4/10/62 Hale Schalebin of Edinburg offers the Paso Real Inn and two acres surrounding it to the Lower Rio Grande Valley Historical Association.

1963 This year, at the request of City Librarian Verna McKenna, Howard Butt donates the former detention center of the old Harlingen Air Force Base (built in 1952) to house a gun collection which has been donated. This building has 2,925 sq. ft. of space. Mrs. Butt also arranges a $500 donation from the Butt Foundation. The individuals who were then to organize to properly display artifacts are Mrs. Mac Caul (Lon C. Hill's daughter Eustacia), Cecil Carruth (businessman), Gene McCullough (attorney), Mrs. Gerald (Verna) McKenna, Bill Pletcher (nurseryman and city commissioner), Lee Richards Hygeia Dairy), Mrs. Dorothy Washmon, and Mr. J. D. Werner (schoolteacher, city commissioner). Thus begins the origins of the Rio Grande Valley Museum, an idea first contemplated in the late 1950s. The initial name of the museum is the Landmarks Historical Society Museum, but, in 1968, this is changed to the Rio Grande Valley Museum. Curator Eleanor Gault, state representative Menton Murray, and Mrs. Caul are especially active in collecting local memorabilia. After much cleaning and the collection of artifacts, the museum has its formal opening in March 5, 1967 when its doors are opened to the public. In December of that year, the Rio Grande Valley Historical Museum Association is organized. Mrs. Charles Washmon chairs the fund-raising committee which raises about $184,000 to create the RGV Historical Museum Complex.

The early directors of the museum set a high goal for the enterprise as is to be seen in the early Mission Statement and Museum Philosophy. These are:

Mission Statement
1) To collect and display historic objects and information in order to preserve and conserve them and use them for interpretation and education on the unique blend that has made the Lower Rio Grande Valley magic.
2) To use these and other materials to demonstrate the fusion of the six nations, Native American tribes, and countless individuals that have contributed to the cultural evolution of Texas.
3) To interpret the natural history of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.
4) To develop a supporting library of historic and archival materials.
5) To perform other related activities that further these purposes.

Museum Philosophy
The philosophy of the Rio Grande Valley Museum is to be a resource, an asset and a contributing member of the Valley community. We intend to be an educational and learning center for all our citizens, encouraging and fostering an interest in the cultural history and natural history of our area. We will accomplish this with exhibits at the museum complex, educational and fun activities for all ages at the Museum and beyond, outreach programs at schools, centers, and other gatherings and with speakers on topics of interest. Our new addition will give us a base to continue the successful efforts of the past and build for the future.
Early directors of the Rio Grande Valley Museum Association were: President George Pletcher (nurseryman); Vice-president M.H. Connelly (insuranceman); Secretary Ruth Lara; and Treasurer Henry Griffin. Including these, there were 16 directors in all.

2/66 The City Commission passes an ordinance setting up a board to organize and direct activities of a museum.

3/72 The original Hill home is restored by the Junior Service League, Mrs. Bob Clark, chairman.

1973 What is salvageable of the dilapidated Paso Real Inn is moved from its original site to the Rio Grande Valley Museum complex and will be restored in 1976.

1974 The Hill House is moved across Fair Park Blvd. after having been restored in 1971-72. Now on the southside of the boulevard, attractive gardens are established around the home.

1976 The old F Street Hospital, then owned by Louis Levine who donates it, comes to its final resting place in the museum complex. November 6, 1976 sees the dedication of the restored Paso Real Inn with its authentic 19th century furnishings.

Likely in 1976 Verna McKenna, longtime Harlingen librarian and a historian, put down a written reminiscence of the origins of the Rio Grande Valley Museum. It was reprinted in the Valley Morning Star 75th Harlingen Anniversary Issue 4/14/85. It reads:

"The City Manager requested me to call a meeting of the Local History and Landmarks Committee and the Library Board to consider the organization and operation of a museum. Mrs. M. C. Caul [Lon C. Hill's daughter Eustacia] had been willed a gun collection valuated at $3,000, and she wanted immediate action (on Mr. John Haines' will).

It was explained that none of the city-owned buildings at the old HAAF Base were fire-proof. Objections were made to using a frame building. It was explained that Building 565, the old stockade or jail was fire-proof, but it belonged to H. E. Butt [the retail grocery chain].

I went back to the library and called the HEB office in Corpus Christi and was told Mr. Butt was in conference.

Mrs. Butt called back, and said they would make out the deed to the City of Harlingen. I called the Mayor and the City Manager and told them the good news of the gift.

Considerable change had to be made to the interior of the building. This was undertaken by the Jaycees under the supervision of the City.

I promised the Harlingen Museum a tape of my experiences in Harlingen. Pan American University also asked me for an oral history."

1973 The first full-time director is hired.
1981 In this year $174,000 was raised to add 2,000 additional sq. ft. to the old brig building. Mrs. Charles Washmon was chairman of the fund raising committee. The added space allowed for the exhibit of costumes and historic manikin displays. On 11/7/82 with Henry Griffin as president of the RGV Museum Association and Harold Ebbage, chairman of the Board of Directors, the new wing is dedicated. Although the by-laws of the association were adopted on January 20, 1981, the official incorporation of the organization would not be until 2/19/85.


1985 This year saw some major improvements to the complex. An enclosed patio with a fountain was laid along with inlaid-patterned paths. Some interior walls in the original building were removed to provide a better flow pattern and exhibition space. A storage area was erected and carpeting was installed. A tall southwestern style bell tower was erected over the main entrance to the museum.


July 1988 The RGV Museum Association conducts its first membership drive. Its purposes are twofold: to raise money for continued expansion and recruit volunteers for the Museum Volunteer Program. This drive was chaired by Edna Tamayo. At the time Menton J. Murray was chairman of the Museum Board of Directors while George Pletcher was president of the association.

1989 The F Street Hospital and Paso Real Inn were relocated on the grounds with funds donated in a will. This allowed more appropriate room for the Hill House.
5/89 The original Lon C. Hill home at Lon C. Hill Park is moved across town from Fair Park to the Rio Grande Valley Museum complex. By the end of 1989 all three historic buildings are ready to be showcased.

1990 A city bond issue passes, and it provides money for a $500,000 visitor center addition. This 8,012 sq. ft. building has two large exhibition area, gift shop, spacious atrium, a small auditorium, office and board room space, a kitchen, storage and work spaces.

1991 Linn Keller is employed to be museum director.

1992 The Rio Grande Valley Museum gets a facelift with the completion of the new reception/exhibition building to front the complex. It has a gala pre-opening on April 10, 1992. This new facility is valued at $640,000 in 2002.

April 1993 Thanks to the efforts of Betty Murray the historic Ross-Bobo house at 521 E. Harrison is saved and moved to the museum grounds. This structure was the home of Harlingen's second mayor, Lawrence Sullivan (L.S.) Ross Jr. (son of the famed Sul Ross) and later the Water District Manager C.P. Bobo. Numerous Harlingenites would later remember it as the site of Bobo's Baby Bank, a popular day nursery.
2/2001  Linn Keller resigns as museum director after experiencing conflicting ideas about the museum's future direction.

7/01  Karen Gerhardt is hired as new museum director. She holds a master's degree in museum studies form Baylor University and has been employed for three years as Weslaco Bicultural Museum director at a salary of about $30,000.
11/10/01  Ms. Gerhardt is placed on administrative leave after male employee Ramon Rivera makes a police report stating that he was threatened by her. On 11/15 she is released by the City. Following this dismissal the museum experiences several years of loose administration and can be said to have been adrift.

12/05  City Parks and Recreation head, Tom Wilson, is given the directorship duties for the museum. He enthusiastically picks up the slack reins and initiates plans for its future. 1/17/05  Thomas (Tom) Michael Wilson, 52, dies of a heart attack. This Fort Worth native first worked in the Valley for the city of Mission where he helped to restore the historical La Lomita Mission Chapel. In Harlingen he became Director of Public Services (Parks and Recreation), a task he truly relished. One of his major accomplishments here was the creation of the Arroyo Trail. Recently he had been assigned the additional job as head of the Rio Grande Valley Museum. He was moving quickly to revitalize this somewhat stagnant institution when he succumbed. This Catholic leaves his wife, Maria Guadalupe (MG) Moreno, and sons Thomas Marion Wilson, Timothy Michael Wilson, and Todd Matthew Wilson, all of Harlingen, in addition to his mother, brothers, and sisters. Family wishes were that memorial contributions be made to the museum in lieu of flowers. On May 4 the city commission voted to name the southwest playing fields at the Harlingen Sports Complex on Wilson Road the "Tom Wilson Youth Sports Complex." 2/05  Upon the death of Wilson, the Museum Board actively moves to revitalize the museum. Volunteers are secured and trained. An inviting series of exhibits and events are then to follow.

3/6/05  A Texas State Historical marker commemorating the Harlingen Army Air Field and the Harlingen Air Force Base is dedicated and placed in the front of the museum. Markers already exist for the Old Harlingen Hospital and for the Lon C. Hill house.

9/05  The city appoints Tomas Arispe to be coordinator of the Rio Grande Valley Museum. His mother was originally from Port Isabel but moved to Los Angeles 37 years ago. After residing and being educated there, Arispe and his mother have returned to Port Isabel. On 11/2/05 he announces that the museum's name will shortly be changed to the Harlingen Arts & Heritage Museum to better reflect the community's involvement with it. Arispe will resign two years later to concentrate on his own business on South Padre Island. His two year tenure is significant in that it marks a sharp turnaround in interest in the museum by the community.
5/07 Patricia Morales is named Coordinator of the Harlingen Arts and Heritage Museum. She received her bachelor of arts degree in art history from the University of North Texas in Denton.

5/1/08 Museum Coordinator Patricia Morales resigns to take another position. Ramiro "Rod" Rodriguez is named new coordinator. A Harlingen native, he is an honors graduate of UT Pan American in 2005.

8/09 The Advisory Board of the Museum accepts a plan devised by Norman Rozeff, Harlingen Historical Preservation Society researcher and advisory board member. It deals with the renovation and redoing of the history exhibit building of the museum. In short, a Harlingen Military History Room will be established to be followed by the redesign of current exhibits to reflect Harlingen history rather than RGV history.

8/15/09 Ramiro Rodriguez resigns to accept a position at Harlingen High School South.

Now there is a continuous round of activities at the museum. Summer programs target youth while year-round exhibits and receptions draw the adults. Especially eventful are the annual "Taste of Harlingen" and the "Harlingen Heritage Festival" in June or July. A monthly newsletter keeps docents, members, and the public abreast of developments.