

The City Parks of Harlingen, Texas
Norman Rozeff
Harlingen Historical Preservation Society
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Early in its history Harlingen's founder, Lon C. Hill, who was also the president of the Lon C. Hill Town and Improvement Company, realized that it would be wise to donate land for churches and parks. He thereby set aside certain corner lots for this purpose. In the 1909 plat of the fledgling town there was set aside three city blocks for parks. These were Bowie Park between Jefferson and Madison and 2nd and 3d Streets, Plaza Porfirio Diaz between Harrison and Van Buren and D and E Streets, and Travis Park between Tyler and Polk and 6th and 7th Streets.

The first park was Bowie Park. This park was named for the Texas Revolution and the Battle of the Alamo hero, James (Jim) Bowie. Early settlers gathered there under the mesquite trees to exchange news. Later newcomers encamped in it as their temporary stopping place before finding more permanent quarters. The area of the park later shrank. It was announced on 10/15/26 that the park, which had a children's playground within it, was to get a small zoo also. First the southwest corner of the park was appropriated to construct the Woman's Club building in 1927. This building contained the small public library. It was later added to in order to accommodate a more spacious one-room public library. Later a Girl Scouts frame clubhouse was constructed in the park's southeast corner and then a Day Nursery. In the city's effort to attract tourism a surplus barracks was moved from the closed Harlingen Army Air Field in 1947 and relocated in the park's northwest corner at the junction of 2nd and Jefferson Streets for use primarily by "winter Texans". By early 1960 the number of tourists using the center was such that larger facilities were needed. The City Commission in July 1960 voted to evict the Woman's Club from the building it had used for over 30 years. The revamped structure, now called the Tourist Center, held an open house on 11/16/61. Still later its activities would utilize the Girl Scout building too. With great foresight the city moved to erect a major facility on the site. Architect Alan Y. Taniguchi of the firm of Taniguchi and Croft of Harlingen was awarded the design contract for what was to become the avant garde Casa del Sol. In April 1961 W. B. Uhlhorn Construction was selected as the low bidder at \$91,290 for the building itself but with heating and cooling amenities plus housing for these components would raise the total to \$134,368. The Casa del Sol (1961) was erected in the park's southeast corner. It is a domed structure with a scalloped shaped roof of thin-shelled concrete. With its 120' diameter it has a seating capacity of 1100 to 1200 people together with a catering-type kitchen. The Harlingen Chamber of Commerce held a naming contest for this new facility. The City Commission selected Mrs. Charles Binney's Casa del Sol over two other favorites, Easterling Hall and El Rondondo. In attendance at the 2/62 dedication was the 85 piece Harlingen High School band led by Carl Seale and a standing-room only crowd. Mayor Fred L. Paschall, in presenting a certificate to the widow of Finis Easterling, noted that her deceased husband had been instrumental in securing the center when he served on the commission. The building was dedicated in his memory.

Later the Harlingen Community Center (1969) was constructed in the park's southwest corner where the Woman's club had stood for many years. This new building then became the nexus for winter Texan activities.

Today Bowie Park itself is but a small bowling green in the northeast corner of the block.

In 1926 the city's first city hall, a small non-descript structure at the intersection of Commerce and Monroe Streets, was demolished. The small triangular area was cleared and transformed into a park-like state. This area, in existence to this day west of the Grimsell Seed store, was on 9/2/26 named in honor of Gordon Hill, a Harlingenite and the son of Lon C. Hill. Gordon, who worked for the betterment of the city while also serving it in various official capacities, had died in his early thirties during the influenza epidemic of 1918.

A.D. Holmes who has visited the area regularly since 1910 decides to move to Harlingen and sells his Gonzales County farm in 1921. At 514 E. Jackson he erects a house across from the Central Ward School. It is so admired that he becomes a house contractor for others. He is later to build Harlingen's first apartment complex at 601 E. Jackson. In 1924 he runs for the city commission and receives the highest vote total—34. Holmes is responsible for the beautification of Fair Park by planting initially planting a triangular-shaped flower garden with a fountain at its center. He then goes on to plant numerous ebony and Acacia trees throughout the area. At the park he starts a zoo, populated primarily by area animals. Willacy Sheriff Luther Snow supplies Holmes with wild cats, deer, Mexican lions whose offspring he is able to sell to other zoos, coyotes, and wolves. Then he obtains raccoons and bald eagles among other species.

Lon C. Hill Park is an old park but has not always gone by this name. It was Fair Park for a long while and more recently Fiesta Park has at times been applied to it. It is a 73-acre facility on Fair Park Boulevard [which in itself was called Valley Fair Blvd.] and surrounds the Harlingen Municipal Auditorium built in 1927-1928 to seat 3,200 people. The park was established in 1927 and for over three decades hosted the very successful Mid-Winter Valley Fair. The 20-acre site was deeded to the city by Mr. Hill. It had, at times, encompassed his home, sugar mill, livestock barn, and portions of his farm. The city commission voted to rename Fair Park Lon C. Hill Park on November 8, 1949. The park was so dedicated 11/19/50 on the day it hosted the 23rd annual Mid-Winter Valley Fair. Hill's four daughters participated in the dedication after riding in the Pioneer Parade. They were Miss Paul Hill, Miss Annie Rooney Hill, and Mrs. M. V. Caul of Harlingen and Mrs. Izaak Hill Morrow of Brownsville.

At present this park contains a playground, covered picnic shelters, barbecue pits, two basketball courts, a volleyball area, and a hummingbird/butterfly garden where Lon C. Hill's first home in Harlingen once was located before being moved in 1992 to the Rio Grande Valley Museum complex near the Valley International Airport. Originally the home was on the site of the Casa de Amistad but was later moved south across the boulevard. The Hill family called the whole surrounding area "The Plantation". It also has the Lon C. Hill Aquatic Center. The park grew in size in March 1983 when the city purchased, for the token amount of \$10, the vacated cotton oil mill complex to the park's east. The Rio Grande Oil Mill, Ltd. of Fort Worth, with Mr. C.C. Wisler president, had

offered the 16.44 gross acre property to the city in 1982. All but one of the complex's nine structures were torn down by a contractor. The remaining 1958 high roofed warehouse, now the Oil Mill Athletic Pavilion was transformed into a roller blade hockey rink. To its north a remote-controlled car racing track with adjacent bleachers has been built. The complex's scale house became the office of the Parks and Recreation Department. The park is the site of the immensely popular annual Rio Fest, a celebration of arts, crafts, history, and entertainment, held each April over a three-day period.

Named after the city's founder, the area, as noted previously, was for many years the location of the Valley Mid-Winter Fair. This was a major Valley event concentrating mainly on agriculture. It existed from 1921 through the mid-50s. Forty five acres of the park were sold to the city by the Valley Fair Association for \$80,000 in 1927. This included a well-constructed barn which Hill had erected in the early days. Other exhibit buildings were to follow. The Labor Day Hurricane of 1933 severely damaged many of these buildings as it did the more substantial Municipal auditorium which took several years to rebuild.

For years the American Legion operated the municipal swimming pool. Permanent amusement rides in the north part of the grounds afforded weekend excursion activities for both Harlingenites and other Valley people. This complex was called Fair Park and gave it name to the nearby thoroughfare. It was in fact built on part of the area which once contained the Hill Sugar Mill. This facility was burned to the ground allegedly by bandits from Mexico raiding the area in July 1917.

In 1960 the park had three tennis courts, a softball diamond, a mini golf course, kiddie rides, a city nursery, a small zoo, and the Optimist Club was operating the Boys Center. This latter would later evolve into The Boys and Girls Club. Also in existence at this time were the Exhibit Building, the Well-Baby Clinic, the Park Maintenance shops, and the State Welfare Office. It was in this year that a new swimming pool was built at 601 North L Street within the park. Park area would later be reduced by the erection of a Navy Reserve facility.

In 1950 the baseball stadium, then seating 3,500, was constructed after a \$90,000 bond issue carried. It was the largest of that type facility in the Valley. It is officially carried on the city books as Cardinal Stadium, named after the Harlingen High School sports team mascot. The baseball team played home games in it. The director of parks in 1957 is Eugene W. Hill.

Over the years it has seen a succession of professional baseball teams make it their home field. The first was in 1950 when 200 citizens raised \$25,000 to form the Harlingen Baseball Club, Inc. in February of that year. The Class C club which played in the Rio Grande Valley League had 90,000 paid admissions that first season. In 1955 the team is known as the Harlingen Capitols. By February 1960 the Texas League established a franchise in Harlingen. The team, which was known as the Cameron County Giants, became the RGV Giants and commenced its schedule in April. At this time the press often referred to the field as Giant Stadium. As interest in baseball ebbed and flowed the local team ceased to exist. With a sudden announcement in early June 1961, the team's owner, Jimmie Humphries says the team's last game will be played here 6/9. Because of lagging ticket sales he has chosen to move the franchise to Victoria, a city which itself had lost a team in recent months.

In 1994 professional baseball returned to Harlingen with the inauguration of the Rio Grande Valley White Wings team of the Texas- Louisiana League. The city completed a \$1.2 million renovation of the 50 year old stadium in May 2002. The stadium is currently referred to as Harlingen Field. At the end of 2002 it appeared that Harlingen would lose the franchise due to lagging attendance. In 2005 a new league came into existence and plans were to establish a new professional team in Harlingen by 2006.

It was in 1966 that the first of many recreational vehicle rallies was organized and accommodated at Lon C. Hill Park. The Casa de Amistad within the park offered a suitable venue for activities of the participants. By the winter of 1971 eleven companies were operating in Harlingen to conduct recreational vehicle and trailer tours into Mexico. Partial hookup facilities were installed at the park to service the more than 10,000 RVs which would utilize the park in the years to follow.

On 9/20/97 The Performing Arts Theater opened at its location in the park's southeast corner. This medium size theater is owned and operated by a non-profit corporation, but the land upon which it stands belongs to the city.

9/23/04 Groundbreaking occurs for the construction of a 15,000 square foot public skatepark. The location is part of the parking lot next to the Harlingen Boys and Girls Club at Fair Park. Later the remainder of the 77,000 square foot parking lot will be transformed into a sports complex. Recently the club received \$300,000 in financial commitments from the Valley Baptist Health System and private donors according to Club Executive Director Gerald Gathright. The city committed \$50,000 toward the project. Area skateboarders were thrilled by the development.

Travis Park is adjacent to the Travis Elementary School between Tyler and Polk Streets at 6th Street. It is named after the Battle of the Alamo commander and hero William Barrett Travis. Initially donated by Lon C. Hill, its area was the city block between 5th and 6th Streets and Tyler and Polk. In 1950 the Lon C. Hill Memorial Library at a cost of \$100,000 was built on the site. Its west side was beautified by the donation of the Marion Hendrick Smith Garden in the 1980s. When the new library was constructed on '76 Drive in 1993, the old library building was occupied by city departmental offices. Now the park has been reduced to a small landscaped area with one wooden playscape and a single picnic table

The George Gutierrez Jr. Veterans Memorial Park is one of the city's oldest parks. It was originally named the Porfiro Diaz Plaza in honor of the President of Mexico, who served his country for 24 years starting in 1876. It was established in 1931 on land donated by Lon. C. Hill. This was done in deference to the Hispanic citizens of Harlingen who resided in the now La Placita district of west Harlingen. Unofficially it likely existed as a park before this date, for the 1/21/27 issue of the *Harlingen Star* tells us that Diaz Park is to get an ornamental pool with a bridge across it as well as flower beds around it.

The park along the 500 block of West Harrison between D and Eye Streets is just over two acres in size. It has picnic tables, cast iron benches, a playground and a bandstand. In 1945 the Harlingen Mexican Chamber of Commerce took on the rundown park as a project. It provided shrubbery and benches and hired a caretaker to maintain the area. In 1980 it was renamed to its current designation in honor of the Harlingen military helicopter pilot who heroically perished in Vietnam while on a mission. Gutierrez was a

Harlingen High School football star and student body leader. After being graduated from Texas A & M University he entered the service. He was killed in action near Saigon on 8/24/65.

Along Harrison Street in the park is a stone commemorative tablet. This monument was erected in 1949 by the Charro Social Club. Engraved on it are these words: *In Honor and Memorial of Our Comrades of the Harlingen District Who Paid the Supreme Sacrifice. World War II 1941 1945.* Beneath this citation are 50 names in alphabetical order. Later a bronze plaque was affixed with an additional 44 names.

In September 1983 the city appropriated \$68,000 to give the park a facelift including a major renovation of the bandstand.

With the reactivation of the Harlingen Air Force Base in 1952, the city's population grew. This necessitated park growth in order to serve the community. As new subdivisions came into existence, pocket neighborhood parks were established both for beautification and neighborhood use. Among these were:

Revere Park which is located in the Laurel (also called Parkwood) Park subdivision. It is bounded by Revere Lane, from which it takes its name, and North Parkwood Street. The triangular shaped park is .54 acre in size. Its only amenity is a picnic table.

Windsor Park is at the intersection of South 77 Sunshine and Filmore Streets. Its original 1.9 acres dedicated in 1926 by the developers of the Windsor Park Addition subdivision has grown to about 2.1 useable acres at present. It was developed and improved in the 60s and 70s. It has parking for ten vehicles and contains two picnic tables under a canopy plus six concrete tables under the park's numerous shady mesquite trees. It has two climb/slide playground sets, a spring seesaw, and swings.

Hunter Park is at the intersection of 3rd Street and McGregor close to the Matz Extension Subdivision. It takes its name from the Hunter Subdivision which dedicated it to the city in 1952. In its .75 useable acre are two picnic tables under a canopy, two climb/slide playground sets and swings. The parking lot will accommodate ten vehicles.

One of the older city park facilities is the Tony Butler Golf Course. It is named for the long- time pro who managed the course for many years. Located at US Highway 77/83 and M Street, it is a 27-hole golf course with a full service pro shop since 1967, driving range and snack bar. This course was initially organized by mid-Valley citizens as the Arroyo Country Club. It was called the Harlingen Municipal Golf course when its 18 holes were constructed in 1929 and early 1930. The designer of the course was John Bredemus, a famous and renowned golf architect. The land acquisition cost \$127,000 and the course construction \$120,000.

A private organization, The Harlingen Country Club, was established in 1950. On a two acre site adjacent to the course its 350 members built a \$125,000 clubhouse with a swimming pool. Through the efforts of organizer Lew Bray, Valley theater owner and citrus grower, the club initiated its "Life Begins at Forty" invitational golf tournament in 1953. This was played on the municipal course. Professional golfer tournaments with purses were also played on the course.

In 1967 the Harlingen Country Club burned down. Its members then decided to build a new private course and clubhouse on land to be vacated at Harvey Richards Field, now the community of Palm Valley. This municipal airport was to close, and the former Harlingen Air Force Base field was to become the city's airport. The Life Begins at Forty tournament was then played at its new home for the first time in the spring of 1970. In 1957 as Expressway 77 in west Harlingen was being widened in preparation for the new December 1960 bridge across the Arroyo Colorado, this necessitated the rearrangement of parts of the municipal course. The city airstrip, a leased setup at the south end of the course, was removed to make a home for new 7th and 13th fairways. In 1973 nine additional holes were constructed at Tony Butler as increased winter tourism made the course one of the more popular and reasonably priced in the area.

With the rule of thumb being "a city should have 10 acres of parkland for every 100 of its citizens, Harlingen was pretty close to this in December 1961 with its 15 parks within the city totaling 238 acres plus an additional 120 acres at the Municipal Golf Course. At this time its annual budget was \$61,000.

In "April 1961, James Ross, Director of Parks and Recreation, compiled a brief history of Harlingen's Parks and Recreation history. He did so as part of a movement to show Harlingen was going to move forward as a community despite the announced closing of the important- to- its- economy Harlingen Air Force Base. A copy of that report is appended. What follows is supplemental material and history after Mr. Ross's article.

The first two major parks developed in the city both come on line in 1974. Pendleton Park is one of two comprehensive park facilities, the other being Victor Park. The former is named for Miller V. Pendleton, who was mayor of Harlingen during the Great War 1914-18. It is located at the 1600 block of North Morgan where it intersects with Grimes. The land itself once contained the cattle feed lot owned by J. B. Hodge. It, along with the Hugh Ramsey and Sam Botts park areas, were acquired in the 1952-56 period when Charles "Cut" Washmon was mayor.

Over the years Pendleton Park has evolved and changed to suit the needs of the community. In 1962 its then 37 acres had a lighted field each for Pony and Little League play, six lighted concrete tennis courts. It has a 25 yard covered and heated swimming pool used year round by the high school teams, the Harlingen Aquatic Team and senior citizens in recreation programs in addition to the community at large. The maintenance of the pool had been under the HCISD but in September 2004 was placed under the city parks. In addition it has seven Little League baseball diamonds (added in 1991), a small scenic pond, a sizeable picnic pavilion, and individual picnic area. Its lighted 18 tennis courts were upgraded in 1991 and put under the contract management of a tennis pro. The facility is called the H-E-B Tennis Center and has a pro shop.

The park presently comprises 47.47 acres. Adjacent to its southwest side is a ten-acre vacant parcel which the city has been working to acquire by eminent domain but which has been tied up in court for years over the issue of fair market value.

10/13/06 Plans for major changes at Pendleton Park are revealed. The city will match a state grant of \$300,000 and will earmark \$98,500 for the purchase of 9.8 acres of adjacent land to expand the park. Other construction and renovation projects include an \$80,000

playground renovation, \$120,00 for pavilion work, a \$120,000 softball field overhaul, \$16,000 for soccer/football fields, \$4,500 for a picnic station, \$35,000 for a multi-use court, \$20,000 for a pier in the pond, and \$18,000 for a half-mile nature trail. In addition the Harlingen Tennis Foundation intends to raise \$750,000 towards the renovation of 18 tennis courts in the park. The city will, through sale of certificates of obligation, match up to \$750,000 while H-E-B for a right to put its name on the complex pledged \$200,000, Lighting will be improved throughout and the central championship court will feature stadium seating.

At this time the park has five fields for Little League play in addition to Kmart field. In 2008 the park received a \$1 million renovation. This involved tennis court improvements, the construction of a new ½ mile gravel nature trail, a 15 x 10 ft. wildlife observation platform, a multi-purpose court, a multi-purpose field, four horseshoe pits, and three picnic stations. Also finalized was the \$400,000 purchase from the Sharbineau family of 9.85 acres to become the park's southwest corner. With the Harlingen Tennis Foundation seeking more courts at the park, the city also agreed to match funds raised by the foundation up to the \$750,000 level.

In the Fall of 2008 plans were being formulated for the erection of a Veterans Memorial in the southeast area of the park.

In the summer of 2009 most of the park was closed to commence renovations. It would be closed until March 2010. Projects now reached \$2.25 million in cost. The south side tennis courts were being torn up for the installation of new surfaces. The rundown Troyce Shofner Pavilion between these courts will be demolished and replaced by a modular while the Harlingen Tennis Association continues to raise funds to erect a permanent pro-shop with amenities.

The Collis Thompson Pavilion is to receive new flooring with brick pavers, and more importantly the structure itself will be totally rehabilitated. It is popular for family gatherings and other events.

New to the park will be a half-mile asphalt trail for walking/jogging around its perimeter. It will wind through native trees, some of which have been planted over the years by Harlingen Proud on Arbor Day. Children will be delighted by a new playground. Giants Field where American Little League and Harlingen League Youth football play is to get a new concrete block restroom building and a concession building. If this didn't suffice also to be added are new picnic area, a basketball court, a multi-purpose athletic field and horseshoe pits.

Victor Park is located at the intersection of the 1600 block of South M Street and US Highway 77/83 Expressway. It has soccer fields, four lighted tennis courts, a 50 yard pool, a picnic pavilion, and individual picnic shelters along with five lighted basketball and softball fields. The forty two acre park is named after the John J. Victor estate which donated the land to the city before 1963. Mr. Victor lived in Oklahoma City while two of his sisters once farmed the area using mules. Goat herds were a common site on the land here. In the 1930s it was the site of a roping arena.

On 5/6/82 improvements at the park were dedicated. These included the Charles Powers Athletic Field, the Alex Gonzales Softball Field, and the Omar Lucio Bronco (baseball) Field.

City Lake Park/Liberty Garden is at the 600 block of '76 Drive. It has as its center the small reservoir of the Harlingen Waterworks System. It consists of seven acres of paved jogging or walking trail, the lake, and a meditation garden. The trail is very popular for exercisers. The garden is often the site of outdoor wedding ceremonies and photographs. The reservoir lake is a natural depression. Previously it was even larger as it extended to the east before being reduced by the extension of 6th Street through it in 1975. The area filled and drained periodically depending on the weather. After 1908 when the Harlingen Canal reached the city, water was available to keep the area perpetually filled. A 1915 picture taken by Robert Runyon shows the lake filled to its brim and Harlingen's new homes to its south.

In the year 1976 a part of 6th Street connecting it and 7th Street was renamed '76 Drive to commemorate the 200th anniversary of our nation's Declaration of Independence. The 1.616 acre landscaped garden adjacent to the current Cultural Arts Center was designated Liberty Garden. Commissioner Jim Werner, Bicentennial Chairman, was instrumental in moving this project forward. Eleanor Matz designed the park's sign. The building of the Cultural Arts Center and its parking lot in 1986 diminished the park area somewhat. Annually on Easter Sunday, the park is the site of a sunrise service. The winding paved pathways are handicapped accessible and pass numerous markers commemorating individuals for whom trees were planted annually in Arbor Week. Raised flowerbeds are periodically in bloom.

Dixieland Park is at 2501 South Dixieland Road at the terminus of this road. The park was set up in 1978. It has twenty acres with a playground, basketball court, a park pavilion with a barbecue pit, and a Harlingen Waterworks System reservoir. The latter is the site for an annual fishing contest for small children. The pond was created in 1971 when the soil from the borrow pit which created it was utilized for ramp material in the construction of the overpasses tying Expressway 83 to Highway 77.

Rangerville Park is located at 1101 Rangerville Road. The road takes its name from the Texas Rangers' camp which in the early 1900s was situated near the intersection of Rangerville Road (FM1479) and the Old Military Highway. On the 24 acres of the park are a playground, four soccer/athletic fields, a park gazebo with a barbecue pit, and restrooms. The park was established in 1996, however as early as 3/31/88 the City Commissioner considered spending \$20,700 to purchase land and establish the park.

Arroyo Park is at the intersection of New Hampshire and Hale Streets on the south side of the Arroyo Colorado. It is one of the city's newest parks and was built to service the growing number of homes and residents in the area. The Arroyo Estates subdividers had originally given the city 65 acres by 1960, but nothing was done with the area until 1995 when residential development in the area picked up.

By 2004 its 29 utilized acres contain two baseball fields, two soccer fields, nature trails with scenic overlooks of and access to the Arroyo Colorado, a playground, a volleyball area, a covered picnic shelter, and restrooms.

In March the now sixty-acre Arroyo Park commences a \$330,000 facelift. It begins with 275' of fencing and eight light posts being installed around a third field. The girl's PONY League has been using two unlit fields over the last five seasons. Over this period the

league has grown to over 300 girls. A new parking lot to accommodate 100 vehicles is being constructed along with additional sidewalks.

C. B. Wood Park is situated at the west end of Harding Avenue in its 200 block. Its nine acres contain a playground and one sheltered picnic table. It has the southwest side access to the two mile long paved Arroyo Hike and Bike Trail. The Carl B. Wood family donated the land to the city prior to 1968. The park is named after the Harlingen man who, in partnership with H. Raymond Mills of Weslaco, is credited with establishing the first citrus packing shed in the Valley. The year was 1922. Known as the Valley Packing Company it was located at North Commerce and Washington Streets.

McKelvey Park is situated at 1325 South 77 Sunshine Strip. 7.5 acres of its present 12.72 acres were donated to the city in 1951 by John McKelvey and his Laurel Park Subdivision. John W. McKelvey was a dynamic Harlingen business man with interests in Southwest Packing Co. He died prematurely of a heart attack at age 52 on 5/6/59. The city did not file deed to the park area until 1955 and then left it undeveloped. In 1962 heirs (namely Jack Busa) to Mr. McKelvey's estate expressed a desire to exchange the designated parcel for another site along the Arroyo. The city would not accept an inferior location and eventually won out after legal maneuvering. The area has a playground and picnic tables. It is the site of outdoor concerts by small jazz groups and others. Since 1986 it has been the annual site of Harlingen's attractive Arroyo Holiday Lighting and associated festivities. The park has the east side access to the two mile long hike /bike trail along the bottom of the Arroyo Colorado. It was in the year 2004 that the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a series of concerts at McKelvey Park under the name "Blues on the Hill." These grew into a continuing event. Adjacent to the parking lot is a small bronze marker set in concrete. It reads: In Memory of Susie Lackland, A Flower Lover and Coordinator of the Bougainvillea Trail of Texas. This is all that remains to remind us of a flower garden once installed by area garden clubs but which disappeared due to lack of proper maintenance. The same held true for a stone-bounded circulating water course erected by private effort. It presently sits dry and neglected near the Hwy 77 Bridge.

Hugh Ramsey Nature Park is at the 1000 block of South Loop 499, a northern extension of Ed Carey Drive, where the bridge crosses the Arroyo Colorado. It is named after the former mayor of Harlingen who served from 1936 to 1946 and again 1948-1950. It was designated as a park by the city commissioners in February 1953. Amenities in this 53.54 acre wooded park include nature trails, an observation blind overlooking the arroyo and restrooms. It is continually being improved with native plantings, improved trails and markers. At some future time it will become the home of the Harlingen Birding Center.

McCullough Park is on the southwest side of the Arroyo Colorado bridge along South Loop 499. The 6.15-acre park was named in 1964 for former Harlingen mayor, Gene F. McCullough, 1950-1952. The park encompasses the wide east bank of the arroyo where the creation of motorbike trails was feasible. The park used to resound to trail bikes revving their engine as they traverse the undulating terrain. The trails are now overgrown. It is periodically inundated by runoff waters of the Arroyo Colorado.

At some time in the future a trail may be laid to connect McKelvey Park to McCullough and Ramsey Parks. This would provide access to one of Harlingen's most beautiful and wild vistas. However adjacent landowners dispute ownership of portions adjacent to the Arroyo Colorado.

The Arroyo Hike and Bike Trail is a unique paved ten-foot wide trail running from McKelvey Park in the northwest to C. B. Wood Park near Expressway 77/83 on the southwest. It is exactly two miles long and traverses the floor of the Arroyo Colorado about fifty feet below its rim. It passes under the historic 1905 Arroyo Colorado railroad bridge spanning the 500 foot distance of the arroyo at this point. The trail has two sturdily constructed steel bridges allowing users to cross the perpetual stream flowing at the bottom of the arroyo. The trail was constructed in 2000. It may periodically be closed when excess Rio Grande River floodwaters and other upper Valley runoff waters are shunted into the arroyo's relief course. Its relative wildness and quiet amidst the bustling of the city is an unusual feature of this park area.

Sam Houston Park on 3rd Street near the intersection of Roosevelt is just north of the school of the same name on Taft Street. It is named for the Texas war for independence hero Samuel Houston. He became president of the Republic of Texas and later U.S. Senator and governor of the state. It is primarily set up for athletic practice and competition, especially soccer.

Vestal Park is an extension of the adjacent Zavala School park grounds. It parallels Lafayette Street at 1111 North B Street. It is accessible from several dead end streets in the neighborhood. It was created in 1990 from land donated by the Fitzgerald family and is named in honor of Mrs. Vestal Davis Fitzgerald. The 14.208 acre site is covered by athletic playing fields. The Fitzgerald family is associated with the nearby Tri-Pak Machinery Corp.

The Bonham School Park is west of the school at the intersection of Jefferson and 21st Streets. It is named for James Butler Bonham, a South Carolinian who came to Texas to fight for its independence and was killed in the battle of the Alamo. It has a useable area of about .54 acre. Immediately adjacent to it is a sizeable parking area that services both it and the large playing field together with the playscape equipment of the school itself. The park contains two playscapes and two swing sets plus a covered pavilion holding two large picnic tables.

The Harlingen Sports Complex is at 3139 Wilson Road on Harlingen's west side. Its 41.35 acres are primarily laid out to accommodate athletic competition in leagues and tournaments. It has four lighted softball fields, two athletic fields, two basketball courts, a fishing pond and pier for juveniles, a playground, a handicap accessible playground, one mile of jogging/walking trail, a covered picnic shelter, a large park pavilion with barbecue pit, and restrooms. This complex was created in 1991. On May 4, 2005 the city commission voted to name the southwest playing fields of the complex "The Tom Wilson Youth Sports Complex" in honor of Wilson who died of a sudden heart attack in mid-

January at age 52. Wilson had long served as director of public services for the City of Harlingen.

The facility is so well conceived that it has hosted the PONY League National Fast-Pitch Softball Tournament. In 2008, 111 teams participated and brought an estimate of over \$258,000 to city hotels. In 2009 about 133 teams are expected here. The action will be evenly spread out in the Wilson Road Sports Complex, the adjacent Tom Wilson one and Victor Park.

The Harlingen Thicket is a mostly undeveloped xerophytic vegetated area along the west bank of the Arroyo Colorado near and west of McKelvey Park and along Taft Street. It offers semi-arid fern and fauna for nature lovers and bird watchers. The establishment of this area was made possible in 1997 by The Valley Land Fund, the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival, and other conservation partners which purchased the forty acres of native brush within Harlingen. Part of the area's use was possible through a Conservation Easement of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In May 2005 twenty-one parking spaces for the Thicket were constructed along Taft Street. In the first quarter of 2006 a sheltered cover for two picnic tables was erected along with restroom facilities. Wheelchair accessible trails were laid. One is the 7/16 mile Arroyo Delta Trail; the second is the ¼ mile Comal Trail. The 5/6 mile Olmos Trail is unimproved. Former motorcross bike trails crisscross the whole area for the more adventurous hikers. Several bird blinds were fabricated within the area. An attractive welcome sign reads "Harlingen Thicket Birding Center—World Birding Center."

Centennial Park is the name given in 2006 to the area between Jackson and Harrison Avenues and lying between West Street and the railroad tracks right-of-way. The parcel acquired piecemeal over the first half of the decade was formerly unused land belonging in part to Bill Debrook and the paved area along the street to the WaterWorks. It is slowly being upgraded. In 2009 palm trees were planted, and its grass has been reinvigorated. By April 2010 it will become the home for a large Latin motif mosaic mural brought from California. The \$175,000 tile mosaic is titled "The History of Mexico and Mankind." In 1975 it had been installed on the exterior wall of the California Museum of Science and Industry in Los Angeles. It will be installed on nine concrete panels ranging in size from four feet to 13 feet tall arranged in a semicircle. Each panel will have information and text below it explaining what's on it. It will be about 75 feet long. Shrubbery, trees beds, ground cover, and boulders will be installed throughout the park's periphery. A revamped irrigation system is being installed. Along Harrison Avenue the park features a Los Caminos del Rio monument describing in English and Spanish the city's origins.

Sam Botts Park was designated as such but was never developed. It was to be located at the south 74 acre tip near the vacated municipal airstrip adjacent to the municipal golf course. It lay between the Arroyo Colorado and the Harlingen Main Canal. Some of its area was taken when the golf course was redesigned; the remainder is scrub brush. Sam Botts served as mayor of Harlingen from 1928 to 1936. He was the operator of a general merchandise store. In partnership with Fred Chamber, their store was situated on the first floor of the Harlingen First Bank building. This structure at the northwest corner of Van Buren and First Streets had been built likely around 1909 by Lon C. Hill.

It is on 1/5/07 that the City Commission awards a contract to Halff Associates, McAllen, to design a \$5 million soccer complex on 80 acres near a trash transfer site on East Harrison. This site is large enough to hold 12-14 official-sized soccer fields.

On 9/12/07 was the groundbreaking ceremony for the \$7.5 million 14-field soccer complex at 4515 E. Harrison. Initially the complex's cost \$4.5 million was set as for ten fields and night lighting. The Marshall Company was expected to complete the work within 180 days.

Complementing the parks and under the administration of the Harlingen Parks and Recreation Department are several facilities which have been heavily used over the years and are an integral part of the community's business, cultural and social life. These are:

The Harlingen Municipal Auditorium which was built in 1928 with art deco designs. For many years this theater was the venue for major visiting cultural attractions. In 1992-93 it received a major facelift with the construction of an extended lobby area, new dressing rooms, enhanced acoustics, the enclosure of its windows, and installation of new seating among other things. It seats over 2300 people.

When Hurricane Dolly hits the Valley on July 23, 2008, the auditorium and also the Harlingen Center for the Performing Arts are considerably damaged. The former has to cancel planned attractions for the next year and a half while extensive repairs are conducted.

The Casa de Amistad is adjacent to the auditorium. The two buildings are united by a common lobby and an attractive Mediterranean- style façade. Built in 1967 as a large, open metal building, it serves multi-functions such as for trade shows, receptions, concerts, convention headquarters, the Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival, and major displays.

The Casa de Sol on Madison Street was built in 1961. It is characterized by its unique architecture. Its large open circular floor space is excellent for receptions, performances, displays and other uses.

The Harlingen Community Center is located next to it. This general purpose brick-facaded facility built in 1969 serves both winter tourism and local activities ranging from aerobics to bridge playing to high school graduation festivities.

In June 2005 the city purchased a mobile stage to be used for city events and musical performances. Its first use was in late June for the Blues on the Hill concert, a regular feature at McKelvey Park. The 28 feet deep by wide by 40 feet wide stage cost approximately \$111,000. An additional \$9,000 will be expended for an accompanying sound system. Advertising space on the stage will be sold to offset costs.

As Harlingen entered the 21st Century, the Parks and Recreation Department had grown in order to provide the widest range of services to the numerous interests of the city's populace. Organizationally it now had a Director of Public Services, Recreation

Superintendent, Park Superintendent, Athletic Supervisor, Program Coordinator, Administrative Coordinator, Recreation Secretary., Parks Secretary, Youth Services Coordinator, Administrative Coordinator, Golf Manager, Director of Arts and Entertainment, and Box Office Manager. A six member Parks and Recreation Advisory Board served to provide direction and input.

On 4/9/86 the department dedicated its new headquarters at 900 Fair Park Blvd. in a building which was formerly a cotton scalehouse.

The activities and services provided by the department are wide-ranging and include: park pavilion use, softball leagues, adult flag football, girls fast pitch softball, tejano/country dance lessons, twirling/ tumble/jazz/cheer classes, fencing, table tennis, tennis classes for juniors, senior aerobics, introduction to photography, a comprehensive winter Texan program, Blues on the Hill Concerts, Arroyo Holiday Lighting, and much more. It was in 1994 that the department commenced its popular entertainment series to better utilize the municipal auditorium. This brings professional theater and related productions to the city. Shows are grouped into Spotlight, Encore and Children's Classics Series.

Modern Harlingen Park System Got Its Start with Four Parks In 1953

By James Ross
City Parks Superintendent
4/16/61

Prior to 1952 the Harlingen Parks System included only four parks, Lon C. Hill Park, Diaz Plaza, Bowie Park, and Travis. During 1952, the City Commission created a Parks and Recreation Board for the purpose of acting as advisers in order that a concerted effort be given in the beautification and development of the parks and a complete recreation program be offered to a fast growing city. The Parks and Recreation board was charged with the responsibility of laying out a long range program. The City Commission had acquired several tracts of land for park purposes at key points where the population was expected to spread.

The newly created Parks and Recreation Board's first action was to concentrate on the proper expenditure of the 1953 Bond Issue money. The board decided to recommend to the City Commission that all existing parks be revamped with both plant material and playground equipment and that Pendleton Park, located in the heart of the fastest growing part of the city be completed both as a recreation area and a point of beauty.

In order to provide the children of the city proper playground facilities, equipment was installed, not only in recognized parks, but at four schools where no park facilities were available.

At present the Parks and Recreation Department is supervising and maintaining eleven playground areas located at key points throughout the city.

A summer recreation program is carried out eight weeks each summer with 1,800 children participating. This program includes golf, swimming, tennis, and ball games to the smaller playground games and hand crafts.

Other facilities include the maintenance of eleven ball fields, Municipal Swimming Pool—available figures show that 20,997 people used this pool during the last season, six lighted tennis courts, an auditorium with 2,100 seating, and a professional baseball field now used by the Giants baseball team. All these and many more facilities are maintained by the Parks and Recreation Department.

Today, there are fourteen parks in Harlingen with a total acreage of 237 with four parks or 137 acres still undeveloped. The City Commissions of the past have planned well selecting these beautiful park sites.

The Parks and Recreation Board is charged with the responsibility of recommending the correct areas to be improved. In the program at present, the brush and rough areas are systematically being cleared on the 74 acres of Botts Park, which is south of the golf course; immediate partial development with barbecue pits and some playground equipment will be made at McCullough Park located on the Arroyo Estates Addition.

This department is also concerned with the pruning and maintenance of the various boulevards and park plantings in order that they will bloom when the greatest effect can be obtained.

A recent assignment to the Parks and Recreation Board is to assume the responsibility of concentrating every effort to have beautified all the new expressway boulevards and highways passing through the city, cooperating with other city boards and the Highway Department in order to make Harlingen a town to remember in South Texas.

Plans are being developed by the Parks Department to keep outlined for the City commission a promising park development program for Harlingen. A lot is yet to be done, such as: additional tennis facilities; a new municipal auditorium and civic center; additional sprinkler systems; additional facilities at the golf course; more lighted Little League ball fields; widening the Arroyo Colorado and utilizing the extra area, and tying together Botts Park in the southwest section of the city and Ramsey Park in the southeast part of the city. With this could come water skiing, boat racing, fishing and numerous other aquatic activities. These facilities would help greatly as a tourist attraction and business interests in Harlingen.

The City of Harlingen, because of its climate and great potential in industry and other fields, must have good parks and playground areas if it is to grow into a thriving metropolis.

It is apparent since Ross wrote this in 1961, and as the considerable history of parks set forth in this series illustrates, that the City of Harlingen has answered the challenge and

more than kept abreast of its growing population. That foresight by our town fathers and others is to be commended. Harlingen Parks and Recreation Director Jeff Lyssy, his staff, and crew do an outstanding job in undertaking tasks that requires maximum flexibility.