About Some of Harlingen's Old Buildings

Notes on Sharon Newell Photographs by Norman Rozeff, April 2007

At a cost of $28,000 Roque Herrera, who had been involved in construction here since early 1916, builds a hotel and restaurant at 308 S. C Street but loses possession due to cost overruns. He pays $150 a month to a San Antonio loan company but loses the 4,750 square foot building the first year. While on the C Street side the upper floors will serve as the Valley Hotel, the ground floor along Harrison will hold the City Pharmacy. Romulo (Romeo) Castillo purchases it in 1940 or 42 from the previous owner for $18,000 and operates Romeo's Cafe here, prior to its occupancy by his Ro-Ca Loans in 1974 and his 1975 bail bond business, Ro-Ca Bail Bonds. He operated the latter at the 401 W. Harrison side until his retirement at age 93 in 2005. Romeo was born 2/28/1912 in Zaragosa, N. L., Mexico and came to Harlingen at age 8. He was to die at the end of January 2006. He was president of the Pan American Golf Assoc., a charter member of Life Begins at Forty, on the Board of Directors of the Harlingen Housing Authority, and still a rancher and landowner in Zaragosa. His Harlingen survivors include his wife of 53 years, Maria Idolina, daughter Juana C. Cortez and son Romulo, Jr. of Harlingen, and a daughter Luz Martinez in Laredo.

Also in 1928 a Mexican army officer in exile designs and builds an elaborately styled two story brick building for his mother-in-law, Tomasa Villareal Garza, at 323 W. Harrison. With a grocery store in the front and Cortez Cleaners in the rear, there was also a rooming house upstairs. Mrs. Garza loses the building in the 1930s depression. Later it houses an auto parts store and becomes Flores Cleaners in the 1990s.

The Letzerichs [another source says Charles H. Waterwall] erect the brick building at 216 W. Jackson on the northeast corner of Jackson and Commerce. Substantial and continuing billing, 10/15/09 through 4/1/10, of the South Texas Lumber Co. to Dr. Letzerich may indicate the building being erected in this period. It will later house the Harlingen Pharmacy owned by Hugo L. Letzerich on its first floor and the offices of his brothers, Dr. Casper W. Letzerich, and Dr. Alfred M. upstairs. One may even conduct some dental work as a building sign indicates. Hugo Letzerich first saw Harlingen as a mail clerk on the first train through the community in 1904. When the post office was in this building he was its postmaster. The structure is currently occupied by an antique emporium. Hugo will marry in 1916 when his fiancée Alma, who was born in Oakland, TX, arrives here. She is a dedicated Methodist whose work for the church will be recognized on Alma Letzerich Day in April 1977. Hugo, who was born in Warrentown, TX 1/6/81, will die in 1936 at age 55. Casper, age 59, will die 9/5/35 of a heart attack while his wife Maude Weller Letzerich will die 7/7/50 of a heart attack. This First Presbyterian member was residing at 202 E. Tyler at the time of her death.
1933 Boggus Motors Co. is established in Harlingen. J. Louis Boggus' family had come to the Valley in 1917. He started as a bookkeeper at the Ford Automobile Company dealership in McAllen in 1918. This was Daniel Ford. Because of his outstanding abilities as a car salesman, he became a Mission Ford dealer in 1919, and part owner of Brownsville Patteson Motors in 1923. He moved to Harlingen in 1933 and acquired the Ford Agency from H.R. Hollingsworth completing the deal hours before the hurricane struck. After the storm the new Ford V-8 was offered. Lincoln Zephyr models came to the agency in 1935 and Mercury in 1939, the same year Boggus acquired this franchise in Harlingen. It was in 1939 also that he started a tractor company in both Harlingen and McAllen. In 1946 Boggus separated the Valley Motor Co. selling Lincolns and Mercurys and the Boggus Motor Co. selling Fords at its new Harrison Street location.

1920 In this year it is likely that the city saw its first drive-in service station, "Battery and Oil Station" operated by William Witt. He is the son-in-law of G.P. Brandt, who operated a blacksmith shop at the location, 202 N. Commerce, for several years. In 1922 I.W. Spenser bought the property and building behind it. By 1926 A.T. Starnes becomes the manager of the Harlingen Battery and Oil Station. A Sinclair station is constructed by Mr. Teas at 202 N. Commerce, then HWY 96 which is the main route from Corpus Christi to Brownsville. It ceases operations in the 1970s and has since been restored in appearance by owner Bill DeBrooke.

Sam Foster starts the first Chevrolet agency at 516 W. Jackson. In July 1, 1934 he sells his business to the Knapp Chevrolet Co. Shortly thereafter its W. Harrison building burns to the ground. The dealership moves to the Wroten Building where Harlingen Motors later was located. George Wroten, in addition to operating Wroten Motors, together with Phil Edie, operated the Cadillac Grill. In 1944, after he had left the dealership behind, he was employed by Browns Express Co. as a claims adjuster. He left the Valley in the fall of 1955. He died in San Antonio at age 81 on 2/8/61.

James K. Junkin is selling furniture at 211-3 W. Monroe. In 1931 he will have moved into the building at 124 North A Street across from the Arcadia Theater. By 1941 he will move into the spacious two-story building that has been vacated by Wroten Motors at 516 W. Jackson. The Olympus Gym moves in when Junkin's Fine Furniture vacates this site in 1990, only to close a few years later in smaller premises.

1927 Hygeia Milk Products Company is organized by Dr. James Traylor, whose wife is principal of the Alamo School. Dr. Traylor's partners are Tyre H. Brown, B.M. Hollon, and Link B. Martin. The original plant at 215 North A is managed by Harvey L. Richards, Sr., a June graduate of Texas A&M College. Richards, who will serve as a major in the Army Air Force in WWII, will continue his aviation interest as Chairman of the Airport Board. The first significant municipal airport facility will be named in his honor. In July 1927 bottling and distribution, by a one horse drawn wagon, begins from the plant with a capacity of 60 gallons per day.

1912 Built by the city, the first electric plant begins to operate and, together with the water works, has taken the expenditure of $20,000. From time to time it is leased to private operators but is constantly taken back due to poor management. The plant
sometimes provides energy for up to two hours in the daylight hours and four at night. In 1928 the citizens approve its sale to CP&L.

1926 In this year the Jackson Street lots of the First Baptist Church are sold and lots purchased at the northeast corner of Van Buren and 5th Streets. The following year a large brick sanctuary at 501 E. Van Buren is erected by S.G. Stringer and Associates at a cost of $100,000. (An aerial photograph of Harlingen shows the church with its roof still under construction on 9/11/27.) The building is said to have cost $100,000. This comes about under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. W.W. Lee. In this period the congregation numbers around 394. The debts for this building are paid by 1943. It is in 1937 that this edifice is to receive a pipe organ given as a memorial by Dr. and Mrs. N.A. Davidson. The gift is ably used for the next 28 years by the talented and inspirational musician, Foster Tebee.