

**Brick Kiln Location Discovered**  
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**December 2008**

The various Harlingen Centennial committees are already working hard in preparation for what will be the Valley's longest and largest city centennial commemoration. Beginning in December 2009 the activities will come thick and furious as they run into Harlingen's Centennial month of April.

As part of the celebration a Centennial book will be published. In connection with finding suitable historic photographs for the book, John Topp, Cheryl Laberge, a photographer, and I have just completed sifting through hundreds of photos at the Harlingen Arts and Heritage Museum. From dusty archives we have found a wealth of interesting material which must also be winnowed into the treasured best.

Recently, one of the items uncovered at the museum answered a long-standing history mystery. This was "Where exactly was Lon C. Hill's clay pit and brick kiln along the Arroyo Colorado?" For several years I have been exploring the north bank of the arroyo, primarily near the railroad bridge and also within the Harlingen Thicket. I was searching for some evidence or clue as to the clay quarry and kiln's location. I came up empty handed.

Some background explanation is needed at this point. On 8/27/1909 a hurricane had made landfall south of Brownsville. This city with the only official weather station at the time recorded 4.63" for the month. Undoubtedly the Valley as a whole received much more precipitation. The Rio Grande level of water registered at Rio Grande City was 30', well above flood stage. Runoff lifted the levels of the Arroyo Colorado over the next week. Soon it was filled bank to bank. On September 3 the *Brownsville Herald* reported that the bridge at Harlingen had been damaged, and train service to the city would be interrupted. The damage was likely to the wooden trestle section on the south side of the bridge.

Uncovered at the museum was a framed series of photos and a short typed description dealing with the subject matter of the 1909 flooding and noting the Hill's brick operations. The series of photos showed various scenes along the north bank of the arroyo near and on the bridge. Sightseers were attracted to the site by the high volume of water racing east down the Arroyo. Two of the photos were shot about 50 yards west of the bridge and facing eastward. In both of them is a derrick of sorts and, in one, two buildings connected with the brick making. They are on a flat nearly inundated by the floodwaters of the arroyo. City streets at this juncture were also inundated and impassable. Many were simply quagmires.

Brick making in the Valley was more or less a cottage industry and had been from its early days of settlement in the late 1700s. Many small clay pits and nearby kilns existed along the Rio Grande wherever settlements grew. Hill's operation was semi-commercial in that he produced bricks primarily for his own use. The bricks were stamped with a -K. This was Hill's brand for his cattle. He used the bricks to construct, in 1908, the first brick building in the town. This was the sizeable two-story building at the northwest corner of Van Buren and First Streets. Its construction by contractor Andrew Goldammer took time as the bricks were made by hand and

hauled by team to the site. Erection work would stop as bricks ran out and the masons had to await the hand fabrication of more bricks by Hispanic laborers.

Now armed with some definitive knowledge I recently returned to the arroyo site and disappointment again. The stream of the arroyo with its periodic flooding has over time eaten away the sine curve meander side of the stream and taken the flat that was the site of the brick-making operation with it. Still I was able to find in the immediate area a sizeable topographical bowl of gummy clay that confirmed the existence of this valuable soil. Paralleling the railroad tracks on their west side was a washout that once might have been the route of a wagon road over which the bricks were sent on their way. Then, it would be convenient and a direct route to follow the railroad right-of-way into town.

Mother Nature has a dogged determination to eradicate man's works over time. Man tries to document, but his now rapidly changing technology may actually stymie his efforts. For sure clay and its products are transient.