

Port Aransas Preservation and Historical Association

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PAPHA Newsletter

October 2009

Tours to Little Chapel on the Hill Begin

Tours to the Little Chapel on the Hill will begin this month.

Betty Bundy of the Port Aransas Museum obtained permission to give the tours through the museum due to the generosity of Frank Carter and David and Aubrey Carter. Frank and David are sons of Aline Carter, for whom the chapel was built in the 1930s. It was built on the tallest dune in Port Aransas. Carter used the Chapel to treat Port Aransas children to ice cream as she shared non-denominational Bible stories.

The Chapel is beautifully decorated with frescoes covering the walls and ceiling depicting the history of Chris-

tianity painted by Austin artist Patrick Cobb nearly a quarter of a century ago.

Two tours will be held each month, with a limit of 10 people on each tour. Reservations are required and should be made by visiting the Museum or calling 361-749-3800. Leave a name and number to get on the tour list.

The museum is open Thursday through Saturday, from 1 to 5pm.

The tour will take approximately an hour with a short orientation at the Museum before the trip to the Chapel. Members of the tour group should plan to be at the museum 10 minutes before tour times.

Tour dates for 2009 are: Friday and Saturday, Oct. 23-24, at 10am; Friday and Saturday, Nov. 20-21, at 3pm; and Friday and Saturday, Dec. 18-19, at 10am.



Historical Lecture Series Begins with Presentation on 1919 Storm

The Port Aransas Museum has scheduled a 2010 Historical Lecture Series, with plans for it to be an annual winter series.

The inaugural event will be kicked off before the New Year. A presentation on the 1919 storm by Jim Moloney will be a fitting end to the 2009 hurricane season.

The 1919 storm destroyed much of Port Aransas, and in many cases rearranged the buildings that remained.

The powerful hurricane devastated

Corpus Christi ninety years ago, leaving nearly 1,000 dead. Low-lying sections of the city were inundated by up to twelve feet of storm-driven tides. Downtown, buildings lining the bay were destroyed or heavily damaged, while the rest of the downtown was flooded with oil-slicked waters. On North Beach,

See '1919 Storm' on Page 4



Spooky Spoofs, Freaky Fables Await Bus Riders

Catch a ride on the History's Mysteries Ghost Tour bus for the night before Halloween. Two tours will be given, at 5 and 7pm, leaving from the Port Aransas Museum (corner of Brundrett & Alister). The cost is \$3 for adults, \$1 for kids, with proceeds going to the museum fund.

Hear spooky and intriguing stories of the island while celebrating Halloween.

The museum will be open through

6pm that evening for people to browse before the tours.

This joint effort between the Port Aransas Preservation and Historical Association and the Port Aransas Parks and Recreation Department has limited seating aboard the bus. Reserve a spot today.

Call Pam Greene at 361-749-4158 or email pamg@cityofportaransas.org to reserve a space.

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Shopping Spree Set

Whether you are just starting or near the end, the Port Aransas Museum wants to be included in your holiday shopping plans. The Museum will hold a fun Holiday Shopping Party the Friday before Thanksgiving in the Gift Shop of the Museum. Mark the date on your calendar--November 20.

The shopping bonanza will be held from 5-7:30pm. Champagne and cookies will fortify shoppers.

Several of the vendors who make the beautiful items sold in the gift shop will be on hand to visit with guests and

show an even larger array of items they offer for sale. All items in the shop, including special ones brought in for the show, will be 10% off for the party hours only.

Also several merchants will have a certificate offered to each person who purchases items. It will include discounts in local stores.

Plan on doing your holiday shopping in the museum shop and have a fun time doing it. We'll have ribbons to make your purchases festive and docents will be on hand to answer your special requests.



Save March 6 for Dinner/Auction

March calendars fill up fast as families look forward to Spring Break activities. Make sure to save the first Saturday in March for the 2nd annual Port Aransas Museum Dinner and Auction. Last year, 120 folks enjoyed the event and raised \$21,000 for the museum. The 2010 event will continue the celebration of the city's centennial and promises to be a night you won't want to miss. Watch upcoming newsletters for additional information.

What Is in a Name? For Our Town, Economic Opportunity!

J. Guthrie Ford

Our Centennial is next year. A birthday of that magnitude got me curious about how we came to have the name "Port Aransas." Here is what I dug up.

Port A is our third official—on the rolls of the U.S. Postal Service—name; the others were Ropesville and Tarpon. These names reveal an interesting pattern: Starting with Ropesville, each speaks to a promising economic factor. Elijah Ropes is the New Jersey fellow who in the late 19th century came to our community and promised it the benefits of tourism and of managing a ship channel he was dredging through Mustang Island as a route to the Corpus Christi wharves. Excited by these prospects, the townsfolk chose in 1888 to name their little berg Ropesville.

(I have seen unofficial community handles that preceded Ropesville. "Star" and "Mustang Island" appear frequently in the literature.)

It was not long after we became Ropesville that Ropes' plans to develop the Corpus Christi Bay area began to unravel; particularly so when he was accused of scandalous activities by his investors—one Corpus man even gave Elijah a good old fashioned a caning!

Figuring discretion the better part of valor, Ropes and his shapely secretary skedaddled back East, never to return to Texas. Work on the partially completed Mustang channel stopped, and the deserted—and eventually land locked—dredge boat Josephine became a local symbol of dreams lost. But it was time to move on, and in 1896 the Ropesville folks decided against their loser town name, dropping it in favor of "Tarpon."

The 1890s was when it was becoming abundantly clear that sportsmen, from near and far, would pay town fisherman to take them out for the strong pulling, high leaping tarpon, schools of which filled the Aransas Pass and neighboring bays. The tarpon economy, however, soon began to be eclipsed by another economic sun that was rising after the turn of the century. It was in the early 1900s when confidence was restored that the Aransas Pass would finally be stabilized and made safe by a proper jetty system—previous jetty efforts had been failing since 1868! In turn, an improved pass would justify a major seaport; and to the joy of the people of Tarpon, a group of mainland investors chose close-by Harbor Island

as the locale for the new port.

This facility promised Tarponeers a bright economy by way of good and consistent paying jobs—tarpon guiding, and associated tourist trades, depended on availability of the game, and guiding did not pay all that well. The new seaport would need clerks to collect docking fees and deal with customs matters, stevedores to load ships with bales of Texas cotton, brake and firemen for the railroad from the mainland to the port, and hands to man the tugboats that maneuvered ships in and out of the docks. What name was this new port, fed by the Aransas Pass, to have? Logically, it would be Port Aransas.

So excited were the people of Tarpon by the prospect of Port Aransas that they approached postmistress Emma A. Roberts, and on 23 December 1910 she struck Tarpon from her postmark and replaced it with Port Aransas. (In the following year the town was incorporated under that name.)

An engaging salesman, a hard charging fish, a Texas cotton seaport: We chose our town names as harbingers of good times to come, and let us pray that such times will continue to grace our sandy home.

Civil War Life on Mustang Island: the Major Thompson Letters

J. Guthrie Ford

As I reported in the August 2009 Newsletter, Confederate Fort Semmes, on the head of Mustang Island, fell to the Federals on 17 November 1863. Afterward, part of the Federal force was detached to stay and guard the strategic Aransas Pass. Major William Thompson, the commander of that detachment—the 20th Iowa Infantry Regiment and African-American engineers—left us Islanders quite a history gift: a collection of letters to his wife in Marion, Iowa. In this article I will provide excerpts from some of these to give you a unique piece of early Mustang history. (I thank historian Norman Delaney, Ph.D., Our Lady of Corpus Christi / University of St. Thomas, for sharing these documents. My additions to them are in brackets; I did not alter errors in spelling and grammar.)

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***Mustang Island, Texas, Nov. 18th 1863.** [Note the various post names that Thompson created.] I left Point Isabel on the evening of the 15th and we all steamed up the Gulf about 80 miles and arrived at the lower end of this island on the evening of the 16th and commenced our march about 9 that night and as my horse failed to come in time I marched on foot. And we traveled 20 miles by sun up yesterday morning. My regiment carried 100 rounds of ammunition, their guns, and knapsacks, and three days provisions. And then hauled two 12 lbs. brass cannon, and came up soon as the rest. We found a fort here and three pieces of heavy artillery and about 100 men. We commenced fire on them, both from the gun boats and land forces. But they run up the white flag and surrendered without firing a shot [in fact, the fort's picket line did briefly engage the advancing Federals south of Semmes].... The position we have gained is to us an important one. Mustang Island commands the Bay and Inlet of "Corpus Christi," so we can land all the forces we wish. We captured about 70 head of horses and mules, and I am again on horse back.

***Hdqrs. U.S. forces, Post at Mustang Island, Texas, Nov. 23rd**

1863. I have here my own Regt. and about 200 other troops...among them 100 of the colored troops known as the Engineers [detached from the Corps d'Afrique]. Their arms are spades and shovels and they are at work on the fort [emplacing artillery and building barracks]. The southwest end of Mustang is called Corpus Christi Pass and the northeast end is what is called Aransas Pass. We landed at Corpus Christi Pass and marched up to Aransas Pass.... We will attack the enemy in the morning about 40 miles up from here at Matagorda Bay, and we will take that place certain, but I will not be there to assist or see it done. [That place was Matagorda Island's Fort Esperanza which fell on 29 November. Thompson was lamenting having to stay behind with his Mustang Island garrison.]

***Hdqrs. U.S. forces, Post at Mustang Island, Texas, Nov. 26th 1863.**

I was placed in command of an expedition and put aboard a ship and sent 20 miles above this post to a point known as Live Oak Point. We went for wood and beef and got to the point at about 5 in the evening and at 2 the next morning we had the wood on board and just as we had finished a blow came up and sent the ship ashore.... We finally arrived safely here at 11 a.m.

***Post at Aransas Pass, Texas, Dec. 6th 1863.**

I caught a five year old mustang stallion. Black as a crow and very heavy main and tail. My negro boy Billy went at him and they had it up and down for about two hours, but the darkey beat him out of it and rode him.

***Post Aransas, Texas, Dec. 25th 1863.**

I have just eat dinner. Our bill of fare was first venison and potatoes then good light bread, apples and blackberries, coffee, sugar and molasses. The camp is very quiet. Many of the boys are out on the Bay in some sailboats, others on rowboats. Some fishing, others bathing, while others are out for a hunt, and I am alone. Dec. 26th. Lieuts. Johnson and Crosley got back today. They went on and took Corpus Christi.... Corpus is

about as large as Marion and splendidly located.... We have the honor of being the first Yankees in the place.... Women and children are absolutely suffering for want of the necessaries of life, and it is only the beginning of their misery.

***Post Aransas, Texas, Jan. 22nd 1864.**

I do not know what the news is in any place for we are here on the island playing Robinson Crusoe. We have nothing to do but drill and guard. I have battalion drill every p.m. and company drill every a.m. except Saturdays and Sabbaths. [Looks like misery came in blue as well as gray.]

***Post Aransas, Texas, Feb. 15, 1864.**

I sent a boat expedition up the bay to scout around and see what they could. They took the town of Le Marr [Lamar] and drove out a lot of rebels and took some prisoners. Also got enough lumber to build us a commissary building 24 feet side and 80 feet long. [I contend that would have been Mustang's first mercantile endeavor.]

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What Major Thompson does not explain is why he was left to garrison a bleak island while the rest of the Federal force continued up the coastline to even more glory. In fact, Thompson's posting to Mustang was punishment from the Federal commander, General T.E.G. Ransom, as explained in this communiqué from the General to his superiors: "I regret to mention ... the unsoldierlike conduct of Major Thompson, commanding Twentieth Iowa Regiment, who constantly discouraged his men by complaining in their presence of the hardships of the march [up Mustang on Nov 16-17, 1863], and permitted them to scatter and straggle to the rear, losing more than half his men before he reached the north end of the island."

The Federals pulled out of Post Aransas on 24 June 1864. Mustang Island's Civil War period, which began with the incursion of Lt. Kittredge and his sailors in February 1862, was finally over. The Islanders began to filter back to face the forthcoming rigors of Reconstruction.

Catching Tarpon Within Sight of the Post Office

J. Guthrie Ford



At the turn of the 20th century, right at the very tip of St. Jo Island, the wealthy New Yorker Ned Green established the Tarpon Club. For a membership fee of \$100 (plus dues), one could

1919 Storm

— Cont. from Page 1
Photos published with permission by Jim Molloney
more than 220 homes were demolished by the storm tide.

Those residents unable to reach the safety of high ground were swept into Nueces Bay to battle the storm and debris for their lives. Many died, but some survived the 14-mile struggle across the bay to come ashore at White Point or the Turner Ranch on the back side of Nueces Bay.

After the storm the downtown area was filled with debris from shattered buildings and piers and thousands of cotton bales from the Municipal Wharf. The cleanup involved the entire city and resulted in a mountain of debris piled at the edge of the bay at Hall's bayou. The hurricane inspired Corpus Christi in its efforts to secure a deep-water port and build a protective seawall.

A history of the storm has not been published until now. Murphy Givens, Caller-Times columnist, has collected the tales of survivors and newspaper accounts of the time and woven them into a gripping narrative of death and survival. Moloney organized photographs from the aftermath of the hurricane to give an understanding of the destruction and the clean-up task facing the battered city.

Moloney, a partner in Energy Gas Compression and collector of postcards and other paper items of Corpus Christi history, will present a summary of the new book on this hurricane, 1919 – The Storm, which will include a slide show of the devastation.

The book will be available for purchase at the presentation.

stay at the gracious club house and hunt and fish—under the guidance of our townfolk—to the point of exhaustion. Indeed, the Tarpon Club was greatly responsible for getting the word out, near



1919 Storm

Above, People Street in Corpus Christi. Below, Plaza Hotel in Corpus Christi after the storm.



Focus On ...

Each month a focus will shine on a different docent that volunteers to work for the Port Aransas Museum.

Kay Culpepper

Kay Culpepper has been a docent since the very beginning of the program at the Port Aransas Museum. In fact she was there helping as the first exhibits were being assembled last November and December.

Kay doesn't have a set schedule to work, but comes whenever she is needed. She is also working part-time as a pharmacist at Wal-Mart. She's lived in Port Aransas for 10 years and is married to Bil, who is retired.

and far, that Mustang Island, Texas, was a sportsman's paradise.

Those coming to the Tarpon Club were men of means whose affairs necessitated communication with the outside world. To accommodate that, the club finagled the U.S. Postal Service into opening a facility by the Tarpon Club for the sole purpose of handling the club's incoming and outgoing mail. This stamp sized post office was named Sport.

Shown in the accompanying picture is an envelope emanating from the Tarpon Club which shows the handsome Sport, Texas, cancellation stamp (image courtesy of Mr. Jim Stever, acclaimed expert on the early postal history of Texas). The envelope's content was not recovered, so we can only imagine what was written to Mrs. Riester of Cleveland on March 12, 1900.

My fantasy is that Mr. Riester penned a succinct communiqué along these lines: Dearest; The sports afield here are simply too heavenly to leave. Forward my mail. Will see you and the children in May—June at the latest. Double Hugs and Kisses (with sugar)...