

BHA Banner Newsletter

Brownsville Historical Association

Volume 2, Issue 4

October 2016

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Brownsville Historical Association

1325 E. Washington Street
Brownsville, Texas 78520
956.541.5560 Fax: 956.435.0028
Email: info@brownsvillehistory.org
www.brownsvillehistory.org

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BHA Archives

The Restored Courthouse and Judge Oscar Dancy

On October 26, 2006, Cameron County celebrated the (very expensive) restoration of the historic 1912 Courthouse. While the structure was out-of-service as the official courthouse, it had been named the "Oscar Dancy Building" in honor of the long-serving late county judge. On that pleasant fall evening the restored and again official Cameron County Courthouse was rededicated to Dancy, with his portrait presiding over the (new) commissioners' courtroom. The main address of the evening was given by Dancy's grandson, Dan Kennerly, a man whose charm reflected that of his ancestor. Some years previously I had obtained tapes of radio broadcasts made by Judge Dancy, and I now provided copies to his grandson. When the judge's voice first reached Kennerly's ears, his face lit up with delight at hearing a voice he had not heard for many decades.

Judge Oscar Dancy served nearly 50 years as Cameron County Judge, from 1920 to 1970, with a two-year interruption during the Depression. Born in a log cabin in North Carolina in 1879, Dancy gained his early political experience by making speeches for William Jennings Bryan during the 1896 presidential campaign. After serving in the Spanish-American War, Dancy was chosen as mayor of a town in his home state, but his wife's illness compelled him to relocate to South Texas in 1909. Dancy practiced law for a time, was appointed county attorney in 1917, then elected county judge as the political machine of "Boss" Jim Wells finally faltered.

An enduring characteristic of both Judge Dancy's public policies and his personal life was his commitment to frugality. The judge did not waste money on liquor or fancy living, never owned a car, and lived in a modest residence. Although he frequently travelled to Austin, Washington, and Latin America on behalf of the county, he always strove to save the taxpayers' money by staying in second class hotels

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From the Executive Director...

As we draw the year to a close and begin the busy holiday season, I invite each of you to take advantage of the many programs, tours, exhibits and lectures we offer. The BHA staff is excited to offer great activities this fall.

The past few months have brought some changes to the Brownsville Historical Association. In September, we said good-bye to our Program and Education Coordinator, Craig Stone, and wished him well in future endeavors. We now welcome our new Coordinator to the BHA team, a long-time volunteer at the Old City Cemetery Center, Mr. David Parsons. It is always encouraging to work with dedicated staff and meet volunteers and community leaders who share the same goals in telling the story of our local history.

This Christmas season, consider giving friends and loved ones the gift of a BHA membership or stop by our museum stores for your gift shopping needs.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of the sponsors, volunteers and board members who made our Paella Festival Cook-Off Competition a great success.

Enclosed in the newsletter is our calendar of events. We hope to see you soon.

Happy Thanksgiving and Merry Christmas!

Tara Putegnat

Executive Director

and eating basic meals. When, after 25 years, he was awarded a salary increase, he refused to accept it for himself. According to County Attorney Jack Wiech, Dancy "had the increase deposited in a special fund to help those who were in dire need... Whenever the special fund was depleted, he gave from his own pocket." As a proponent of development in the twenties he was willing to commit funds to what became known as "Dancy's sidewalks"—roads constructed of concrete but only one lane wide. That way the money went twice as far, since passing vehicles could each keep two wheels on the concrete—better than having four wheels in the mud. According to Dancy, "We had to get the farmers out of the mud and in to the market places." When other counties saw their roads deteriorating during the money-short Depression, "Dancy's sidewalks" held up.

In the 1930s and 1940s Judge Dancy worked for flood control and water conservation. He was a strong proponent of the Water Treaty of 1944 with Mexico that led to construction of Falcon Dam. He persuaded Cameron County to fund the Anzalduas Dam in Hidalgo County despite Hidalgo County's failures to participate. A long-time supporter of the concept of Padre Island National Seashore, Dancy saw his dream fulfilled in the latter days of his administration. He also worked for the development of South Padre Island, including the first causeway to the island.

Oscar Dancy was able to achieve his policy goals because he was a successful politician. He knew how to relate to his constituents primarily because he liked people. A typical visit to Rio Hondo involved the judge leaving his ride at one end of the main street, then walking through town greeting everyone and asking about their families by name. His gifts of money to the poor came from the heart even if they had political benefits. Throughout his life Judge Dancy was a die-hard Democrat, an essential position in one-party Texas. He was known to answer his phone, "This is Oscar Dancy, the Democrat."

Toward the end of his career Judge Dancy was still proposing innovative development projects, including desalinization of Rio Grande delta land and a fresh-water canal from East Texas. He lived alone, rising at 4:30 am to cook his breakfast and walk to the bus stop on his way to the courthouse. He had out-lived nearly all his family. "I miss my family more than I can tell..." he said. "It's an awful thing, you know, with them all gone. But I cherish their memory."

Oscar Dancy died only ten days after leaving office. He had lived lonely years devoted to good government in Cameron County. When he finally laid down his burden, his reason for living had ended. But his legacy endures in the Oscar Dancy Building and the county he served so long and well.

Anthony Knopp
BHA Board Member



From a Sow's Ear to a Silk Purse

"What part of the city do you live in?"

"I live in Los Marranos".

"Los Marranos, where's that located?"

"You take the Old Alice Road cut-off at Sixth Street, where the City Abattoire (slaughterhouse) is, cross over the Corpus Christi Bridge, at the entrance to the Sewage Plant and the resaca where the holding ponds are for the sewer station, cross over the Boulevard, and enter into that swampy bog area where the pig farm was. I moved over from that resaca area across from the City Dump, because I just couldn't tolerate the stench, the buzzards, and the constant cloud of smoke from the burning trash, you know, Los Ebanos."

Does that sound familiar to you by today's terms? Could it be Rio Viejo? With all of the constituent parts mentioned above, it is no less than where Rio Viejo is now, and yes, Los Ebanos Subdivision was directly across from the City Dump, where Cummings Middle School is now. How times have changed!

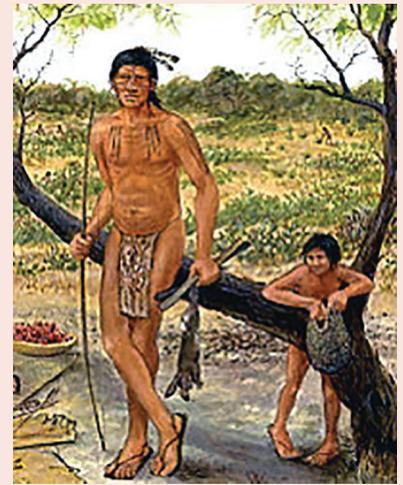
We begin this scenario in the late 1920's, when the population of Brownsville was at 22,021, up from 6,000 at the turn-of-the-century. The outskirts of town at that time, in the dawn of the Great Depression, had extended to about where Washington Square is now, on the eastern fringe. The Los Ebanos Subdivision project was being carved out of a thicket of mesquite and ebony, with tree girths the size of a fat man, lingering over from the primordial ground cover that was here from the time of the appearance of the first European settlers.

Although it sounds incongruous to have all of those unsightly, noxious elements placed in proximity to where Brownsville now enjoys its finest residential areas, at that stage of our development "Los Marranos" was far removed from the city center, and downwind as well. This all changed in the period directly after WW2, and it began with the team of land speculators made up of Paul Carruth and W. Vernon Walsh. This duo had their early business dealings based out of Harlingen, though Walsh came from more extravagant roots, having had family ties to the ownership of the vast 62,000-acre "Las Mestenzas" land grant that was owned by his grandfather.

In 1947 Walsh and Carruth committed for a parcel of raw land that lay on the outskirts of Brownsville, financed by Dwight Taylor of the Pan American Bank (on Elizabeth Street) and none other than Dallas millionaire, Clint Murcheson. What we now see as broad, deep resacas in that zone was not nearly the case in those early years of the development of the "Santa Rosa Tract" as it was called. At best, the area that now is made up of the peninsulas of Rio Viejo and the Saint Joseph Academy grounds was surrounded by a meandering bog, with expansive areas of silt beach that were choked with outcroppings of native brush. Crooked mesquite-wood fence posts and a rickety barbed wire fence ran down the center of the waterway, because it often went completely dry and the cattle and pigs had to be confined to their respective parcels.

"From a Sow's Ear to a Silk Purse" will be continued in the next newsletter.

The Coahuiltecan Indians



The Coahuiltecan Indians were the native peoples first encountered by the Spanish in what would eventually be referred to as the Rio Grande Valley. A nomadic people, the Coahuiltecan culture had many subgroups including the Payayas, Tamiques, Carrizos, Bobole, and Aranamas. Surviving in a harsh environment these groups ate what nature provided; mesquite beans, cactus, deer, skunks, rabbits, spiders, ants, and even such things as rotted wood or dirt. Truly, the Coahuiltecan race existed in starving times on the very brink of what the human anatomy could digest. Their minimal clothing came from nature as well, as they made sandals from local materials and a type of loincloth sundried from materials including deer, coyote or rabbit. Portable shelters were similarly made from hides or matting.

Little changed in Coahuiltecan society and as a result they are sometimes referred to as a "fossil culture." This can be in part due to the fact that few outside tribes ventured into this semidesert area causing isolation, teemed with the reality that these peoples spent their time merely surviving, and experienced little progress or advancement.

Nevertheless, they certainly exemplified talent. The Coahuiltecan possessed an ability to create an intricate weaving for netting, and used an impressive relay system to chase down certain prey. They utilized an alcoholic drink from the agave cactus, and consumed the hallucinogenic peyote cactus for religious purposes. Coahuiltecan religious traditions also believed that everything, even man-made objects, had a soul.

By the mid nineteenth century the Coahuiltecan way of life had virtually disappeared due to the encroachment of the Spanish who brought disease and warfare. However, Coahuiltecan blood exists today through assimilation. Many elements of the local culture including food, medicine and language, still reflect Coahuiltecan traditions.

Jim Mills
BHA Board Member

Brownsville Historical Association
 1325 E. Washington Street
 Brownsville, Texas 78520
 956.541.5560 Fax: 956.435.0028
 Email: info@brownsvillehistory.org
 www.brownsvillehistory.org

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