

Port Isabel History Notes

As Compiled by Norman Rozeff, October 2011

In the *Brownsville Herald* of 5/10/36 upon the opening of the jetty channel to Port Brownsville, Elisa Costa Neda Villareal wrote these remarks. "On 1/24/1828 Rafael Garcia was given a grant of land of 30,000 acres from the state of Tamaulipas. A narrow peninsula in the grant called "El Fronton de Santa Ysabel" extended into the Laguna Madre. When the Americans came, they translated the name and called the place "Point Isabel". In that way the town that was to become the most important port in South Texas was named. [It was said that the town was established in 1823.]

The original settlers of Point Isabel came from New Orleans. Some, formerly sailors, had retired from the sea and set up businesses in Point Isabel. Among the settlers were three brothers by the name of Champion. Almost every Champion family residing in the Rio Grande Valley is descended from these early pioneers. Other important settlers whose descendants are still in the Valley are the Eglys, La Rouches, Kliebers, Wells, and Schriebers. After a hurricane destroyed Clarksville in 1874 many settlers from that town became citizens of Point Isabel. However when Brownsville began to grow and town lots were sold, many Point Isabel people moved inland."

Another early Point Isabel pioneer not mentioned by Mrs. Villareal was Sanforth Kidder. A short comment on Captain Kidder around this period is to be found in an interview written up by Lt. W. H. Chatfield in his 1893 publication "The Twin Cities of the Border". It is a commentary by long-time Brownsville resident Adolphus Glaevecke. He related: "I landed in New York in 1835, and after looking about for a time, I concluded I would not stop there, but go somewhere where it was not quite so cold; so I took passage on a coasting vessel bound for New Orleans. The ship was caught by the great storm of 1835, off the coast of Florida not far from Savannah, Ga., and for about twelve hours things looked pretty black; I began to think I would soon be looking for my fortune in Davy Jones' Locker. We weathered the gale, though, and got to New Orleans, in due time. It was during that same storm a tidal wave swept over Brazos Island down here at Point Isabel. Captain Kidder was living on the island, with his family, and his wife was drowned." This account appears to be at odds with family history later provided by Richard Kidder. Obviously his wife outlived the captain and brought his body back from Mexico for burial in the Old Brownsville Cemetery.

That Captain Kidder obtained land in Point Isabel is attested to by: Court records Volume " F " PP 50-52 Francis Gonzales, Martha Gonzales to Sanforth Kidder, Convey lots 1 and 2 Block 96, in town of Point Isabel dated March 16, 1854.

In LeRoy Graf's Harvard PhD thesis published as "The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1820-1875", he goes to an original source –Deposition of Sanforth Kidder, House Rep. 34th Congress, 3 Session No. 175 (February 2, 1857), 299-300. It is likely Kidder made this deposition in an attempt to claim compensation for his losses. Gleaning from the deposition Graf writes: "Although the Fronton had occasionally been used as a temporary place of deposit between landing from lighters and loading on carts

or pack mules for the trip to Matamoros, we know of no attempt to establish a permanent commercial depot before 1833. In that year Sanforth Kidder, a native of Connecticut, who had come to Matamoros in 1825, leased a site on which he built a warehouse and a wharf. He intended to carry on a forwarding business; but the move was ill-timed. The authorities who were continually plagued by the large amount of smuggling which went on through the lagoons of the Gulf, ordered that these structures be torn down, on the grounds that they afforded facilities for contraband trade.

Captain Kidder's knowledge of Spanish put him in good stead when the Mexican War ensued in 1845. His services as an interpreter were likely valuable to General Taylor's army.

Solis family connections to Point Isabel were documented in a narrative sent to the Texas Historical Commission while securing a THC marker for the Solis Cemetery in La Feria. This was recorded: " Lazaro Solis was one of eight children of Francisco Solis (1801-1876) and Anastacia Rivas de Solis (born 1808), early residents of Point Isabel and Brownsville. Francisco's family eventually grew to include Albert, Peter, Nicholas and George Champion (Campeone) – three brothers and a cousin from Revigno, Austria (present-day Italy). The brothers and their cousin married four of Francisco's daughters – Estefana, Felicita, Teresa, and Cerilda Solis. Albert had married Estefana of Point Isabel in 1850. The Champions' knowledge of transportation, commerce, and ranching subsequently contributed to the economic development of Brownsville, as well as the livelihood of the Solis and Champion families. Charles Champion and James B. Wells would later own much of Point (now Port) Isabel.

Rozeff in his article on the US Navy Wireless Station at Port Isabel wrote of the later history of the area. He stated: About one-half its area had come into the possession of Judge James B. Wells 1886. Charles Champion purchased for \$17,500 the other half-interest in 1904 from E. K. Butler, President of the International Harvester Company of Chicago. It was from the estates of Wells and Champion that the station land was purchased. The Champion House/General Store constructed in 1899 remains today as a unique landmark and is part of the Port Isabel Museum complex. Together with the Port Isabel Lighthouse constructed in 1853, they are lasting reminders of the community's history.

The station, erected in 1916 and disestablished in 1923, encompassed an area of approximately 20 acres. In the year 2006 this area is bounded by W. Madison Street on the south, W. Adams Street on the north, S. Musina Street on the east, and Leal Street on the west. Dividing the Reservation and equally spaced were the east-west street W. Madison and to its north W. Jefferson. At a later time Cisneros Street and Yterria Street to its east were carved out in a north-south direction. When the Point Isabel Station was deactivated the local population continued to call its compound area "The Reservation" and did so for many a year. The station was abandoned for the most part then buildings on it were rented out until 1936 when the whole reservation was put on a reserve basis.