Lozano Building Holds Many Memories and Stories

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When in the early morning hours of July 11, 2004, the Santos Lozano Building at 117-119 West Jackson Street, Harlingen was engulfed in flames, the structure would burn spectacularly, perhaps fittingly for its proud heritage. Its aged timbers and flooring were not readily consumed but for hours fought against the efforts of firefighters to extinguish them. The gap created by the burned-out structure was made more ghostly when scorched exterior walls still retained their stateliness. Not only was a physical gap created by the building's destruction but a spiritual one as well.

Santos Lozano had come from Alice to Harlingen in 1905. In early 1906 he was to buy the second commercial lots on Main (Jackson) Street. The first lots in the townsite platted by Lon C. Hill had been purchased by Mr. and Mrs. A. C. Weller, who, in early 1906, had come up from Brownsville with their daughters. While Weller was to do exceedingly well for a time with saloons around town, Santos had more conservative ideas. In early 1906 he builds a small frame structure for a general store with living quarters upstairs. This building was removed in early 1915 and the brick, two-story, S. Lozano Building was erected. Its bricks came from Monterrey, Mexico. It was designed by capable, but little documented, architect Baltazar Torres.

Santos V. Lozano was born in Ejidos San Nicolas de los Garzas (now part of Monterrey), Nuevo Leon State, Mexico in 1863. His parents, Felipe and Otta Gracia Lozano had immigrated to Texas during the Mexican-French War and ended up in Collins, TX when Santos was two years old. In Alice, Santos would eventually operate a mercantile store for fourteen years before making his way to Harlingen. After the death of his first wife, Micaela Beasly, he would marry Tomasa Cantu. His oldest son J.B. Lozano was born in Alice 4/12/92, educated at public schools, and, in 1909, became a merchant with his father in Lozano and Son. J.B. was to marry Herlinda Hinojosa 5/12/12. His younger brother, S.V. Lozano was born in Alice on 7/27/94, and also educated in public schools. When he entered the business the store was called S. Lozano and Son Dry Goods Store. He came to Harlingen at age 11 and was to serve in WWI in a medical detachment. He later was an American Legion member and was in the Woodmen of the World. Both brothers were proud of their Irish-Mexican heritage. In the 1920s the Lozanos had placed store branches in La Feria, Donna, and Raymondville. Another Santos son, Don Guillermo Lozano, would open the first meat market west of the railroad. The family patriarch, Santos, would die at the ripe old age of 90.

The family and the building have many interesting tales to tell. It was in 1903 that the children of La Providencia Ranch hands were taught by Miss Margarita Villareal (later she becomes Mrs. G. M. (Willie) Lozano. Their son G. M. Lozano, Jr. will marry another early arrival to the Harlingen scene. This is Ida Priestly, who arrived here in 1922, as her father with ancestors from Clarksville, TX takes up tenant farming in the Rangerville area. In 2002 she is to celebrate her 86th birthday.) Having been graduated after eleven
years of schooling in Brownsville, Margarita is qualified to teach. Instruction is in English. Later the school moves into the second floor of the Lozano Building. This serves some of the Hispanic children until the school district builds a facility for them.

It is in late 1910 that Santos, who is a registered voter, signs a petition which will allow Harlingen, now with a population of 1,126 individuals, to form a commission form of government and officially become a city.

In the Bandit Era centering around 1915, a strange set of circumstances occurs. The story is this. In 1874 Donna Benigna Hodges' first husband, Morgan Barclay buys the first of two tracts from the Matamoros heirs of Jose Narciso Carvazos. He is licensed by Cameron County Commissioners to operate the ferry at Paso Real. When her second husband, Mr. Hodges, dies she maintains the ferry until the coming of the railroad in 1904 ends stagecoach travel. Years later, bed-ridden in her home above the Paso Real crossing she appeals to Santos Lozano to care for her after two ranch hands are killed by bandits. The Lozanos take her to Harlingen and care for her. Having no heirs she wills her ranch to Micaela Lozano. Thus the mercantile Lozano family also becomes ranchers.

Four years after the construction of the Lozano Building, a city ordinance to ban the construction of wooden buildings in the downtown section passes, and the council moves to eliminate existing fire hazard structures. In May of this same year, 1919, Harlingen has a smallpox outbreak. Dr. Letzerich vaccinates many, but Mrs. Santos Lozano, who helps to nurse others, dies of the disease.

Harlingen "white way" is completed in late July 1921. Electric lights on ornamental poles line Main (Jackson) Street. On 8/27/21, Ku Klux Klansman, 104 strong, march down Main Street after citizens celebrate the electric street lighting inauguration with a block party. Masked and in full regalia they carry sign warning bootleggers to go and promoting "White Supremacy." On 8/31 John Myrick (father of Mrs. Jack [Elizabeth] Garrett), J. F. Seago, and T. Kingston lead an ad hoc meeting of 150 individuals in Lozano Hall. In two resolutions the body condemns the KKK as well as vice, and, importantly, supports the constituted form of government in enforcing the laws.

1920-26 Chaperoned dances take place in Lozano Hall to the music of a record player. Not only is prohibition enforced but so are the "blue laws" wherein retail firms are suppose to be closed on Sundays. The hall serves as the gathering place for special events, and orchestras are even imported from San Antonio.

By 1930 the Lozanos close their Jackson Street business and lease it to C. E. Stone Company, which calls itself a department store. During one of its many renovations the etched sign atop the façade facing Jackson Street, S. Lozano & Son -1915, is plastered over and "Pioneer's Building" takes its place along both the Jackson Street and A Street facades. Numerous businesses are to occupy the premise over the years before Kattan's Western Wear purchased the building in 1998.
In 1970 perhaps it is fitting that a Lozano descendent, Sam Lozano, becomes mayor, for it was his pioneer ancestors who helped develop Harlingen prior to and after 1910. He was born here, is a graduate of St. Mary's University, has been a visiting teacher (truant officer) in Harlingen junior and senior high schools, and will become principal of Coakley Junior High School. He is both the first Hispanic elected to this office and the first native-born Harlingenite to fill the position.

It was in 1980 that the Santos Lozano Building, in later years better known as the Pioneer's Building, was awarded a marker designating it a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark. The structure was said to have been constructed of bricks brought from Monterrey, Mexico. The text of the marker reads: Built in 1915, this commercial structure is the oldest existing brick building in Harlingen. It was designed and constructed by Baltazar Torres of Brownsville for the mercantile business of Santos Lozano. It also served as a community center, providing upstairs space for bilingual school classes and special events. A post office was included on the ground floor. Continuously owned by the Lozano descendants, the structure has housed various businesses.

Stephen Fox of Houston, who has an interest in architecture, added the following information:

Baltazar Torres was a prominent early twentieth-century architect-builder. Unfortunately his career has not been well documented, so there are only a few buildings that can be securely attributed to him. One commercial building in Brownsville faces Market Street at 629 E. 11th Street and has a small plaque on it dated 1928. It identifies B. Torres as the architect-builder. The March 1913 issue of the nationally-circulated trade journal "American Carpenter and Architect" illustrates a house in San Antonio designed and built by Torres. It won an award in a national competition sponsored by the magazine. Minnie Gilbert is the author of an entry on Santos Lozano and his brothers in "Rio Grande Roundup: Story of Texas Tropical Borderland (pp.167-174). It includes a description of and an historic photograph of the building.

VMS (7/15/04) Lozano Building Article Feedback

James Matz and others called to bring attention to the fact that the Texas Historic Landmark for the Santos Lozano Building was in error when it states "Built in 1915, this commercial structure is the oldest existing brick building in Harlingen." Matz notes that the Matz Building has an even older history. Its origins trace back to 5/14/10 when the School Board of Trustees considers a bond election. On 7/8/10 the issue is set for $40,000, payable in 40 years at 4% interest in order to construct, equip, and purchase the sites for two brick schools. Forty-six voters (51 in another account) out of the population of 1,126 participate on 11/9/10. All vote in favor. L.S. Green of Green and Briscoe, Architects, Houston is selected for the "Main School" to serve grades 1 through 11. There was no twelfth grade until the late 1930s. Abner W. Cunningham is instrumental in purchasing a whole city block between 5th and 6th Street along Main Street for the site of the school. It is purchased from Lon C. Hill for $3,500.
It is 4/25/11 when Andrew Goldammer is awarded a $25,000 contract to build a three story brick schoolhouse on the northwest corner of Main (Jackson) and 6th Streets. J.P. McDonald is to supervise its construction. Another source puts the low-bid contract at $22,800. Now called a $40,000 school, it is nearing completion by 10/26/11. The building is accepted 3/25/12.

The Central Ward School is occupied for student instruction on 4/1/12. E.W. Anglin, a school board member in 1911-12, recalls, "We gathered up all the classes scattered about town on April 1, 1912 and moved them all to the new brick building on Jackson Street. The next year was a rainy one and we had to build a board walk all the way from downtown to the school."

Robert Runyon, the famed Valley photographer takes numerous photographs of the impressive structure on a visit to Harlingen in 1912. First called the Central Ward School, it is, in 1936, renamed the Sam Houston School.

1921 Luz Ramirez, later to be Mrs. Bennie Leal of San Benito, is the first student of Mexican ethnic origin to be graduated from Harlingen High School. In 1922 Alfred Lozano, later to be Doctor Lozano, is the first Hispanic boy to be graduated. He was graduated from the University of Texas, Columbia University and Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, then went on to study in France. While he practiced four years in Harlingen, he also spent time in Alabama and in Corpus Christi, where he died at the early age of 35 in 1939. He was responsible for converting the top floor of the Lozano Building into offices and instruction rooms for Harlingen's first business college.

What was to become the Matz building serves as a school from 1912 to 1950 then several years as a community center. Before a new separate high school is built in 1925, the school is taxed for room with Harlingen's increasing school population. Two wooden classroom buildings for early graders are constructed to the north of the brick edifice. They are later moved south of the Alamo School on F Street when it too requires more classrooms. In 1952, with its name by now changed to Sam Houston School the Central Ward is purchased and renovated into an office complex named the E.O. Matz Building.

James Matz recalls working for his grandfather when much of the wooden interior was removed to reduce fire hazards. In chipping bricks for 10 cents a piece in order to reclaim them, he encountered some marked with Lon C. Hill's kiln identification. This was a bar K (K), the same as Hill used as his cattle brand. Hill's brick kiln operations were semi-commercial in that he used much of the production for his own use. The kiln and clay source were adjacent to the Arroyo Colorado, likely where the Harlingen Thicket now exists.

Runyon's 1912 photos, some taken from the high 50,000 gallon steel water tower built in mid-1912, also show the brick building occupied by the Letzerichs. It is at the northeast corner of Commerce and Jackson and now currently occupied by an antique store. In its early days it served as an office for Dr. Caspar W. Letzerich, the Harlingen Pharmacy operated by his brother Hugo L., and a dentist, who was ensconced upstairs. Some
sources attribute its construction, as early as 1909, to E. H. Waterwall, who built the Verser House as well as other early Harlingen buildings. Photos labeled the year 1910 already show this building in existence.

While the legend which was on the Lozano Building may not be entirely correct the structure deserved a marker because of its importance in Harlingen history. Readers are directed to a chapter on Santos Lozano and his brothers in "Rio Grande Roundup: Story of Texas Tropical Borderland (pp.167-174). The article is authored by Minnie Gilbert, and the book is to be found in the Harlingen Library. It includes a description of and an historic photograph of the building.