Harlingen Happenings

A Man for His Times—Hugh Ramsey

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Tomorrow, Friday November 16 at 1:00 p.m. at the Harlingen Public Library the Harlingen Historical Preservation Society will meet. The occasion is its annual awards event. At this time the Society will recognize and pay tribute to certain individuals in the community who have contributed greatly to sustaining Harlingen history and making it a better community. Ten awards will be made in the categories of preservation, media, city, Presidential, and Lifetime Achievement. The public is invited to attend in support of the recipients.

The honorees are deserving as was an individual who graced the Harlingen scene for many a year and who was a mover and a shaker—Hugh Ramsey.

Having moved to Harlingen, Texas in 1925, Hugh Ramsey was elected Mayor of the city for the first time in 1936, then re-elected for four consecutive terms, and again to serve 1948 to 1950. This native of Milford, TX was born in 1894. He joined the army in 1913 and was stationed in the Valley in 1916. He served overseas in the Great War (WWI) with the 36th (Texas/Oklahoma Panther Infantry) Division before being discharged in 1919. This division saw action in the famed Battle of the Marne in France. He was a member of the First Baptist Church and the Rotary Club for over 24 years. In the late 30s he was owner of a furniture store bearing his name. He later sold it to Tom Vines and concentrated on being a general contractor.

As early as 1938, air-minded city officials launched a program designed to stimulate interest in making Harlingen a commercial airport center. The European events of 9/40 awaken popular enthusiasm for defense of the U.S. Mayor Hugh Ramsey made a definitive proposal to the War Department. City officials, along with Senators Tom Connally and Morris Sheppard, pointed to a number of factors which made Harlingen attractive for military training. This set the stage for the start of a military air field here in late 1941. It would become the Harlingen Army Air Field with a mission to train aircraft gunners. Over 48,000 gunners, including two future Medal of Honor awardees, will have been trained at the field before WWII ends in August 1945. The field closed shortly thereafter but was then converted to the city's municipal airport and industrial park. In 1952 the field is to reopen as the Harlingen Air Force Base. In a period of just over a decade before it is ordered closed, it will train over 13,000 officers in air navigation. The economic implications (positive, later negative, then positive again) of what Mayor Ramsey initiated and wrought were immense for the city of Harlingen.

It is in the year 1939 that Saint Alban's Episcopal parish builds a more sizeable sanctuary at the corner of 11th and Van Buren. Contractor Hugh Ramsey builds the brick edifice for $8,500 and at no profit to himself. It will be enlarged and remodeled in 1946. The old church, now to be used as a parish hall, will be moved behind the new one. The church's first rectory, at 718 E. Van Buren, will be purchased in 5/42.

In recognition of all that Ramsey had done for the city a park is named in his honor. Hugh Ramsey Nature Park is at the 1000 block of South Loop 499, a northern extension of Ed Carey Drive, where the bridge crosses the Arroyo Colorado. It was designated as a
park by the city commissioners in February 1953. Amenities in this 54 acre wooded park include nature trails, an observation blind overlooking the arroyo and restrooms. At some future time it will become the home of the Harlingen Birding Center.
In June o