



Era of Coal Mines Recalled in New Permanent Exhibit



Back in the days of the Roaring '20s and on through the Great Depression, people who knew of Bastrop County thought about coal – in those days (1902-1944), lignite mining was the county's leading industry. The county held the largest deposit of lignite in the State.

And when folks who lived here thought about mining, they probably thought about the little company towns where the employers provided their workers with housing to live in, commissaries to purchase their food and supplies and schools to educate their children.

These long-forgotten communities – with names like Phelan, Sayers and Calvin – were populated by miners who had been brought from Mexico by the mines' operators. More than a dozen lignite mines were located between Bastrop and McDade.

Those are the elements highlighted in the recently opened Coal Mines exhibit at the Bastrop County Historical Museum. The new permanent exhibit was opened March 14 at an event honoring numerous Hispanic descendants of the long-forgotten ghost

towns with names like Phelan, Dunstan and Glenham.

“Estimates are that 1,000 men worked at the mines at one time, with the average mine requiring 35-50 men working 40-165 feet underground,” one panel explains. “Above ground were the pit boss, engineers, trackmen, mule drivers and blacksmiths.”

In the depressed economy of the 1930s lignite produced through the shaft mining techniques characteristic of the Bastrop mines became increasingly uncompetitive compared to strip-mined coal and to petroleum, according to the Handbook of Texas.

The exhibit, designed by artist Lee Jamison, features an underground shaft leading into the earth, along with a mouse that acted as a “guard” on duty to detect eminent danger (see photo caption).

At the March opening ceremony, more than two dozen direct descendants were recognized for the achievement and culture of their ancestors. ★

Project Seeks To Memorialize Freedom Colonies In Bastrop County

The Bastrop County Historical Museum is looking to crowd source its next exhibit: a look into the freedom colonies that once dotted the county.

Oral histories, old photographs and artifacts — the museum is interested in anyone that can help shed light on communities of freed slaves that were established after the Civil War and through the early 20th century.

Many of those colonies have since disappeared, spurred by the dispersal of the communities. At one time, over 550 ▶



Fourth grader **Ivan Gonzalez** of Lost Pines Elementary was honored at the Bastrop County Historical Society recently for winning a mouse-naming contest for a new exhibit recognizing the role of coal mining in Bastrop County. Why a mouse? Early coal miners used the presence of mice to alert them to the possibility of potential mine collapses – if the mice scattered, something was up, or about to come down. Ivan's winning entry was “Riskers.” BCHS Director Kaye Sapikas presented Ivan with a certificate at the exhibit opening in March. Fourth grade history students from Mina Elementary and Emile Elementary also submitted entries.



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(As of Mar. 31, 2019)

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DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Lots Going On Around Here

The first quarter of 2019 was **as busy as anyone around here can remember**. The Museum and Visitor Center welcomed 3,179 guests, a 50 percent increase over the same time period last year. Paid museum admissions are also up by 30 percent in the month of March alone ...

Something to be proud of: In January, *Texas Meetings & Events* magazine published their "Best of 2019" edition.

After winning first place in 2018 for Best Visitor Center in a town with less than 25,000 people, we won runner up in 2019 for the same category. A tribute to our highly qualified and dedicated volunteers and staff ... We have

expanded our docent-led museum tours; we are now providing tours every Tuesday and Friday afternoons from 1-3 p.m. Tours are free with paid admission, and of course, admission is free with your BCHS membership ... **Outdoors in May,** we will once again have our Historic Downtown Walking Tours every Saturday morning of the month. Beginning May 4, tours will start at 10 a.m. at the museum and are free to all ... We have **two exciting Special Exhibits** coming up. The first is "**The Episcopal Church – 150 Years,**" which will open on April 5th and run through May. Check out the page 4 article about Ken Kesselus' upcoming quarterly meeting talk about that church ... The second is the **Freedom Colonies of Bastrop County.** Research on that project is still under way. Read on page 1 about our **crowd-sourcing search** for oral histories, old photographs and artifacts from these communities of freed slaves. This exhibit will open June 1st and run through August. More information on both of these free exhibits is available on our website ... And to help us kick off our Freedom Colonies Special Exhibit we will be hosting a **members-only reception** at the Brooks Wilbarger Home on May 30th. This event will feature the **Peterson Brothers** and require RSVP from all interested members. Be watching for your invitation. ★



Kaye Sapikas, Director

Freedom Colonies *from page 1*

colonies established by 200,000 newly freed blacks existed in Texas, according to Texas A&M researchers, but many of them today only live on through memories, oral histories, photographs or other old records.

"That is our stated aim: to find out where these colonies were," said Carol Kysar, an archivist at the Bastrop County Historical Museum. "We're just looking at all sorts of clues. Old maps, census records — every resource we can think of trying to determine where these people lived."

Kysar has teamed up with 16 other people, many of them slave descendants, for the Freedom Colonies Research Project. In June and July, the project will unveil its findings through a special exhibit of artifacts, oral histories, storyboards and photographs.

"We're just getting started, and we don't really know where it's going to end," Kysar said.

But the project isn't starting from scratch. About 10 freedom colonies, established in Bastrop County, have been recorded by Texas A&M urban planning professor Andrea

Roberts. The Texas Freedom Colonies Project, a project Roberts launched in 2014, aims to aggregate a comprehensive database of freedom colonies across the state. The project will help black Texans "reclaim their unrecognized and unrecorded heritage" and help city planners to preserve the communities, according to the university.

Some of the known colonies in Bastrop County include: St. Mary's Colony, which was settled in the county's western stretches; Cedar Creek Colony; Salem Colony, located in the southern area of the county; Pleasant Grove Colony, settled north of Elgin; and the Colorado and Flower Hill colonies which were located near Smithville. Kysar knows of others she'd like to add to that list, like one centered around a church near Utley, she said.

Freedom colonies are oftentimes marked today by historic cemeteries or churches. And the lives of the freed slaves were likely marked by the cotton trade and sharecropping. After emancipation, cotton became an economic driver in Texas as ▶



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slavery gave way to sharecropping, and the black population of Bastrop County boomed. Census records show that by 1890, the African-American population grew to 43 percent in Bastrop County, about double the state average.

Today, the black population has shriveled to under 8 percent, according to census estimates. Now, Kysar and her team are working to memorialize the nearly forgotten local histories.

Anyone interested in sharing their personal or family history — via artifacts, photographs or interviews — is asked to call the Bastrop County Historical Museum at 512-303-0057, email archivist@bchs1832.org or stop by the museum at 904 Main St. in Bastrop. ★

Article by Brandon Mulder and reprinted courtesy of the *Bastrop Advertiser*

BCHS would like to thank...

- Adela Jones, Bob Malerk** and **Deborah Zoda** for preparing the Winter Newsletter for mailing.
- Robbie Sanders** and **Terry Stringer** for serving as docents for the Leander Chamber of Commerce tour of downtown Bastrop.
- Barbara Clemons** who spoke to Emile Elementary second graders about Bastrop: Past, Present, and Future.
- Barbara Clemons** and **Jennifer Leisure** for providing refreshments for the Winter Quarterly Meeting.
- Judi Krause** for donating a custom-made cape for the Baron de Bastrop mannequin. The cape is a replica of the one worn in the 1936 etching of the Baron and Moses Austin meeting in San Antonio.
- Pat McKay** for purchase of a hard drive for the Research Library computer.
- Sharah Johnson** for providing champagne for the “toast” to Robbie Sanders completion of the permanent exhibits of the Museum.
- Willie De La Rosa** for cleaning the leaves and oak blooms from the area in front of the Museum.
- Jim Lewis**, former BCHS trustee and current resident of Pensacola, Florida, for his assistance in preparing this edition of the newsletter. ★

Museum Acquisitions

- Mildred Bell** – Copies of 1981 and 1993 yearbooks for Union Hill Missionary Baptist Church
- Nancy Bulak** – Scanned photos of coal miners going to church in horse and mule-drawn wagons
- Sandra Chipley** – *Historic Millwork*
- Barbara Clemons** – *History of Cedar Creek*
- Mary and Jim Clinton** – World War II German and US military memorabilia
- Anthony J. Edsall** – 1851 Navy Colt revolver used by Texas Rangers up to time of Civil War
- Sue Ann Fruge** – Handmade wooden doll cradle made in 1914 in payment for delivery of a baby
- Stephanie Jenkins** – Large, framed photo of Robert Lane Jenkins and wife Scottie Chambliss Jenkins circa 1890
- Carol Kysar** – *Women in Texas History* by Angela Boswell; *Nine Years Among the Indians* by Herman Lehmann
- Dianne Mills** – Loan of large, framed portrait of James Franklin, father of T. C. Franklin
- Dr. David Robinson, Sayersville Historical Association** – To-scale map of the Oak Hill Community showing the location of existing cemetery, locations of former church and school
- Tom and Nancy Scott** – Two volumes of *War of the Rebellion* – Union and Confederate Army Records - Correspondence
- Elizabeth Zaengle Triana** – Photos of Camp Swift taken by her serviceman-father in 1944
- Michael and April Wallace** – *The Men and Women in World War II from Bastrop County* Photos and biographical information on the men and women from Bastrop County who fought in World War II
- Research Library Volunteers*
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Thanks to the Scotts

The Bastrop County Historical Society would like to express our thanks to Nancy and Tom Scott who provided lodging for an extended period of time to Lee Jamison as he designed and fabricated the Coal Mine exhibit. THANKS Tom and Nancy! ★

Calvary Episcopal Is Topic of Talk

It won't take long for a researcher interested in learning about Bastrop County history to come across the name of Ken Kesselus as an authority on the community's past.

A visit to the library – or Google – will turn up Kesselus as the author of three authoritative books that trace a detailed timeline from the town's founding on the Colorado River in 1830, through the Civil War and Reconstruction, until 1874. And in addition to the 19th Century times gone by, most folks who track civic affairs around town are aware that in this century, he served five years on the city council and then three years as Mayor.

But it's the spiritual background that Kesselus is particularly suited to discuss, at least as far as the 150 years that the Calvary Episcopal Church has served the community. He served 18 years as the 26th Rector of Calvary of the church long located at the corner of Spring and Church streets.

Armed with that up-close-and-personal

knowledge, Kesselus will speak about the church's sesquicentennial past at the quarterly meeting of Bastrop County Historical Society at 6:30 p.m., Thursday, April 25th at Calvary Hall, 1020 Main Street in Bastrop.

"I hope people interested in our history will learn something about the triumphs, ups and downs and trials and tribulations of a small town church founded in 1869 and continuing to thrive right up until this year," Kesselus said. "I don't think you'll have to be a member of the church to learn some interesting aspects of how our community has developed and survived over the decades."

Among the subjects he'll cover are the construction of the current church building in 1881 as well as the complexities of subsequent renovation – including the challenges of gaining approval



Calvary Episcopal Church, circa 1950

for the re-do by the architects at the Texas Historical Commission. ★

Street parking is available on Main and Spring Streets and behind Calvary Episcopal Church.

THURSDAY, APRIL 25 AT 6:30 P.M. CALVARY HERITAGE HALL 1020 MAIN STREET BASTROP

Bastrop
MUSEUM & VISITOR CENTER
of the Bastrop County Historical Society

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