Major Facelift Creates a Beauty

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April 2009

No ladies, this article is not about cosmetic surgery nor botox. It is about a remarkable architectural transformation on one of Harlingen's signature buildings. The old Harlingen Hardware Store at 302 W. Jackson has been unbelievably transformed into a stunning car showroom, and really a car museum, by Butch Cooley and his wife Gretchen.

This site goes back to Harlingen's pioneer days, for the sizeable brick building was erected in 1916. Its background is this. Frank T. Phillips opened his Phillips Hardware in San Benito in 1908. Eight years later he was to partner with James H. Ewing to form Ewing and Phillips Hardware at the northwest corner of Commerce and Jackson, Harlingen. Ewing had arrived in Harlingen in 1908, only four years after its establishment, to take a job with the South Texas Lumber Company. Married to Phillip's sister, Ewing was in fact his brother-in-law. The firm was competitive and had branches in both Sinton and Bishop, Texas.

Another individual who will become involved in the company's history for a time is S. Finley Ewing, James' brother. Originally from Ballinger, Runnels County, TX, Finley had come to San Benito in 1912. After four years there he took work with the government in border construction projects. Then in 1919 he came to Harlingen to enter the hardware business as manager of Ewing and Phillips. Later he is to become president of the Peoples Gin Company. He is elected Mayor on 4/6/26 and serves until 1928. His slogan is "Progress with Cooperation", and he is upbeat in stating: "This is the logical place for a big city and if we make the right kind of effort Harlingen will be the leader."

One of his most important achievements would be his success in going to New York to sell bonds to finance construction of the Municipal Auditorium that would become the showcase of the Valley. By 1929 he is president of the Harlingen Development Company. This is the relic of the original townsite company which was acquired by local interests from foreign capitalists in 1924. At this time in the original townsite there are1,000 unsold building lots left which this company owns and controls. In 1938 he and his wife move to San Antonio where he is involved in the oil business and investments. He is to die 8/18/75.

In its very early days the hardware store building also housed the Eastern Seed Company owned by Clark Seed of Corpus Christi. When it closed, its 25' frontage was incorporated into the hardware store.

By 1930 and for four years the hardware company that occupies the premise goes by the name Rio Grande Hardware and Machinery Company. It has both retail and wholesale branches. In these years M.A. Myers is its manager. By 1935 it has assumed the name Harlingen Hardware.

In 1938 the firm was incorporated as the Harlingen Hardware and Supply Company. Minority stockholder T. D. King ran the store from 1940 to 1949. In the latter years he was also to serve on the school board of trustees.

While the Ewings pass out of the firm's picture, the Phillips family are associated with it into the 1990s. When Frank Phillips dies in the early 1940s his widow Harriette hires a manager to operate the company for a few years. In 1948 her daughter Frances would then
enter the picture with her husband Clyde W. "Tony" Roush. They would acquire all the stock of the firm. The Roushes enlarged the premise, and he opened several furniture stores. In 1974 the store would become affiliated with the national branded Ace Hardware.

Roush would die in 1976, but daughter Harriette would return from San Antonio to help renovate and operate the store. Harriette claims both Phillips and Ewing as ancestors. A few years later, in 1979, she would marry Jim Armacost, who would greatly assist her in managing the company. The three Armacost children would grow up to help in the store at various times over the years.

Upon the death of Jim, Harriette carried on. In the 1990s she made the decision to lease the business site to Broadway Hardware and Gifts, the very successful McAllen company. Broadway ran the site with the original veteran employees until early 2008 when it decided to close the Harlingen outlet which by then bore its name. Perhaps the major hardware competitors Home Depot and Loews, which came on the scene in 2006, influenced its decision.

The Cooleys were immediately attracted to this central location and offered to purchase the property from Harriette. They did so in May 2008. The property stood vacant until ambitious plans were drawn up for its renovation.

Harlingenites will remember the old store that seemed to have everything imaginable in regards hardware and oddities. Its slogan was "Everything from diamonds to horse collars." With its disjointed layout and packed inventory, the north side having been extended over the years, one invariably had to ask for assistance in locating a particular object. The staff however always knew what was in stock and were very helpful in locating items as well as offering repair hints and suggestions. Most had been employed there for decades.

Because of these memories it is difficult to grasp the significant evolution that has occurred in the building. Having been totally gutted and then reconstructed from a barebones status the building now looks very expansive with a line of sight stretching between two rows of displayed vehicles. The uniform ceiling and ample lighting add to the ambiance as does the uniform retro black and white floor tiles. A clever handling of space is the treatment of the west wall. Here in each section Cristina Duron Kitagawa has painted acrylic recreations of old garage doors, seemingly resurrected from the 1920s and 30s. Another contributor was Jason Campbell who put up much sweat equity in working on various elements of the reconstruction.

Cooley's office sits at the north end behind large glass windows allowing visitors to see its handsome interior including its unique and beautiful mesquite flooring. If this description isn't enough to entice a visit then certainly the numerous fabulously restored cars will. While most are Chevrolet products, Frank Boggus has graciously loaned the showroom two stunning old Fords, one of which is an old "woodie". That this historic Harlingen site has been saved for future generations is a great credit to the Cooleys, their foresight, and all involved in *Downtown Harlingen*. 