The Harlingen Arts & Heritage Museum—Its Past and Its Future

Norman Rozeff, Harlingen Historical Preservation Society, July 2009

The background of the museum is given in the accompanying CD as "Museum of Harlingen Chronology." The important thing to glean from this document is that the museum was originally named the Rio Grande Museum. This reflected the desire to portray the history of the Valley as well as that of Harlingen. The exhibits and artifacts now occupying the museum reflect that goal. The exhibits over time have come to represent a mishmash of historical time periods encompassing a region much larger than Harlingen itself. The fact is that the Museum of South Texas History in Edinburg is now the place in the Valley to see and learn about the Valley's history from its earliest Spanish exploration and colonization. This museum has spent over $1 million to reach this stage and it shows. The scattered items in the Harlingen Museum that reflect pre-Harlingen history are few, scattered, poorly exhibited, and poorly annotated. Other exhibits, such as the mason jar collection, are there only to occupy space in a cubbyhole room. The Pineda Stone is a hoax according to knowledgeable scholars who have examined it. It does however retain value as a teaching tool and to illustrate scientific skepticism.

I propose that the museum concentrate on Harlingen history per se with perhaps some presentations to provide the area's physical environment and setting as a foundation for what is to follow. With the unusual and unique buildings surrounding the museum's courtyard the museum possesses a tremendous asset that lead into Harlingen's total story. The museum's history exhibition building should be used to tell that story in depth.

My lengthy "Chronological History of Harlingen" (also provided on the CD) provides very detailed facts on all aspects of Harlingen's development, social and business life, and much more. It may be utilized to fill in the blanks when developing the exhibits that I propose for the history building of the museum.

Firstly the exhibition areas and subjects I propose would be laid out to create a logical story and a time line of the city's history. As such it would flow from area to area in a rational progression. Here are the subjects in that progression:

1. The Story and Vision of Lon C. Hill, founder of Harlingen. This story must include warts and all, not in the least varnishing the profit motives involved (see on the CD Hill chapter excerpt from my book)
2. The Land and Its Potential, the Railroad and How It Was Brought to Fruition, the Water and Its Infrastructure, and Lastly the Fruits of These Developments, Namely Farming.
3. How Harlingen Got Its Name following its being Rattlesnake Junction, Six Shooter, and then Howlin' Gin, all of which will be explained.(see CD essay on subject)
4. Exhibit of pre-Harlingen area maps, earliest Harlingen township maps and plats, maps showing changes in street names, city extra-territorial expansion over the decades
5. First businesses and the growth of Jackson (Main) Street. A good 3-D model of the city in this period would be eye-catching.
6. Civilizing the frontier—churches, clubs, organizations, etc. over the early decades.
7. Infrastructure evolution for power, water, street maintenance, City Cemetery, street lights, etc.
8. Education in Harlingen (on CD)—public schools, parochial schools, private schools, business schools, TSTC, MMA and the library.
9. Government—changes in form, law enforcement, fire department, etc.
10. Commercial businesses of note, especially the cotton industry, shrimp packing, Harlingen Canning Co., hotels and motels, the industrial park, etc.
12. Tourism, murals, camporees-travel trailer rallies, mobile home parks for Winter Texans, Harlingen Community Center, Jackson Street Days, etc.
13. Sports, leisure, and entertainment (history of Harlingen Cinemas is on the CD) that would highlighting outstanding athletes, amateur and professional, and those that went on to recognition in the arts. Note would be made of the city's parks (see CD history) and golf course.
14. The medical complexes and facilities of Harlingen.
15. Crossroads of the Valley—railroad, highways, Port of Harlingen shipping, most used airport, etc.

One other subject that could possibly be included would be weather-related disasters in Harlingen.

You will note one major subject not covered. This is the military. I propose that the large south side room of the museum be used wholly for military exhibits. It is one of the most spacious rooms and its open floor space is amenable to set up numerous transparent display cases. A room dedicated to the military would appeal to the sense of patriotism that is strong in the community, appeal to a large segment of the population who are veterans or who have or did have relatives in the service, and would commemorate and memorialize those who have served and sacrificed. Coincidentally it may generate fund donations.

Harlingen's military-related history commenced with soldiers stationed here 1915-1917 during the "Bandit Period" (see article on CD). For WWI there is the establishment here of the American Legion and Red Cross volunteers. WWII saw, of course, the construction of the Harlingen Army Airfield and the establishment of the Harlingen Army Gunnery School (HAGS). This history is also described on the CD. During the Korean War the Harlingen Air Force Base came into being to train navigators and cadet officers. Other more recent conflicts would be recognized. People such as Luis Perez, who has been pushing for a veteran's museum, and organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the GI Forum could likely be of assistance in putting together a suitable exhibit.

This area is also the logical place to display the museum's extensive gun collection, many of which had military uses. They need to be identified and labeled.

Because this room is currently not used and can be isolated from the remainder of the facility, it is the logical place to start the reconstruction of the historical museum. It would then become a very fitting endeavor to fit into the city's centennial celebration. With the time frame being allotted to come up with something for 2010, this subject is a reasonable choice and should conform to budgetary limitations.