Stuart Place School History

Compiled by Norman Rozeff

The Stuart Place Tract was a 10,000 acre subdivision whose eastern boundary was approximately two miles west of the center of Harlingen at the intersection of Jackson Avenue and Commerce Street. Established around 1918, recent decades have seen it re-subdivided into numerous development parcels that while primarily for residences also include business and industrial lots, and recreational vehicle parks.

1916 Otis Edmond (O. E.) Stuart comes to the Valley. He and his brother, R.T. Stuart, later develop and promote Stuart Place with its 10,000 acres, probably the largest individually owned agricultural and citrus fruit property in South Texas. Brand names are Stuart's Premium and Stuart's Tree Ripened. Its two packing sheds handling products have a total of 10,000 square feet. R. T. is, in this year, a resident of Oklahoma City and president of the Mid-Continental Life Insurance Co. (of Oklahoma). O.E. is its treasurer. In 1918 O.E. is selling land via the American Land Corp and is vice president of R.T. Stuart & Co. By 1930 the former is the American Land Company with I.W. Wine, manager.

Prior to 1917 Thomas F. Lee purchases a parcel of land of significant size just west of Harlingen with the intention of subdividing it. To attract buyers he builds an impressive two-story community clubhouse at "Leeland." When the Stuarts later purchase Lee's holdings, the building becomes the Stuart Place Community Club and the site of many social activities. It is still there at 7901 West Business 83 and currently serves as the office for a mobile home park to its south. By 1917 Thomas F. Lee is heavily promoting sales of his farmland west of Harlingen. His Lee Land Company has offices in what he calls Leeland (now the Stuart Place area south of West Business 83), Dallas, Oklahoma City, and St. Louis. He is utilizing excursions to generate sales. One brochure exclaims "Our luxurious private steel Pullman car leaves the Union Station, St. Louis, the first and third Tuesdays of each month for the Home of the Golden Fruit--Leeland--the heart of the Rio Grande Valley." His brochure titles are "The Magic Valley", "Telephone for Rain", "Golden Fruit", Harvest at Christmas Time", and "My Southern Home."

1919 Some time before 1920, the population of rural Leeland to the west of Harlingen had grown enough that a school was warranted. A frame building consisting of two large rooms to serve all grades was erected at the corner of what is now HYW. Business 83 and Altas Palmas Road. Before 1923 this facility was being outgrown by the rising student population, so a one-room frame building was added to hold the first and second grades. It is around this year that Samuel Emmons Van Burkleo, wife Mary Jane Penn, and children Ben, Elizabeth, Dora, Hugh Perry, Christina, and Tracy move to Stuart Place from Altus, Oklahoma. He will become a teacher at the school.

In 1921 the Stuart Independent School District (SISD) is created by an act, titled "Senate Bill No. 306" of the Texas Legislature. Its territory was formerly included in Common School District No. 4. The SISD's area comprises about 16 square miles. Property in it belongs to an number of corporations and oil companies. In addition the Cameron County Investment Company owns approximately 1,315 acres of land known as Adams Gardens. The American Land Company owns about 2,000 acres of land in the district. The balance of property is owned by 464 land owners, 150 of whom are residents.

4/18/21 The first SISD School Board meeting is conducted this date.
6/19/21 A $50,000 bond issue is voted by Stuart Place residents to construct a schoolhouse. It will be paid for by a 75 cent per $100 property valuation tax increase according to Cameron County School
Superintendent P. D. Kennamer. Bob and O. E. Stuart donate land for its site. The Stuart land is deeded by O. E. Stuart on 9/15/21. It consists of 5.2 acres of land, Lot 8, Block 2, Survey 297, to be used as a school site.

The school is scheduled to be completed by January 1, 1922. Mrs. Hugh Fitzgerald is president of the board and Mrs. R. D. Corn secretary. The former is one of the few women in the state to hold such a position. B. A. Elwing and Roy Mulhausen, architects of San Benito and Harlingen, have submitted plans for a modern building to serve the 185 scholars presently enrolled in the district. The same architects have designed the $50,000 new Harlingen High School. The 216' x 145' structure will have two wings each holding eight classrooms and be constructed by W. T. Liston and Son.

1923 The Stuart Place School is dedicated. On the stone monument commemorating it are inscribed the names of the school board. They are: O. E. Stuart, president, J. J. Garrett, vice-president, Mrs. Hugh Fitzgerald, Secretary, W. H. Maupin, I. B. Corns, and H. C. West. A year later with the first graduated class comes the school's first edition of its annual, "Hoja de Palma". By 1928 the school will be fully accredited.

1924 The first graduating class of the school consists of Lillian Mayfield, Harold Call, Willis Burnett, Joseph Pitts, and Viola Guthrie. There are only 11 grades in most Texas schools at this time. Sports are popular, and Stuart takes pride in its champion girls basketball team. Coached by teacher Opal Snavey, the winning team consists of Louise Garrison, Margaret Doane, Irene Bradshaw, Viola Guthrie, Helen Pitts, Ruth Fankenhauser, Dorothy Dodson, and Genivere Guthrie. Naturally, Victor H. Tumlinson, Superintendent of School, wants to be pictured with this great team. The following year, 1925, it is the Stuart boys who will capture the basketball championship. This team consists of Troy Moon, Charles Johnson, Clifton Mayfield, Sam Fergusson, Edom Moon, Vernon Call, Fain Arrington, Harold Wilson, and Carlton West. It is coached by L.W. Heogy Jr.

10/8/26 At a PTA meeting Supt. Butler of the Stuart Place School notes that the addition of four more credits this school year will bring the total to 17½ or 18.

In its early years the school building will be much more than an educational facility alone. Bob Mars, an area resident and a post office employee, comments on the facility. I paraphrase: When the new school was completed in 1925 it became the center of attraction for all occasions. On Sunday morning and night it was a church gathering of many faiths and people in fellowship from many states. It would go on to host pie suppers and cake walks, become a place for area farmers to discuss marketing their crops, and be used for political rallies. Women also used the building as a gathering place for what we now call "Garden Clubs". State rallies brought pot luck suppers. The building also served as a center to care for the needs of families in want of aid.

1929 The graduate this year are: Robert Monis, Mildred Hester Carden, Olivina Dorsey, Ruth Garrett, Franklin and Aden Arrington, Joe, Hencill, Howard Einger, Clyde Hester, Troy Moon, Herman Hentz, and Irvin West.

1931 A sad note was written when Lee Holloway, Stuart Place grad and basketball team player between the years 1929 and 1931 when only 11 grades were offered, died shortly after graduation of meningitis. The Otis Stuart children attend the Stuart Place School from its earliest days. At the time Texas grade schools only have eleven grades. Kelsey will not complete her grade school days here because her parents send her on to St. Mary's Hall preparatory in San Antonio to ensure that she is prepared for college. She apparently is the proverbial "handful" as a teenager. While she does well at St. Mary's the headmistress indicates that she needs additional work if she is to be accepted in a New England
woman's college. Kelsey, in 1932, instead opts for the University of Texas and receives her degree from it in June 1936.

Jeanne takes another route to college. She attends St. Mary's for one year in 1930-31 and returns to the Stuart Place School. In the years 1933-34 and 34-35 she attends Brownsville Junior College then enters the Incarnate Word College in San Antonio. From it she transfers to the H. Sophie Newcombe Memorial College of Tulane University of Louisiana, New Orleans. She receives her BA degree from this school on 6/8/38.

Brother Leslie in the meantime is attending Texas A & M College where he is a senior in 1937-38. Both Kelsey and Jeanne will have long careers as teachers while Leslie will go on to farm, own a citrus grove in Mission, and operate a grove care service called La Homa Development & Care Corp., Mission. Kelsey will have local teaching jobs in Mission, Mercedes, and Harlingen. In World War II she joins the Navy and is commissioned as an officer in the Waves.

In the early 1930s some of the senior high teachers at Stuart Place include: Mrs. R. E. Rader, trigonometry; V. G. Morrell, history; Margaret Thompson, chemistry; Mattie Belle McIntire, physical ed; Mrs. Mary(?) Davis, chemistry 5; D. M. Denton, civics; Aleen Coe Hamilton, English; and C. Neighbors, typing. Other teachers and homeroom counselors include Joe H. Wilson, Mrs. Jesse K. Liddell, Mrs. C. Fullick, and Mrs. Saunders. Mr. Denton is the school principal. Also teachers at this time or later were Johnnie Estelle Davis and Mary Elizabeth Mitchell.

4/2/34 We learn from the school publication of this date, The Pirate Weekly, that the school of brick contains 13 classrooms, an office, book room, library, auditorium, and stage. This same year a Stuart student break the Cameron County discus record by three feet and goes on to win the state title in discus. 1933-34 has been a banner year for the school. It placed number one in the Cameron County Interscholastic League meets for Class B teams. It accumulated 137 1/2 points compared to runner-up Port Isabel with 87.

1935 By this year the school population and interest allows for a football team. On the team are; Leslie Stuart, Joe Willis Lane, Byron Mapes, George Haynes, Joe Katzenberger, Delmar Fankhauser, Alton Medly, Robert Spengler, the Holland twins, Martin Perkins, Robert Corns Bill Pitzer and Herman Hensley. Coaches are J. D. Koonce and R. Delang.

7/4/48 Zora Belle Moore Cope began teaching bilingual education to 9 to 13 year olds at the Stuart Place School. She did this for seven years then taught fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in English. She had been graduated from San Marcos State Teacher's College with a degree in education and also a Master's Degree. She had come to Harlingen as a ten year old in 1925 with her parents Levy and Pearl Moore. Born in Floresville 4/28/15, she was to die 11/29/04 at age 89. Preceding her in death were her parents, her brothers William Presley Moore, Elvin Moore, Benjamin Yancy Moore, and Earl Moore; sisters Lillie McCarty, Jesse Stokes, and Nancy Riley. She worked as and elementary supervisor in the San Benito district and was then principal of the Fred Booth School before retiring in 1986 at age 70. In retirement she continued to teach, this time Adult Education for Spanish-speakers trying to learn English. Two children survived her. They are Jane Evelyn Dunn of Simonton and Richard Moore Cope of Victoria.

1950 The school system has 5,662 students. This year sees the final integration of the Stuart Place School and the Wilson School of Primera into the Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District. In this year O. E. Stuart is to die.

In the decade of the 50s some principals at the Stuart Place School are R. L. Nelson in 1952; Douglas E. Giles, 1956 (his wife Shirley M. is also a teacher, and they reside on Doane Road in the Stuart Place area); and Bobby Jo Southward, 1956-58.
1965  Around this period the Wilson School at Primera is closed. Its elementary school students are bussed to either the Dishman or Stuart Place School. Higher-grade students go into Harlingen.

1/15/81  It is proposed by Lubunski Associates that the Stuart Place School be demolished and replaced by a new 20-unit classroom building. The 57-year old structure is deemed too costly to renovate. It currently serves 503 students in overcrowded classrooms. It is demolished save for the retention of its original entrance and entrance hall.

Early September 1982  Stuart School alumni of all classes from 1924 through 1947 reunited in seven different groups depending on their graduation dates. Classes of 1924-28 met at the home of John Mitchell, La Feria; 1929-32 J. D. Wyrick; 32-34, Jack Funk; 35-37, Roger Hampton; 38-40, Joe Katzenberger; 41-44, Bobby Withers; and 45-47, Paul Williams.

Late 2004  The greatly growing school population has put the district under a strain. Construction projects under way include: Austin and Bowie Elementary Schools, classroom renovations by 1/05; Stuart Place and Wilson Elementary schools.

3/29/08  At age 59, Cheryl Card Gray, daughter of former Mayor Bill Card and Garrison Card dies after a long battle with cancer. Thirty-five years of her life were with the HCISD. She was the first director of the HOSTS Program. Eighteen years of her life were spent as principal of her beloved Stuart Place Elementary School, ending here in 2004. As noted in her obituary she significantly and positively impacted the lives of thousands of students and faculty over the years. Her greatest legacy comes from the service to others, which is extremely fitting of the life that Cheryl led. As a colleague commented "She had the leadership to inspire a campus to excellence and the grace to kneel to meet the eyes of a child."
She left behind her husband Harold Gray, her parents, and siblings. Her successor as principal is Vivian Bauer.

For many year Stuart Place graduate Annelle Doane Clausen contributed a popular history and genealogy column to the Valley Morning Star and exhibited history artifacts at numerous Harlingen events. Annelle "Grannie" Clausen will pass away at age 80 on January 3, 2010.

2008-2012 Mrs. Vivian Bauer capably moves Stuart Place Elementary School to new heights and instills in the student body tremendous school spirit. She is rewarded for her efforts by being named principal of Harlingen's new 9th grade academy named for Dr. Abraham P. Cano.