cents/day without board.

By mid-1903 investors, desiring to get in on the ground floor with prospects for the railroad soon coming, were giving Brownsville a boom town atmosphere.

In August 1903 Hill and an associate T. L. Jones and their families left Beeville for good for the Valley. Fourteen large wagons transported their holdings. Together with sixty head of stock the 155 mile journey took thirteen days.

The Valley was still a frontier with all of a new area’s hopes and hazards. Typhoid hit Brownsville at the end 1903. The following year the Hill family contracted five cases of typhoid. The disease took the lives of forty year old Mrs. Hill (11/4/04) and the youngest boy,
George Pendexter, at twenty-five months age. Yet a "quietly suffering Hill", who had begun clearing the brush on a little hill twenty-five miles north of Brownsville in order to build a house on the site, moved his family into its newly-constructed home in January 1905. This was to become part of the town site of Harlingen. For a time it served mainly to corral horses belonging to Texas Rangers.

Gus T. (Buster) Jones, one of those rangers, later mirrors Sam Robertson's earlier remarks about Hill's vision and tenacity. He recounted:

Some of us would argue with Lon Hill along this line: "You are crazy—you can never have a town here; every time the Rio Grande gets on a rampage it comes down through Tiocano Lake and floods this whole darn country stirrup deep. And besides, how are you going to populate and keep these towns that you are promoting; what are the people going to eat—cactus apples and javelina hog?"

Old Lon would say—"That all right. We are going to cut away this brush and cactus, build pumping plants on the river, canals and laterals. You just wait; this is the finest soil in the world and when we get water on it you will see a garden spot. You boys just clean out the lawless element, make it a safe place to bring people to, and leave the brush, cactus and water to me."

At the turn of the century was the Valley still the “wild west”? Apparently so. Before being given the name Harlingen by Hill, the crossroads area was nicknamed “Six Shooter Junction”. The Brownsville Herald article of 3/12/04 attests to that fact and in regards to none other than Hill himself. Hill was on horseback east of the Arroyo Colorado when he encountered a young man in his twenties named Theodore F. Dix. The two apparently had had “words” on previous occasions. Dix was on foot and brandishing a pistol. Accounts say that Hill told him to put it aside or give it to him. When Dix refused and began waving it in Hill’s direction, Hill took action. Papers of the day had a tendency to over dramatize the reportage. So it did “in breathless prose” with this example. “One half dozen people witnessed Hill piercing Dix’s heart with the first shot and as Dix spun around pumping two more bullets into him.” Dix, from Corpus Christi, left a widow and two children. The following day Hill appeared in court in Brownsville where P. E. Blalack and other friends posted a bail of $3,000.

It took nearly three years for Hill’s case to be adjudicated. In February 1907 a judge set a special venue of 75 prospective jurors. When the first call was not met, the trial was rescheduled. At the end of February the trial went ahead. Thirty two of 33 witnesses were called to the stand during the two day trial. The case was turned over to the jury without arguments by counsel of either side. The jury returned a verdict of “not guilty” in 20 minutes. “The evidence showed plainly that the killing was done merely in self defense.”

Hill, through observation of Mexicans growing vegetable next to resacas, realized this soil was higher than adjacent lands, was fertile, and well drained. He, of course, was not the first to come to this recognition. Water was the primary limiting factor for land away from the river. Hill had been progressive, even enough to have sent soil samples earlier from the Valley to Texas A & M for analysis. In this same year Hill had made application to the Commissioner’s Court of Cameron County to purchase 11,070 acres of public school land not out of original Spanish or Mexico grants for $13,837 or $1.25/acre. The court approved the deal with terms extremely favorable for Hill. It took a promissory note for the whole amount making the note due in ten years at 6% interest with annual payments. The 543 acre Harlingen town site, however, was part of another survey. It was part of the King Ranch, having been part of patents in 1885 and 1887
to Richard King as assignee for the Corpus Christi, San Diego and Rio Grande Narrow Gauge Railroad Company. On 3/11/04 Hill bought Parcel 289 among a total of 2,368 acres from King’s widow, Mrs. Henrietta M. King, for $2.00/acre plus interest on the unpaid balance. Earlier he had purchased 40,000 acres of other King Ranch land mainly for $1.25/acre but some for $2.50/acre.

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Part II: Developing Water, Land, and Town

The Lon C. Hill Improvement Company was chartered in his name on 8/10/03. On 2/7/05 it was changed to the Lon C. Hill Town and Improvement Company with a capitalization of $200,000. Incorporators were Hill, James Robert Dougherty, and Hill's best friend Dr. S. H. Bell of Beeville. The stated purposes of the company were for building erection, improvement, loans for such, and subdivision of real estate. James Lockhart, Hill’s foreman directed the clearing and grubbing of the Harlingen townsite and managed the first commissary. On 6/24/04 a permit for the establishment of a post office was awarded. Lockhart became the first postmaster.

The probate of his wife’s will and the community property held between them when appraised 9/21/05 provides a detailed accounting of Hill’s land holdings and their value. North of the Arroyo Colorado were 5,207 acres, a half interest of which was in the railroad’s account. Elsewhere there were:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Acres</th>
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<tr>
<td>1,000</td>
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<td>Fernandez</td>
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<td>480</td>
<td>San Pedro</td>
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<tr>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>Las Mesteñas</td>
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<tr>
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<td>San Salvador del Tule</td>
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<tr>
<td>860</td>
<td>Llano Grande</td>
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<tr>
<td>10,640</td>
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<td>1,721</td>
<td>Ojo de Agua</td>
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<tr>
<td>1,644</td>
<td>Rincon Farm (Espíritu Santo)</td>
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<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>Paredes Subdivision (Espíritu Santo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,900</td>
<td>Paredes Subdivision</td>
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The 58,862 acres of real property were appraised for a total of $119,784 or an average of $2.03 an acre. This ranged from as low as $.75 for the San Salvador del Tule land to $15.00 for the 400 acre Paredes Subdivision.

Minnie Gilbert credits Hill with the idea to publicize the country’s first bale of cotton produced. She says that in June 1904 he bought the season's first two bales. He sent one to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis and the second to Houston. The latter action inaugurated the tradition of shipping the first bale to Houston for auction. Earlier he had been an innovator with Brownsville's first steam laundry, a money-maker with his hardware store also handling farm implements, and an area promoter by re-opening the Miller Hotel to house prospective land buyers and traveling salesmen. It had been shuttered for 21 years.

In September 1907 he added to his holdings and chartered the Harlingen Land and Water Company capitalized for $300,000. Officers were John D. Hill (no relative), Miss Paul Hill (his
oldest daughter and the individual who cared for the family after Mrs. Hill’s demise), Dr. S. H. Bell, and P. E. Blalack. With 3000 shares outstanding Hill himself held 2,987 shares and the others token amounts. With canal work having begun in January 1907, 6,095 acres which had been purchased earlier out of the Concepcion de Carricitos Grant were transferred to the entity together with eighteen miles of main canal, pumping station, and other facilities.

On the occasion of Hill’s 70th birthday the Valley Morning Star (Harlingen) of 7/29/32 reprinted a letter with reminiscences of Colonel Sam Robertson regarding Hill. The railroad subcontractor was on horseback surveying the area in advance of the railway’s ongoing extension. It was May 1904. He encountered L. C. H. and his sons who were camping at the to-be home site north of the Arroyo Colorado. They had been roughing it with only a canvas fly for protection and their saddles for pillows. At that first meeting over camp coffee Hill explained to Robertson his plans to bring water in canals from the river, put out great sugar plantations [we now say “plantings”], and build sugar mills and other industries to support the proposed city. At that time Robertson recalls Hill telling him that he owned 25,000 acres from the river to the Arroyo Colorado [at what was to become Harlingen], 45,000 acres from the river to 16 miles north [presently the Mercedes area], 30,000 acres west of what would be Raymondville, and a rice plantation at Rincon, north of Brownsville.

To paraphrase Robertson’s further comments to the paper: in 1906 Hill started the construction, in a small way, of the Harlingen Canal. Robertson had commenced his construction of the San Benito Canal in December 1906 and was joined by the Heywood Brothers and others in 1907. After selling adjacent land, their “frail pump” broke down. “Lon came to our rescue, and turned water into the resaca, for use of our people. A more selfish person would have knocked the San Benito project and used our breakdown to build his policy. He always has done all possible to help his fellow developers and build up the Rio Grande Valley. Had he sat down like many others, selling only enough land to keep up taxes, he would be a multimillionaire today; but he was a builder, he cleared land, built sugar mills, cotton gins, planted sugarcane and cotton, experimented with all kinds of crops, put thousands of men to work, made it possible for many to build up business and fortunes from his efforts.”

“One of his greatest services was in running out the criminals and ‘bad actors’ from the Harlingen vicinity.” One may speculate if this last offering isn’t in part a closeted exoneration for the homicide incident which had taken place many years before and other occurrences. Concerning such matters historian Benjamin Heber Johnson casts Hill in a very negative light in his 2003 book. Johnson, in paraphrasing Hill's critics, portrays Hill harshly as heavy-handed in his acquisition of a certain parcel of land, later in the book adding such strong language as "...his brutality was legendary" and "...Lon C. Hill's personal campaign of terror."

The Harlingen Canal was made possible when surveying had revealed that the bed of the Rio Grande was nine feet above the elevation of Harlingen. In short, once water was lifted from the river into the canal gravity flow would occur. This was, in fact, the case with almost all major canals built in the Lower Rio Grande Valley at the time. Later, some additional lift stations were installed to move water still further from the river. The Harlingen Canal was built on part of the acreage Hill owned between the river and the arroyo. At the river it initially had only one pump to supply it.

By 1904 there were enough residents for a Harlingen post office to be established. The newly arrived railroad company felt confident enough of the town’s future that it constructed a two-
story hotel in 1906. Its location was at the then center of the town, Van Buren and Hill (now First) Streets. History records other “downtown” buildings at that time to include two general stores, hardware and drug stores, a barbershop, a blacksmith, and Texas Ranger headquarters. A number of saloons would soon follow.

In the early years, neighbors were scant in number. James H. Dishman lived in the Combes area from December 1893 onward. This farmer and large landowner was born in Cherokee County, Texas February 2, 1858. He was educated at public schools and the Masonic Institute. His second wife and granddaughter, later Mrs. Samuel D. Grant, were to join him two years later. A German, Christian Balduf, operated the even remoter Paso Real inn, store, and the post office addressed as Arroyo.

The first schoolhouse was a small frame structure near the Hill homestead. Of its fourteen children seven were Hills, three—Frank, John and Elizabeth McBee, children of Hill’s sister and her husband J. C. McBee, two Joneses—Lynette and Etta, Henry Bell, and Katherine Weller, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Weller. W. A. Francis was the school’s first teacher in the years 1905-07 and was followed by Miss Johnnie Phipps. Lillian Weems, daughter of W. Z. Weems, Sr., was the school’s third teacher in 1908-09.

By mid 1907 Hill was quoted as being broke when he came to the Valley five years ago. His wealth was now conservatively estimated at $800,000 and his land holding at 160,000 acres fee simple. [Although land values had undoubtedly risen, both these figures appear bloated.] When he started as an agent for B. F. Yoakum and Associates, Hill had been begged to acquire Browsville area land for $3/acre.

As the canal progressed northward unscrupulous land speculators entered the picture. Hill had to publish a legal notice that pointed out that “some land sellers are erroneously stating land will be watered by Harlingen Land and Canal Co when it won’t be.”

By the end of October 1907 the canal’s progress had reached the point that construction of the Big Flume over the Arroyo was to commence and was projected to be completed within 30 days. Its cost was projected to be $20,000. The canal work at this time was under the immediate supervision of John D. Hill, an experienced engineer who had previously managed Hill's implement store in Brownsville. His construction crew embraces 450 men, together with seventy teams of mules and horses. They had cleared a sixty foot wide road from Harlingen to the river and at low points bridged them with creosoted timbers. The Canal was already 12 miles long and 50’ wide. Hill laid plans for a second pump with double the 15,000gpm capacity of the first one already operating for two months. A. R. Mann, a mechanical engineer from Chicago, had arrived in Harlingen in mid-August. He was hired to take charge of the power house pumping plant. The cost of the canal was publicized to be more than $200,000.

Hill, by October 1907, had cleared nearly 2,000 acres of his property. He contracted others to do this work for a price of $10 per acre. The grubbing contractors, however, had no claims on the timber cut. This was primarily ebony and mesquite, and its sale for fuel, fence posts, and railroad ties would sometimes cover the clearing costs. The contractors at this point had a force of 400 men, distributed in gangs of twenty. Hill's initial land offering were on a 4,500 acre tract subdivided in tracts of from five to forty acres. The prices of these were fixed according to their proximity to the canals, laterals, railroad, and Harlingen townsite.

In December of this year Hill planted 75 acres into sugarcane. He later let it be known that he hadn't watered the cane until May 1908, yet it produced 33 tons per acre. He sold the cane at
$4.00 a ton and noted in 1909 that the land on which it grew was offered for $40 an acre. The yield noted was poor by any standards. By delaying his initial irrigation he may have hurt his stand unless timely rains occurred to assist in germination. Virgin land plus adequate watering would have produced substantially more cane than that of which he boasted.

The Harlingen pumps were scheduled to start 1/11/08. Hill was said to be ready to plant 5,000 acres of sugarcane northwest of Harlingen and contracts were pending with Louisiana and Cuban planters to put out 10,000 acres of sugarcane south of the Arroyo Colorado and west of the Brownsville railroad, which was to extend a spur to the river. Even this early, lobbying was occurring to dredge the Arroyo to become part of the East Coast Intra-Coastal Waterway. Monies for a survey were appropriated by the Congress.

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Norman Rozeff

As excerpted from his book *Sugarcane and the Development of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1875-1922*

Part III: Harlingen Infrastructure and a Sugar Mill

March 28, 1908 was a landmark day when water carried by a large wooden flume came across the Arroyo [Several decades later this wooden flume would be demolished after a steel-pipe inverted siphon was installed beneath the Arroyo]. A lot of credit for the canal was due Walter Vann, son of Capt. J. W. Vann who was in charge. Already a second 36" pump was being set up, for plans were to be able to irrigate 35,000 acres. The engine and boilers of the old rice mill in Brownsville were shipped to the pumping plant to be recycled.

In an anecdotal article we learn how tight cash flow was as Hill expanded his horizons and before he secured sufficient financial backing. As with many other developers in the Valley he was "land rich and cash poor." On a Saturday, Hill was reported to have shown up at the First National Bank in Brownsville. He asked the cashier, Adolph Ashheim for $800 in fifty cent pieces, so he could pay his canal work crew its weekly wages. Even as he volunteered to sign a note for this amount, Ashheim reminded him that he was already borrowed to the limit. When Hill remarked that his friend Sam Robertson would sign the note, Ashheim replied that Robertson owed the bank even more than Hill. When Hill was asked if he would repay the note the following Saturday, he answered that he would. The following Saturday after the bank had closed for business and drawn its shades, Hill's persistent knocking on the door was finally responded to as Ashheim peeked through the blinds, saw who it was, and anticipating repayment pulled Hill's note from his wallet as he unlocked the door. As related "Mr. Hill, covered with dust from a long trek on unpaved roads, removed his hat and revealed streams of perspiration rolling down his face and said 'My God man, what a hot and miserable trip I've had getting here. You know it's Saturday and I need another $800 for a payroll for the canal gang.' Endeavoring to attract investors Hill contacted a D. A. Garden in July 1908 regarding the compilation of a sales prospectus. He provides these figures. Canals now built valued at $200,000; sugar mill when constructed $240,000; 5,000 acres of land for mill production
$200,000; 8,000 acres unimproved land $400,000; land with cane $200/acre and without $50/acre. He notes that he, the Harlingen Land and Water Company, and J.P. Stevenson collectively own 46,000 acres.

In the fall of 1908 the Harlingen Land and Water Company indicated that it had 100 acres planted for sugarcane seed and would plant several hundred more the following fall. By November 1908 about twenty-six miles of canals were in operation, and 75,000 acres being or ready to be irrigated. During this period Hill helped to frame the state law that put into being the first irrigation district. This was to be Cameron County Irrigation District No. 1 established on August 10, 1914.

There was some cane already being grown in the Harlingen area before Hill made his decision to erect a factory. William Zachary (W. Z.) Weems, Sr. had come to Mercedes in 1907 to build irrigation supply canals with his mules, plows and scrapers. In 1908, Weems put in about 200 acres of sugarcane near Harlingen on land he had purchased from Hill. Then in September 1909 he put up a syrup mill with partners L. F. Hathaway and Allen Barbee. The small mill was on the Hill farm. The operation was not profitable because the demand was light for the syrup, and the glass jars in which the syrup was packaged were expensive.

From a 1962 interview with L. C. Hill, Jr. we learn that Barbee was “a character” who had come from the Coastal Bend where his father was still experimenting with cane. There, Barbee had arranged a horse-driven mill and learned to make syrup. Hill went on to comment that the Donna and Harlingen mills were the least expensive, since they were not housed in nice buildings like the Ohio and Texas and the San Benito mills, which were larger. The Ohio and Texas mill was largest, followed by San Benito then Harlingen and lastly Donna. There is a subdivision just north of Rio Hondo platted as “Sugarland”. Remains today of a brick structure in a waste area north of this city are described by old timers as those of a syrup mill but little else is known of these small ruins.

David Allen Barbee and his wife Gussie Dudley Barbee had come to the Valley in 1907 from Angleton, so he was familiar with sugarcane. He worked for Hill as a carpenter and also at the river irrigation pump. Later he helped to build Hill's wood-clad mill and raised his own cane. Barbee in 1910 helped to build the wooden First Methodist Church on Harrison Street, where it was later replaced by one then another brick sanctuary. He, his wife, and children – Archie A. Barbee and sister Lucille were charter members of this church.

A striking example of Hill's ability to glean attention regardless of his hyperbole and his stretching of the truth (or perhaps we should surmise not correcting the exaggeration of others) was the large-type headline which appeared over an article in the 7/10/09 issue of the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*. It read "How a Full Blooded Choctaw Indian Has Made $6,000,000 in Six Years". Hype of this nature would be routine for Hill for many years to follow.

Years later, Lillian Weems Baldridge recounted to a newspaper reporter a story about Harlingen’s first grave. Her brothers Will and Robert Kent worked in their father’s syrup mill. Robert had cleaned out a large vat used for boiling syrup. To keep from walking through it with his boots on, he attempted to walk on the adjacent ledge, then slipped and fell into a full vat of scaldingly hot syrup. He died at age 17 on 12/10/09. There was no cemetery laid out for the new town of Harlingen. Elmer Williams (E. W.) Anglin wired Hill, who was in St. Louis. Mr. Hill wired back instructions, and a hasty survey was made, a wagon trail cut through the brush and a place cleared for the grave. In 1912, Hill, for $1.00, sold 7.7 acres to the cemetery trustees for
the area where Robert was buried. The Harlingen (City) Cemetery is located on the south end of present day F Street. A Texas Historical Commission marker in the cemetery notes that Robert came to Harlingen from Houston in a freight car.

April 15, 1910 saw the swearing in of Harlingen’s first officials. They were Ike B. McFarland, mayor, John D. Hill and Homer N. Morrow, commissioners. They met the same day and appointed M. M. Osborn as city clerk, assessor-collector, and treasurer of the city commission. The celebratory brochure “Harlingen Golden Anniversary Celebration” states that the petition to County Judge Bartlett for incorporation was signed by seventy-two and was presented by forty-one of the signers as being “…a true and correct list of qualified voters so far as they have been able to find after diligent search and inquiry.” Later E. W. Anglin became the first city marshal.

In early May daily for one week solid the Brownsville Herald was to carry an sizeable advertisement with a map of the platted town and surrounding agricultural lands upon which was superimposed "Kilgore Sugar Cane Plantations". J. C. Kilgore, general manager of this land sales company was assisted by his associates, son W. H. and W. E. Hollingsworth. He advertised: "Now being constructed 25 ton ice plant, big cotton gin, pressed brick factory, $300,000 sugar mill, and $30,000 brick school house. We plant cane for you and under our system of co-operative, the cost of planting and cultivation will be small."

On the advice of technicians from Tulane University, Hill planted 1000 acres to sugarcane. He then went to Louisiana to buy the machinery for the mill. In two train cars he later transported the men to erect and operate it, along with their families.

The location of the mill was just north of the present Harlingen Municipal Auditorium or, to be exact, where the Harlingen (baseball) Stadium is. This is about 1/2 mile north of Hill’s frame house site, which was first located on the north side of Fair Park Blvd., then later moved across the street before its final removal to its present Harlingen Art and Heritage Museum complex site near the airport. A large framed display in possession of the museum shows about nine photographs of the interior and exterior of this mill. Its outside structure was wholly wooden, but it had concrete foundations for the mill rolls. These buried blocks were encountered when the stadium was laid out in the 1950s. Electricity from the mill replaced gas lights in the Hill house. Water for the house came from an artesian well.

Ever seizing the opportunity to publicize the Valley, Hill told the San Antonio Express in October 1910: “The Valley will have the greatest cane crop it has ever known and the largest acreage. There are between 5,000 and 6,000 more acres cultivated and planted in cane this year than was the case last year. Farmers are hard at work getting ready for a winter garden yield.” He then announced that he was making the contract for his projected Harlingen sugar mill and intended to plant 1000 more acres of cane than he had planted last year.

Shortly thereafter it was revealed that he and Sam Robertson were backers of a major sugar refinery to be built in Texas City. It would process both foreign and domestic raw sugar with its 600,000 pounds per day capacity. A refinery was eventually erected in Texas City but many years later.

Hill was dissatisfied with and very critical of the courts and sheriff’s office of Cameron County. He threw his hat into the political arena when he commenced campaigning for the office of Cameron County sheriff. On 10/17/10 he began running against Carr T. Ryan, who was a seven year resident originally from Richmond, Texas. Hill’s Independent-Republican candidacy was
to fail when Democrats swept local, state, and national elections that year. With 3,321 votes cast he lost by only 161 in the November election.

In mid-December 1910 Hill placed the order in New Orleans for a $600,000 sugar mill. This figure will vary again and again depending upon the whims of Hill and/or reporters. The cost figure for the mill is likely overstated. It would have a capacity of 500 tons cane per day. He also contracted for 15 miles of standard gage railroad for feeder lines. By late April 1911 eighteen carloads of machinery for the Hill mill had already been delivered. John Clarey of Houston was the superintendent of erection for the contractor, D. J. Haynes of Houston.

That Harlingen was also on the move was indicated by a $25,000 contract awarded to Andrew Goldammer, Sr. for the construction a brick school house, east of the downtown area on Main (now Jackson) Street. J. P. McDonald would supervise its construction. This was the second brick school house; the first was the Alamo School for Mexican ethnics and whose second story addition would cost $5,966.

The Harlingen Board of Trade reported mid-year improvement expenditures as follows: sugar mill $300,000, cotton compress $35,000, ice plant $25,000, gin $5,000, pressed brick plant $20,000, Methodist church $4,300, waterworks reservoir $5,000, canal extension $60,000, steel bridge across the Arroyo Colorado $17,000, two miles of graded street $1,500, drainage to arroyo $2,500, and together with $34,000 for the schoolhouses a total of $519,300.

Lon C. Hill and The Hill Sugar Company, Harlingen

Norman Rozeff
As excerpted from his book Sugarcane and the Development of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1875-1922

Part IV: Building a Sugar Mill and Selling a Story and Land

Texas Charter #23219 set up the Hill Sugar Corporation in 3/11 indicating “The purposes for which this corporation is formed is for growing and selling sugar cane with the right to make and refine sugar and molasses, and all the by-products of sugar cane and to sell the same.” $300,000 from 3,000 shares was to be the capitalization. The five directors were L. C. Hill, Gordon H. Hill, John D. Hill, Miss Paul Hill, and F. A. Schaff. The meeting of stockholders in May 1913 provided the breakdown of stock ownership at that time. This was Gordon Hill 288.4 shares, Paul Hill 42, F. A. Schaff 1, L. C. Hill 507.6, and Lon C. Hill Jr. 2,161. For whatever reason, Hill's son was the majority stockholder. The company's letterhead had printed Hill Sugar Company Capital $300,000 (fully paid) Lon C. Hill, president Gordon Hill, vice president Katie Bailey, secretary and treasurer Directors Gordon Hill, Paul Hill, Lon C. Hill, Lon C. Hill Jr. G. A. Ratkin uncovered figures Hill had set down (possibly in 1917) for a cost estimate proposition for Valley cane. These hard-to-come-by figures are of interest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Estimated Yield/Acre</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planting</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
<td>30 tons @ $3.15</td>
<td>$94.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivation</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>- $50.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

= $169.50 gross
incidentals  2.00  44.50 net income
harvesting/transportation  15.00
livestock/implements  5.00  Cost of a year’s campaign:
total  $50.00/acre

60,000 tons cane@$3.15  $18,900
milling cost@$1/ton  60,000
insurance, depreciation, taxes  20,000
salaries, management, etc.  15,000
labor, other  170,100

284,000
or $4.733/ton

Revenue at estimated yield of 175 lbs. sugar/ton cane
60,000 x 175=10,500,000 lbs. sugar @ 3.5¢/lb. = $367,500
5 gal. molasses/ton @ 3¢/gal. = 9,000
gross receipts $376,500
cost - 284,000
net profit 92,500
or $1.54/ton milled

An earlier bulletin found among Hill’s paper listed even lower production costs for a 40-ton cane/acre base:

cost of planting/annum  $ 4.50
cost of water/annum  6.00
cost of labor and cultivation  6.00
cost of harvesting and delivery
at the mill - 75¢/ton  30.00
46.50

purchase of cane at mill 40TCA@$3.50 = $140.00
less total expenses  46.50
net to farmer  93.50

The company borrowed $50,000 for its initial operating season. It also purchased from Hill, on 3/11, 1,196.52 acres of land for $239,304 or $200 an acre. This is a bit high and may have been a method for Hill to extract some money from the company. Hill at this time engaged Rucker and Cowart, real estate agents to advertise and sell the land needed to raise cane for his mill.
Even before the mill started, the American Hoist and Derrick Company brought suit to recover for unpaid equipment. Thornton Grab and Derrick did the same for $6,121.48 for its tall crane. By 10/14/11 Little Indiana cane growers Ira G. Keller and T. A. Jackson were laying plans to cut cane for an 11/15/11 start of the Harlingen factory. They began cutting on 11/13 but expressed concern that there would be a scarcity of labor to cut the several hundred acres of cane. Just after
Thanksgiving 1911 an early freeze with temperatures dipping to 27 degrees likely desiccated cane tops and ended further accumulations of sugar if not also damaging stalk tissue itself. Since Hill had committed to purchasing cane from various sources, he brought in some poor quality cane and paid the sellers by the ton regardless of its sugar content. The mill did begin grinding its first cane by mid-November, but a newspaper headline on 11/23 proclaimed “Hill Sugar Mill Loses Its First Sugar.” Indeed, the first week of operation was calamitous. The supports beneath four of the syrup pans had collapsed at 6 am. The loss was put at 28 tons of sugar. “At the same time that the pans fell one of the steam pipes was torn loose and bursted, filling the mill with steam and causing a hasty evacuation by the workmen.” The falling of the pans was attributed to defective walls. The pans were of 10,000 gallons capacity and three of those that collapsed contained about 75,000 gallons each of syrup at the time. The syrup was ready for its final boiling. The loss, including the sugar and damage to the pans and repair work, was estimated conservatively at $3,000 to $4,000. “Although the accident was disastrous, both in time and money, the management of the mill was undaunted. Repair work was to commence immediately.” The cane had come from Little Indiana and elsewhere; eight carloads on the 23rd and more from previous days were stockpiled on the tracks. The pre-freeze cane which had been processed was of superior quality, running over 11% sucrose by analysis. The following day a newspaper ad, which had been place earlier, appeared. It read: “Hill Sugar Mill READY TO GRIND We are glad to report that the Hill Sugar Mill at Harlingen, Texas has been completed in specified time and is now ready for operation. We have also leased the Hidalgo Sugar Mill at Hidalgo and will be glad to crush any cane tributary to this mill. Any cane located on the railroad however, can be handled to better advantage by the Hill Sugar Mill or the Ohio and Texas Mill at Brownsville. D. J. Haynes Company” In early January 1912 the Brownsville Herald reported that the Hill mill had been in operation for six weeks and had commenced grinding the Little Indiana sugarcane when its grinding was suspended -- the previous week. “The Little Indiana people, half of whose cane remains unground have contracted with the Ohio and Texas Mill to handle the rest of the crop. They hauled a quantity of cane to the latter mill last week and it is already being ground.” In its 1912 sales brochure promoting Harlingen area farm land sales, the Rio Grande Land Corporation of Harlingen and Kansas City notes that the Hill Sugar mill paid $4.13 per ton for sugarcane in 1911. Purchase prices were based on the daily sugar market in New Orleans. On 5/10/12 the Brownsville Herald ran an article originating with the Kansas City Star. It embodied the priceless publicity Hill could garner by his appearance and personality. He told the press of Harlingen’s 2,500 inhabitants and of having sold land the last two months for $2 million while still retaining 90,000 acres in the Rio Grande Valley worth $4 million. He related how he "gave up" a $30,000 per year law practice to become a pioneer. An anecdote ran that “He once purchased 4,500 acres at $1/acre, and the wife of the man from whom he purchased it complained to her husband the price was too cheap. ‘I could afford to give it to him’ the seller said, ‘once Lon Hill gets into the country, the thieves will leave our cattle alone’. Another relates about Hill’s friends asking him what he would do if he were attacked by a woman. “I would prove the gallantry of a gentleman”, he said, “I would extend to her the courtesy of the first shot.”
The interview continued with a reality close to home. It recounted that “The other day at his home an enemy fired on him from a house as he was passing in a motor car. The bullet splintered the steering wheel in the hands of a chauffeur. Hill reached into the leather pockets of the car and drew a rifle and a revolver. He emptied them into the side of the house as the chauffeur turned the car into full speed. Upon reaching home the chauffeur asked for his pay. He said he guessed he would go back to New York.”

That Hill had enemies was openly known. J. T. Canales recollects that "not only was (Hill) a settler, but he purchased and developed large tracts of land and had a time dodging executions, at which he was expert." On 7/17/12 a person or persons unknown attempted to burn Hill's large two story commercial building on Van Buren Street by spreading an accelerant at its rear. The arsonist failed in this endeavor. Casting a warmer, perhaps Gringo-slanted, light on Hill's character, a 1919 article said "Yes sir, Mr. Hill is a typical fighter; a man who waged war with anything that deterred he (sic) and his small band of companions from that great work in opening up the Rio Grande Valley. Of solid build and a marked aggressiveness, Mr. Hill was well qualified to carry the banner of civilization into the Valley."

Hill continued his ceaseless dealing. In mid-November 1912 the formation of the Fresnos Land and Irrigation Company to irrigate 10,000 acres in what was to become the Los Fresnos area was announced. Lon Hill along with R. B. Rentfro and J. B. Scott were the investors in the $50,000 stock issue. They matched this figure when they took over the old Brownsville Irrigation Company reorganizing it as the Rio Grande Canal Company. Shortly thereafter Hill sold 1,964 acres to the Fresnos Land and Irrigation Co. out of the 9,255 he owned in the vicinity. He received $39,288 for the land or $20/acre.

 Lon C. Hill and The Hill Sugar Company, Harlingen

Norman Rozeff

As excerpted from his book Sugarcane and the Development of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1875-1922

Part V: Triumphs and Failures

The 1913-14 season began in mid-November. The newspaper described the mill as starting with a full crew for the 50 to 60 day grinding campaign. Hill’s own crop was estimated at 18,000 tons with commitments for 12,000 tons from others. He had again employed J. E. Martel as superintendent for the third year and Louis J. Sentille from Louisiana as fabrication [sugar boiling] supervisor.

After an early December 1913 visit by Hill to Brownsville, the paper editorialized in the usual manner: “Beats Cuba. D 95 [a Demarara variety of sugarcane] has 21.4 brix, 19.84 % sucrose, and 92.7% purity while striped is running 19.0, 17.28, and 90.9 respectively.” The blurb closes with the statement, “For what one man has done carefully, intelligently, and with proper knowledge of environments another can do. Mr. Hill’s success is no mere accidental happening but is a fair test of climate, soil, and drainage made on a field of 400 acres.” Hill was quoted as saying that his cane was raised by cultivation and not by water. In light of what we know of
cane growth requirements, this statement is quite self-serving. Whether from rain or irrigation, sugarcane in its growth period above 65 degrees F. requires 1" of water to produce one ton of millable net cane.

Lon C. Hill, Jr. recollected in a 1962 interview that “The Pharrs knew more about sugarcane than anyone down here.” The Pharrs helped the Hills a great deal as L. C. Hill had to go to Louisiana to get a crew to run the mill. Pharr always helped him get up his crew; which was not too extensive, but they did need a chemist and some technicians.

A special stockholders meeting on 8/4/14 boded poorly for the company’s future. It was revealed that the sugar company had $120,000 worth of bonds which matured on 7/25/14, and also six months interest on these at 6%, and was unable to pay the principle or interest. The holders of the bonds wanted additional security and agreed to extend payment until 1/25/15. The stockholders then moved to assign a chattel mortgage to Breckinridge Jones of St. Louis for all the farm implements and crops to be grown on the farm of the Hill Sugar Company for the year 1914 in Cameron County and also all of the profits and returns from the sugar mill. The mill itself did not process any cane the 1914-15 season nor ever again.

The debts of the Hill Sugar Company and Lon C. Hill had been accumulating over time. In 1914 the Brownsville law firm of Graham, Jones, West and Dancy had put together a "Statement of Judgments against Lon C. Hill and the Hill Sugar Company" in its hands for collection. From it we learn that in March 1911 Hill had conveyed six tracts of land to the sugar company. Totaling 1,361 acres in Surveys 26, 27, 36, and 46, the land was transferred for the consideration of $239,504.50 or $175.98/acre. On 7/27/11 this acreage was used to secure a mortgage and deed of trust with the Southern Trust Company allowing then the issuance of $120,000 worth of bonds with a face value of $1,000. Three weeks earlier this acreage had been conveyed to the Harlingen Land and Water Company in order to secure water rights then was re-conveyed to the sugar company with the rights attached. Some of the rendered judgments in 1912-14 were as follows: Williams Patent Pulverizer and Crusher Co., $1,608.20; American Hoist and Derrick Co., $2001.39; A. Wayne Woods, $612.92; L. A. Springer, $100.00; Magnolia Petroleum Co., $1,595.57; C. E. Schaff, $1,137.32; Oriental Oil Co., $207.20; Sabine Lumber Co., $2,792.45; Texas Varnish Co.(H. J. Kuhn), $110.00; Perlin & Brendoff Implement Co., $3,019.15; Burroughs Adding Machine Co., $481.50; The Texas Co., $4,757.76; Electric Co., $234.66; Thurston Grab and Derrick Co., $6,121.48; Houston Drug Co., $440.77; (sugarcane growers) T. A. Jackson, $4,116.01 and E. A. Stockdale, $1,045. Year 1912 taxes due were $1,454.28 and for 1913, $1,999.13. In addition the sugar company had taken out a chattel mortgage of $1,500 with the Harlingen National Bank using 40 mules as collateral. Finally the company had a Materialman's Lien on it for materials furnished by the Harlingen Brick Co.; it amounted to $7,003 Apparently most of the debts were paid or in part satisfied, for no land had to be sold at a sheriff's auction.

According to old timers, the 1915-17 period was known as the time of the Bandit Trouble. Mexico was in political and social turmoil. The unrest overflowed north of the U.S.–Mexican border. "It was one of terror to many people. Some inhabitants boarded their houses, turned cows, pigs and chickens loose, and left for other parts. The railroad scheduled special trains and still could not get the people out fast enough. Many short time settlers never returned."

Hill’s mill was burned to the ground by unknown individuals, said to be Mexican bandits, on July 17, 1917. The fire started at 2 am. All the equipment in the wooden-sided mill as well as a
large amount of machinery that had been stored in an adjoining warehouse was lost in the fire. Who were the particular culprits of this malicious action, taken at a time when border incidents were winding down, is unknown. They may even have been parties seeking revenge for the scouting services Hill lent to several U.S. military excursions into Tamaulipas or other perceived transgressions. Regardless of the reason, that was the sad finale for the Hill Sugar Company mill. This was a major financial loss during these troublesome times. It was not covered by insurance, for the insurance companies refused to insure the mill and warehouse both of which lacked adequate fire protection and were highly flammable. The sugar which it had turned out was not of the highest pol. The light brown raw sugar had been shipped by rail to Sugarland to be more highly refined into white sugar. At best the enterprise could be characterized as erratic. Despite his mill's off and on again operation, Hill continued to raise sugarcane. For the 1917-18 season, he hoped to produce 6,000 tons from his 400 acres.

Minnie Gilbert reminiscing to a reporter of the Valley Morning Star (4/24/60) stated “...collapse of the sugarcane industry due to the cane borer and salting of the soil was the heaviest financial blow of the Chief’s [Hill’s] career. [Total] Valley losses were estimated at ten million. Hill’s investment in the Ohio and Texas mill was $165,000 and the Harlingen refinery, which bandits burned, hiked his losses in the venture to over a million and a half.” This figure is likely overblown and the reasons for the collapse somewhat superficial.

George Case wrote: “Financial problems plagued the promoter. Hill seems to have always been in debt for machinery. The mills changed hands rapidly. Complicated land deals seemed to have been tied to mill operations. The railroad at first tried to charge excessive rates for moving raw sugar north for final processing and was never entirely cooperative with the sugar industry in the Valley.”

Lon Hill apparently shipped cane from his 1917-18 crop (and perhaps in the following years too) by rail to the mill further west. Reportedly cane acreages were already on the decline by 1914. Hill was not flamboyant, but he did not lack for playing a role. Gus T. Jones, who was once a Texas Ranger in Harlingen, called Hill “not only a shrewd businessman but a consummate actor.” By his 40s he was wearing his hair long, that is, halfway to his shoulders. With his height and dark, piercing eyes he probably relished the sobriquet “Chief” bestowed upon him. While his family owned an interest of land in the Indian Territory because one of his ancestors had been adopted into the Choctaw nation while it occupied what is now Mississippi, Hill did not possess any Indian blood.

Hill, ever the innovator, was credited with being the first to grow avocados and papayas in the Valley. This was in the years 1926-31. At one point he had 5,000 avocado trees. This latter year while showing his orchards to a visiting reporter from Pennsylvania and reminiscing Hill related that he had lost $165,000 in the Ohio-Texas Sugar Mill venture due to its "inability to raise cane, a borer, and the salt combined". He then added that his own mill's deficits brought his total losses to $1.5 million.

In July 1933, the city of Harlingen conducted a Founder's Day to honor Hill. An apparently mellowed Hill addressed the gathering and with surprising modesty offered an unsolicited tribute. Hill said, "If it had not been for the Mexicans, we could not have developed this country. Without other people coming in and helping, myself or any other one man could have done nothing. We had to have somebody to help. They deserve praise and credit for what has been
done. It is true that I might have furnished the executive abilities, but still at the same time, these other people bore the brunt of the burden."

Upon Hill’s death at age 72 on 5/5/35, considerable outpourings praising his character and civic endeavors were made. At this point in his life these were well deserved. However, in his middle years he may well have been motivated more by economics than he was by altruism or philanthropy. Some of the terms extolled upon him and his accomplishments in eulogy were: benefactor, betterment, counselor, charitable, vision, possessed brains, promoter, busy man, and hard worker. Others noted his "rare sense of humor and remarkable ability at telling a story" and his "individuality to a degree uncommon in this day and age; the indomitable will power, the results of his efforts found him almost a man alone." William Doherty in the May 1908 Gulf Coast magazine helps to detail the portrait of Hill’s nature. He characterizes Hill as: “rough in language, frank to the point of bluntness, [he] ‘hates a liar and loathes a thief’, hospitable, [has] sorrows buried deep within him.”

Hill is buried alongside his wife and two sons in the Buena Vista Cemetery in Brownsville. To have accomplished what he did, Hill must have been a dedicated, complicated, hard-driving individual capable of bringing his plans to fruition and inspiring others to break new ground both literally and figuratively. With the passage of time we can conclude that he left a more charitable legacy than most of his contemporaries.