Hi, I’m Chris Boswell, and I’m proud to be the mayor of Harlingen, Texas. We recently celebrated 100 years as a city – Harlingen was founded by Lon C. Hill in 1910. Our first mayor was Ike McFarland, who served for one year. His successor was John D. Hill, who was sworn in as mayor and immediately resigned! So former mayor McFarland was tapped to be sworn in again as mayor, and he immediately withdrew his name. Finally, A. W. Cunningham was appointed mayor by the city commission. Being mayor can be a tough job, but we can look back at April 4, 1911 as the day when our city had 3 mayors in one day! But long before that, there was a lot of history being made around here that led to our area’s growth and development.

NEW NARRATOR:

Almost 500 years ago, in 1519, a man named Alonso Alvarez de Pineda from Spain made the first map of the Texas Coastline. He noted the mouths of several important rivers, including the Rio Grande River. The Pineda Stone can be found at our museum; its history is uncertain, but it reminds us that the area was of vital interest to countries such as Spain many years ago.

When the Mission San Antonio de Valero, which we know as the Alamo, was established in 1718, the Rio Grande Valley was still largely unpopulated and known as the Wild Horse Desert. It was mostly grassland, with scattered mesquite and brush. In 1748, much of the region was granted by Spain to Jose de Escandon to establish towns to compete with France’s claims along the coast of Texas. “Land grants” were very important to the descendants of those who settled this area, because they established ownership of individual sections of land. With the Mexican Revolution in 1821, Mexico took control of the whole area and recognized many of these Spanish land grants, assuring people who may have lived on their family’s land for 100 years or more that they wouldn’t need to leave.

New narrator HHSS student --

Then came the battle for Texas Independence! In 1835, after growing tension between the Texians (as residents of Texas were then known) and the Mexican government, the Texians defeated the Mexicans at the Battle of Gonzales and shortly thereafter, took over San Antonio. General Santa Anna decided to invade Texas to reclaim it for Mexico. He chose a two pronged invasion route in which he would lead the larger, western army toward San Antonio, where after a 13 day siege, with a force of more than 1400 men, he defeated the approximately 200 Texians on March 6, 1836. General Urrea was given command of Santa Anna’s eastern army. His army passed along the coastal route very near to where modern day Harlingen now stands. He eventually defeated Col. Fannin at the Battle of Coleto Creek and massacred the captured Texian soldiers at Goliad on Palm Sunday (3/27/1836). It is from the battles at Goliad and the Alamo that “Remember the Alamo!” and “Remember Goliad!” became the rallying cry that spurred the Texian forces in their final and successful battle at San Jacinto on April 21st. Texas was now an independent country.

But the area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande in which Harlingen now sits was contested for the next nine years. Texas claimed the border reached to the Rio Grande, and Mexico said that it ended at the Nueces River near Corpus Christi.
After being their own country for 9 years, Texas appealed to the United States for annexation. In line with the idea of Manifest Destiny, the US quickly accepted and acknowledged Texas’ claim of the border at the Rio Grande. The US saw this as an opportunity to gain more agricultural land, and some saw it as an opportunity to expand slavery. Regardless, Mexico saw it as an invasion since it had never acknowledged the Rio Grande as the border with Texas. President Polk immediately sent an army under General Taylor south to Point Isabel to establish a supply point and camp for the US army. Soon after, Fort Brown was built to guard the Rio Grande River across from Matamoros and to establish a US presence along the river. The first armed engagement of the Mexican War occurred in April of 1846. Thornton’s company of Dragoons were ambushed by Mexican troops at the rancho de Carricitos, an area just south of Harlingen near present day Los Indios. President Polk told the Congress that “American blood has been spilled on American soil”, when he asked them to declare war on Mexico.

Only a few weeks later, the first battle of the Mexican War occurred 15 miles east of Harlingen at a place called Palo Alto. The victorious American army followed up their win the following day 5 miles further southeast at Resaca de la Palma. After that point the United States pushed the war into Mexico, until it captured the capitol and finally negotiated the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which ceded Texas to the US.

In 1861, Texas joined the Confederacy and seceded from the United States after only 15 years as a state. Texas troops fought throughout the Civil War at just about every major battle throughout the war. Palmito Ranch was the last battle fought during the Civil War and occurred southeast of Brownsville in 1865. US troops stationed at Brazos Island included more than 600 African American troops. Due to the poor communication system at the time, the battle was actually fought after General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomox and the war was officially over. With the defeat of the Confederacy, Texas was ordered to be placed under military control until the adoption of a new State Constitution in 1876.

During the Civil War, Richard King was very valuable to the Confederate cause. He had already established his now famous King Ranch, but he was also the owner and operator of a steamship company that served all of south Texas. He had 2 steamships re-flagged under Mexican colors, since Mexican ships were able to cross the Union blockade of Confederate ships. King’s reflagged boats were used on the river to transport cotton from Matamoros and points further north to Bagdad, Mexico from which lighters carried it to foreign ships offshore. They were also used to import supplies to help the Confederate cause. The cotton and supplies traveled along a road that stretched through King’s ranch, along the coast through what would become modern Harlingen, into Brownsville, then across to Matamoros. However with the end of the war, King
closed the road through his ranch and travelers had to detour almost 90 miles around the entire ranch before heading south again. This continued until the late 1930’s when a road was opened through the King Ranch that cut travel time. This road became the major route connecting the coastal Rio Grande Valley with the cities of Victoria and Houston. It opened the door for quicker travel, but also for the exportation and importation of goods both from and into the Valley. Harlingen became a natural hub for the region since both the King Ranch Road traveling north to south (modern US77) and the Military Highway traveling east to west (Old 83) intersected very near the city.

After the war, many people from other parts of the US came to Texas to start new lives. Many came as ranchers and cattle growers; others came to plant cotton, citrus and other crops. Settlement of the border area came later than the central part of Texas. In the early 1900s when ranger contingents were stationed here, our community was known as Six Shooter Junction, because of its “wild-west” reputation. The area between Alice and Brownsville could only be traveled on horseback or by stagecoach. It was a long and arduous journey, through land that could only be described as wild. Once the traveler reached the northern bank of the Arroyo Colorado northeast of Rio Hondo, he would stop at the arroyo to be ferried across to continue his journey to Brownsville. This was a good stopping point, and Paso Real Stagecoach Inn was built to accommodate the traveler. You can tour the restored Paso Real building at the Harlingen Arts & Heritage Museum, to see what its hotel and dining accommodations were like! Small and sparsely furnished, they probably seemed luxurious to folks who’d come over 100 miles in a stagecoach.

NEW NARRATOR .

Lon C. Hill was an attorney, practicing in Beeville, Texas, when he made a trip to Brownsville in the year 1900. Traveling through the area, he became convinced that with irrigation and better transportation, the brushland could be made into fertile agricultural land. He began purchasing land from the state, county, private individuals, and from the King Ranch, until he owned over 40,000 acres. Meanwhile, he began exploring how to irrigate the land, and helped start the syndicate to bring the railroad to Brownsville. The first railroad arrived at Brownsville from Kingsville, Texas, in 1904. Hill’s system of canals that could bring water from the Rio Grande to interior parts of the south Texas delta was the beginning of the Harlingen Land and Water Company. His first crop was rice, which he grew north of Brownsville where he also operated a hardware and farming implement store. While his home in Harlingen was being built in 1904, Hill and his wife Eustacia and their 9 children lived in Point Isabel and then in Brownsville. It was while in Brownsville that typhoid fever took the lives of both Eustacia and the youngest child, George.

Hill and the remaining 8 children moved into the home in Harlingen; this house can be seen now, much as it was in 1905, on the grounds of the Harlingen Arts & Heritage Museum. Harlingen was platted as a townsite by Lon C. Hill in March 1904, received its post office permit in June of that year, and in April 1910 adopted the commission form of government to officially
be a town. The family of Hill’s good friend, railroad president Uriah Lott, had roots in Harlingen, Holland, an area laced with canals. And so Hill decided to name his new town “Harlingen”. When he first moved to Harlingen, he brought with him cattle, pigs, sheep and chickens. He developed his own innovative plowing system, using a steam engine to pull the plows. He built his own kiln for the bricks needed on his property. In 1911, he built a sugar mill to handle his sugar cane crop. The little town soon had a 10 room railroad hotel, a lumberyard, seed store, and several dry goods stores. Then a drug store, a doctor’s office, and blacksmith and barber shops joined those already along Jackson and Van Buren Avenues. Early pioneer families opened businesses: the Lozanos and Wellers, the Lockharts and Villarreals, the Ogans, Anglins, Weems, and Saldanas. Hill also built a small, frame building to serve as a school – his own children were half the student population of 14 when the school opened in September, 1905.

Hill set aside land in the town for any churches that wanted it; his niece, Dr. Kate Adele Hill, tells us that land was given to the Methodist, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Presbyterian and Catholic churches. He also set aside land for the first cemetery and for three parks (Travis, Bowie, and Diaz).

Lon Hill continued to be a driving force in the growth and development of Harlingen until his death in 1935. He and members of his family were involved with most of the elements that make our city what it is today and we think he’d be proud of the results! And the Valley Star (now the Valley Morning Star) began in 1909 to help record all the progress, challenges, and details of people’s lives through the next century.

NEW NARRATOR

The Bandit Years were brief but brutal and scary. As the Mexican government struggled to stabilize after the Revolution in 1910, bandits found it easy and profitable to cross the Rio Grande and raid farms for horses, guns, and money. During the period from 1915 – 1917, like most local farm families, the Hill children were taught to shoot and to protect their youngest siblings. The story is told that each child was to keep a dark shirt or robe at the foot of the bed, so that if bandits struck in the night, they could pull on the shirt, escape the house and hide in ditches away from the house. The Hills were personally affected by the Bandit Years, when Lon Hill’s son, Gordon, was one of the civilians with the U.S. soldiers who successfully fought off a band of 50 or so bandits at Norias. Later, in 1917, the Hill family sugar mill was burned to the ground, an act attributed to bandits.

During the 1920’s, thanks to the determination of two local women, the first hospital was built on F Street. Ida Gilbert and Marie Yeager were able to secure two of the old Army barracks from the the Rangerville area and have them moved to Harlingen to serve as a rudimentary 10-bed hospital. Julia Bassant, a dietitian, helped Nurse Yeager to care for the patients, who suffered from many of the illnesses and injuries typical of a farm community in the early 20th Century. You can tour this hospital, which is on the grounds of the Harlingen Arts & Heritage Museum. Within the next 2 years, Valley Baptist Hospital opened with 36 beds, near the original hospital. Today, of course, Valley Baptist Medical Center is a large complex of
buildings on Ed Carey Drive, serving thousands of patients annually in its 600 bed facility. In 2002, Harlingen Medical Center opened, giving Harlingen a second full service hospital. Both these hospitals are a far cry from the original hospital! Meanwhile, Su Clinica Familiar opened in 1971, and provides medical services and health education to hundreds of uninsured and under-insured people in our community. In 1998, legislation authorized the University of Texas at San Antonio to establish a Regional Academic Health Center (the RAHC) here in Harlingen. Today, medical residents learn through the RAHC’s program by doing rotations at Valley Baptist Medical Center; the RAHC has a fully accredited internal medicine program and hopes one day to have a full medical school. In 2010 a regional VA Clinic was built next to the RAHC which eventually will offer a wide range of medical services to Valley veterans. With all this development of major medical facilities, support systems have been put in place too. All together, the health care industry in Harlingen is the city’s biggest employer, with more than 4,000 people working in this field. We expect that health care will continue to be a growing field of employment and training.

NEW NARRATOR

Providing a competent education for our children has always been a priority in Harlingen. One of the first things Lon C. Hill did was to build a school building near his home, so that his children and his neighbors’ children could have the education they needed to succeed in their growing town. As Harlingen grew, so did its school system. Initially there was only one building, then two and more. At one time, Harlingen’s schools were segregated; African American children went to school on W. Filmore at H Street; Hispanic schools were on S. E Street and at the West Ward School. All that has changed now, of course. Today, Harlingen has a nationally recognized Board of Trustees directing the district’s 17 elementary schools and five middle schools. 2 traditional high schools, 2 alternative schools and the Early College High School on the campus of Texas State Technical College meet the needs of secondary students. The Marine Military Academy is a private high school enrolling 350 boys from Texas, the US, and around the world. TSTC began in 1965; today it has programs in agriculture, Information Technology, health sciences, culinary arts, engineering and transportation. Part of their mission is to prepare local students for professional careers here in the Valley. Harlingen students also have easy access to the University of Texas, at Edinburg and in Brownsville.

NEW NARRATOR: Wrap up

Right after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army Air Gunnery School was opened in Harlingen, training 48,000 men over the next four years. These years took their toll on Harlingen as they did on all cities in the United States. Cameron County lost at least 200 men in the fighting overseas. The original model of the Iwo Jima Memorial was donated by the artist to the Marine Military Academy in memory of those lost. The war years also saw much progress in Harlingen, though, because the gunnery school required many local people to work in a variety of jobs at the base. New businesses grew up to serve the base and those who worked or studied there. Not long after the war was over, in the early 1950’s, the Harlingen Air Force Base opened, bringing many new families to the area, and bringing many jobs on the base and in local businesses which grew to support the base. This was a period of enormous growth for
Harlingen. But 10 years later, the government closed the base, and the city leaders faced the joblessness, the shrinking businesses, and the empty homes that followed.

Our area has attracted winter visitors since the 20’s and ‘30’s; many winter visitors went on to become permanent Valley residents. Now, a concerted effort was begun to attract retirees from all over the country to the warm climate, relatively low cost of living, and excellence in health care choices that Harlingen offered. Advertising and promotions brought many winter visitors to the area, and with them came the development of parks to accommodate those who came in motor homes. Many of the homes left vacant after the base closing were purchased by people from northern states seeking to escape cold winters in a community that had a low cost of living. We certainly have benefited economically from the influx of winter visitors; many have also become volunteers in our schools, hospitals and at our museum.

Added to these attributes that continue to attract Winter Visitors was the free show that our local semi-tropical and migratory birds have always provided. Local business people and environmentalists recognized that more and more people wanted to come to an area in the United States where they could see a wide variety of birds. Today birding is a major factor in the local tourist industry. The decision by Southwest Airlines to base its Valley services here helped to make our airport the hub of the Valley’s air service.

The history of Harlingen is in some ways the history of Texas, intertwined with the history of Mexico, and in some ways it’s unique to Harlingen. Our founder, Lon C. Hill, was a visionary who worked hard at making his vision come true. Harlingen has evolved in 100 years to a city of nearly 65,000 people, with an economy based on health care services, education, eco-tourism, and financial services in addition to our agricultural industry. The descendants of people who moved here 100 or 250 years ago, with those who arrived much more recently, made their own unique contributions, and continue to work hard to see their dreams come true, too.