

# BHA Banner Newsletter

Brownsville Historical Association

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## BHA Celebrates 70 Years: Part 2

*In 2017, the newsletter will provide a series of articles commemorating 70 years of the Association.*

*This is the second part of the story:*

In 1950, the BHA became interested in purchasing the Abelardo Treviño home, which had been constructed by Henry Miller and occupied for a time by Charles Stillman and his family. Chauncey Stillman (a grandson of Charles) was persuaded by Mayor H.L. Stokely and the BHA to purchase the house and deed it to the Association. The Stillman family contributed furnishings and furniture, restoration began, and Concepcion "Kino" Camarillo was named custodian of the property. The Stillman House Museum opened in January, 1961. Kino lived in the small apartment behind the garden and provided tours to appreciative visitors well into the new century. Annually, the Kino Camarillo Service Award is given to individuals in the community for outstanding contributions to historic knowledge and preservation in Brownsville and service and dedication to the BHA.

Dissemination of information has long been a major focus of the BHA. In 1975, the Association and the city funded the Architectural/Historical Survey and Preservation Plan by Ellen Beasley. This survey prompted the Association to engage Betty Bay, who produced *Historic Brownsville: Original Townsite Guide*, in 1980. The crowning achievement in publishing came in 1982, when *Brownsville: A Pictorial History*, first made its appearance. The book was co-authored by BHA President Bob Vezzetti and past President Ruby Wooldridge. These two individuals had assumed the reins of leadership of the Association from the era of J.T. Canales and Mrs. Davenport. Vezzetti initiated and single-handedly (for many years) produced the BHA "Newsletter," as a unique means

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## From the Executive Director...

As a member of the BHA you support our mission because you believe history matters; by deepening your knowledge of local history through a lecture series, participating in an effort to save a historic site, or simply by discovering the thrill of a new exhibit. Like me, you appreciate the connection with our past, and therefore see the value in preservation efforts through museum work and research.



In May, we celebrate National Preservation Month and this year the BHA is offering several programs with an emphasis on preservation in Brownsville. A presentation, "Brownsville: Then and Now, Part II", is scheduled for April as well as two workshops in May: "Incentives for Historic Homes" and "How to Apply for a Historical Marker" are free and open to the public. These are useful tools for those interested in learning more about the economic benefits of restoration and in acquiring national or state designation for a building or home.

The Brownsville Historical Association is proud to take on the challenges and ongoing responsibility of caring for its historic properties while leading the effort to save the numerous historic treasures in our city. The work invested in our museums and research center is an asset to our community and a wonderful resource for the citizens who visit our sites. I hope that you are able to take advantage of the many opportunities we provide for educational purposes and heritage preservation.

I look forward to seeing you soon!

Tara Putegnat  
Executive Director

of contact with membership. Later, Vezzetti edited items from the "Newsletter," plus other information from BHA archives in order to compile Tidbits. In 1996, Rita Krausse and Don Clifford edited a collection of archival items which appeared as A Blast From the Past. All of the publications mentioned, are still available at the Heritage Museum gift shop. Additional Association activities during this era included presentations of antique clothing, a partnership with the city in placing historic markers on buildings, and the establishment of Historic Brownsville Week.

Beginning with Chauncey Stillman's contribution of the Stillman House, the Stillman family has provided essential support for the expansion of facilities. Guy and Dr. James Stillman led the family in establishing the Stillman House Trust, which served as the conduit for the family's generosity. Catherine Stillman and later generations have continued their involvement and contributions.

In 1988, a contribution from the Homeland Foundation, a Stillman-related charitable organization, enabled the first facility expansion. In 1990, the BHA restored an historic masonry building in close proximity to the Stillman House to serve as the Brownsville Heritage Resource Center for archival housing and research. It was essential to develop such a facility, since for many years the BHA archives had resided under a bed in Ruby Wooldridge's home. An entire room in the Resource Center was devoted to housing the A. A. Champion collection and his life-long work of documenting local history.

BHA members may justifiably take pride in the outstanding accomplishments of their organization on its 70th anniversary. This is only a portion of the story... more to come in the next issue!

Anthony Knopp,  
BHA Board Member

## Rio Viejo Subdivision

Rio Viejo Subdivision was created out of a tract of land consisting of approximately 112 acres and surveyed by the Ruff and Settles Civil Engineers company for the Rio Viejo Corporation, which came to be the owners of said land. W. Vernon Walsh was the president of the Rio Viejo Corporation. The certified surveyor's map (plat) was notarized and then filed with the Brownsville city secretary on August 10, 1950. It was recorded with the County Clerk of Cameron County in Vol. 13, page 73.

By the time of the drafting of the Rio Viejo survey map, public streets and alleys were shown to be included. In time, Rio Viejo subdivision would receive awards for its layout and design, as the curving and meandering streets followed the

numerous resacas. Because of the many curving streets in the neighborhood, it is virtually impossible for cars to speed through the area and does not allow for a quick "shortcut" from Palm Blvd. to Boca Chica, or vice-versa.

Included in the creation of the Rio Viejo subdivision by the Rio Viejo Corporation, came the original Reservations, Restrictions, and Covenants, of this prestigious and



The Brownsville Herald, 1951. BHA Archives



## Incentives for Historic Homes

An investor should be firmly convinced that it is quite sustainable and encouraging to create a "Historic Real Estate Market" in Brownsville. It is sustainable because the city's real estate market has enough distinct assets to offer investors. Over 160 years of history allow Brownsville the luxury of different architecturally designed homes. These architectural styles include: Colonial, Victorian, Eclectic, and Mid-century Modern structures. It is encouraging because the Chapter 348, Article IX, of our City Ordinance establishes three different tax exemptions. Any owner or investor could receive the following incentives, unique to the Rio Grande Valley:

- 1) 100% tax exemption for substantial rehabilitation in Primary Local Sites located within the four Historic Districts.
- 2) 50% tax exemption if the structure can be designated as a Primary Local Site.
- 3) 100% tax exemption if the structure can be designated as a National Register of Historic Places or as a Recorded Texas Historical Landmark.

A good example of a potential economic incentive for a real estate investor would be a property that is currently on the market, located at 1531 West Levee Street. This home was occupied by L. K. Morris in Brownsville. According to his obituary from The Brownsville Herald, he was an entrepreneur that arrived with the railroad in 1904, opening Morris Lumber, one of the largest businesses in the city. In its first year his business sales totaled \$36,000, and by 1929 (the year he died) the annual sales of his company had reached one million dollars. The home, built by this successful businessman from La Porte, Texas, has much of building features still in place. These feature include: California siding, original handrails, double columns and ceiling on the porch, doors with original handles, historic double hung wood windows, hard wood floors, and a fireplace in the living room. These details demonstrate a good design and quality building materials. The structure is fitted on one of the two lots, and perfectly thought out; the breeze runs through the free corner lot and crosses the structure in a natural way, helped by the Southeast porch.

Historic preservation is sustainable due to a supportive community and provides a legacy of heritage for Brownsville. Therefore, investors can thrive in a prosperous real estate market while sharing a sense of pride in our city.

Juan Vélez

Historic Preservation Officer (Spanish Architect & Building Engineer, Escuela Europea de Madrid, España) and BHA Board member

posh neighborhood. On August 22, 1950, the Board of Directors of the Rio Viejo Subdivision (with 100% attendance) meet and adopted by unanimous vote the original Reservations, Restrictions, and Covenants which were to be in effect until January 1, 1975, at which time "said covenants and restrictions shall be automatically extended for successive periods of ten (10) years, unless by vote of the then owners of not less than Sixty (60%) per cent of the square foot area of the Addition, it is agreed to change, modify or amend the covenants and restrictions herein ordained, established and provided; Any such amendment, change or modification of the covenants and restrictions here provided shall be by written declaration, signed and acknowledged by said owners, and recorded in the Deed Records of Cameron County, Texas. Such action, when taken, shall be binding upon all of the then owners of the Property in said Subdivision."

Blocks One (1), Two (2), Three (3), and Four (4) of the Subdivision are hereby expressly designated as a Single Detached Family Residence Area. "No building shall be located on any residential building plot in this Area nearer than fifty feet to the front lot line on resaca front lots, or thirty-five feet on other lots in the Subdivision, nor nearer than ten feet to any side lot line; no appurtenant structure, garage or servants' quarters shall be

*"The curvature of the streets, and uniquely shaped lots in a heavily wooded environment, caused the neighborhood to be highly sought after, a trend that still continues over 60 years later. "*

located less than one hundred and ten feet from the front lot line, or be located nearer than two feet from any side lot line, unless modified by agreement in writing duly executed by the Corporation."

"The minimum floor area for one story structures erected in this Area shall be 1200 square feet, and for two or more story structures erected in such Area the minimum ground floor area shall be 1000 square feet."

From there, the Rio Viejo Subdivision began to grow. Lots were sold and residential homes were built; many of which still exist in the neighborhood today. The curvature of the streets, and uniquely shaped lots in a heavily wooded environment, caused the neighborhood to be highly sought after, a trend that still continues over 60 years later.

In the 1950's, Rio Viejo property owners conformed to the trend of the times by building homes in which, "historical stylistic decoration, no matter how streamlined, was to be avoided." The emphasis of suburbia was rather one of architectural variation, orderliness, and cleanliness, in a "modern tropical paradise."

One of the sought after architects of this period was John G. York of Harlingen (1914-1980). A University of Texas graduate, he helped form the partnership of Cocke, Bowman & York in 1949. Helping to promote the concept of the "modern tropical paradise in buildings, the architecture partnership of Cocke,

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**Rio Viejo Subdivision** *continued from page 3*

Bowman & York became famous throughout Texas. "York designed two houses in Brownsville in 1955, one at 544 Calle Retama for the pawn shop owner Bernard Whitman, and one at 244 Calle Jacaranda for the service station owner Antonio Cisneros, Jr." (Stephen Fox in Studies in Matamoros and Cameron County History p. 317). "The Cisneros House is stepped in plan so that as Calle Jacaranda turns the corner, so does the house." The Whitman House is set at an angle on its lot, rather than parallel to the street. This enabled York to preserve a grove of ebony trees on the property. "Fortunately, both of these now historic properties still exist in their pristine architectural state today as they existed when they were first built.

Another recognized architect of this time was Alan Y. Tanguich. Born in California and a Berkeley graduate, he built a house 414 Calle Retama for retail merchant Harry Katz. (Extensively altered in 1960). The Katz House was designed to stand out as a dramatic work of modern architecture. (Fox p. 319).

In describing Rio Viejo at this time, "cultivated nature was dominate, house sites were generous... and many had resaca frontage. The J. Gilbert Philen House at 424 Calle Cenizo (1952), spatialized the modern tropical paradise myth that Rio Viejo sought to evoke. The Henry J. Fruhling House at 55 Calle Cenizo (1954) was built by Frank Persons, while the Herminio Yturria home at 164 Calle Cenizo (1954) was built by William C. Baxter).

James W. Mills  
 BHA Board member