

Betty Murray, a Generous and Gracious Lady of the Old School

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Long before I met her in person I had encountered her name and work again and again as I researched the archives of the Harlingen Public Library and the Rio Grande Valley Museum. It was easy to conclude that this woman had been extremely active in preserving the history of Harlingen, and the whole Lower Rio Grande Valley. Simply put, Harlingen's history in large measure would not have been preserved were it not for the efforts of this woman. For reasons known only to her, she has devoted her time and efforts over many, many years to protecting and documenting the city's and the region's history.

Her biography is long, as can be imagined for someone in her ninth decade of life. Here, distilled, are some of its highlights. It was the year 1919 that two year old Betty Nosler came to San Benito from Indiana with her parents James Bertram and Marie Williams Nosler and her sister Maud, older by six years. In 1923 James would build and operate the San Benito Electric Gin, the first of its kind in the Valley and which operated until 1936. While Nosler lost it in the Great Depression he recovered to become a successful produce farmer. He died in 1966.

In 1937 Betty would be graduated from UT-Austin with a degree in education. The very first day that she commenced teaching in Mercedes she met a handsome young man. A year and a half later he would become her husband. On 12/27/38 she married Menton Murray, a young lawyer who had an office in Mercedes but lived in Harlingen. They had two children, Menton Murray, Jr., a District judge for many years, and Betty Marie Murray Smith, now residing in Tennessee. The senior Murray served in WWII, as a city judge, and in the state legislature from 1947 to 1975. On 2/20/63 the Texas legislature finally agreed on measures to allow the federal government to establish the Padre Island National Seashore. Rep. Menton Murray of Harlingen was a leader in this effort.

Betty was a homemaker until her children were in their teens. In the years 1956 to 1968 she then returned to teaching as a Texas history teacher at the San Benito Junior High School. In 1965 she was selected for the "Outstanding Teacher" award.

It was from her father who served on the San Benito City Commission, was a strong proponent for the construction of the Intracoastal Canal, and pushed to pave San Benito streets with concrete, that Betty inherited her "passion for history and a sense of civic duty." In 1947 she became a charter member of the Harlingen Junior Service League. Betty served 21 years as a board member of the Day Nursery. For 22 years she volunteered her services at the Valley Baptist Medical Center and even longer with the Rio Grande State Center. For the latter and the nearby South Texas Health Care system, Mrs. Murray helped funding and construction efforts of the Menton Murray Clubhouse on the campus. In acknowledgement, the Volunteer Services Council of these institutions presented her its 2005 Humanitarian Award.

Mrs. Murray was one of the founders of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Historical Association and help to organize the Rio Grande Valley Museum, now known as the Harlingen Arts & Heritage Museum. For her many history-related efforts she was asked to serve on the state's Texas

Historical Commission. She also served on the Cameron County Historical Commission and on our country's Bicentennial Commission in 1976.

Mrs. Murray renewed interest in the preservation of the City Cemetery by obtaining a Texas Historical Commission marker for it. As a spokesperson she educated Winter Texans about the area's history and its significance. She was frequently the featured speaker at numerous club meetings.

In 1926 an event occurred that will later impact Harlingen and, unbeknownst to her, Mrs. Murray. It is the closing of Harlingen's first hospital, a private one. This small ten room, u-shaped hospital painted white was the first to serve the community. It was situated on the east side of F Street between Harrison and Jackson and faced west. Owned by Mrs. Ida Gilbert, it was staffed by two nurses from Chicago. The first was Miss Mary (Maria) Yeager. The small two-year old hospital had been made obsolete once the new Valley Baptist Hospital up the street came into full use in 1925.

In 1973 property owner, Louis Levine, donated the "little hospital" structure and, through the concerted efforts of Betty Murray, the RGV Museum board agreed to accept it at the museum site. When she was responsible for obtaining a THC marker for the structure it was unique in that it was the first such marker in the state for a "hospital." She would later be instrumental in saving the historic Ross/Bobo House that served as the home of an early Harlingen mayor and then for many years as a popular nursery day care center. This structure too now sits at the museum complex.

As an inveterate compiler of current events, Mrs. Murray established numerous subject collections that would later comprise the foundation for files at the museum and the vertical files of the Archive Room of the Harlingen Public Library.

Mrs. Murray was the lead local dignitary in promoting the Texas Sesquicentennial in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in 1986. She has also been a strong supporter of St. Anthony Church since its organization. She helped to obtain a "Main Street" designation for the city then went on to serve on the Main Street Board here. For this and her other community activities the Rotary Club in 1986 selected her for its "Service above Self" award. This was followed in 1989 by the J. C. Penney "Spirit of the American Woman" Award. In 1998 Mayor Bill Card happily proclaimed a "Betty Murray Day in Harlingen".

Being a modest, soft-spoken individual, Mrs. Murray has eschewed the pursuit of honors and awards, but they came to her anyway, for she has always been a tireless and thorough worker. The honors showered upon her reached a crescendo, at age 92, in 2009 with a testimonial in recognition for her many contributions to the Rio Grande State Center. At this fund-raising event for the center, Harlingenites, as one, rose to applaud her many years of service to the community.

Were it not for the written and physical efforts of this woman much of the city's history would have been lost due to neglect and sheer ignorance. Even at her advanced age she has participated in and offered input to many history-related projects and endeavors. She is one remarkable lady.

Betty Murray loves life, and it shows in her activities to this day. After the death of her beloved husband in 1989, she became even more of a world traveler than she had been. In 2002 she flew on the supersonic jet Concorde and has flown and sailed to many nations around the world. She regularly attends history and social functions and, with a subtle wit and a twinkle in her eyes, is a delight to talk with.

The Rotary Club of Harlingen, on the city's 100th birthday recognized her major influence on her community by recently awarding her a tile in the newly created Walk of Fame at the Municipal Auditorium. Harlingen's Grand Old Lady could not be more deserving.