



## **TAMING THE CHANNEL: AN EPIC STORY**

This exhibit tells the story of the capture and taming of the Aransas Pass.

The story begins with the Karankawa, the first islanders, and ends with the final extension of our jetties and dredging of a harbor for Port Aransas in 1919. The cast includes Spanish explorers, early 'Texians', and the armies of three warring nations.

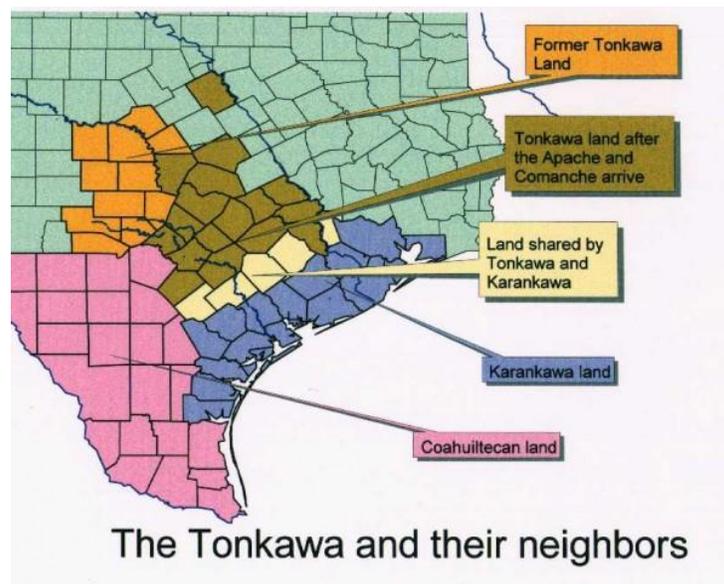
Prior to being tamed the channel moved southward at a rate of over 200' per year. Arresting this steady migration was going to require skill, vision, money and determination. It took over fifty years and five attempts before final success. Both private and government groups weighed in before the task was completed.

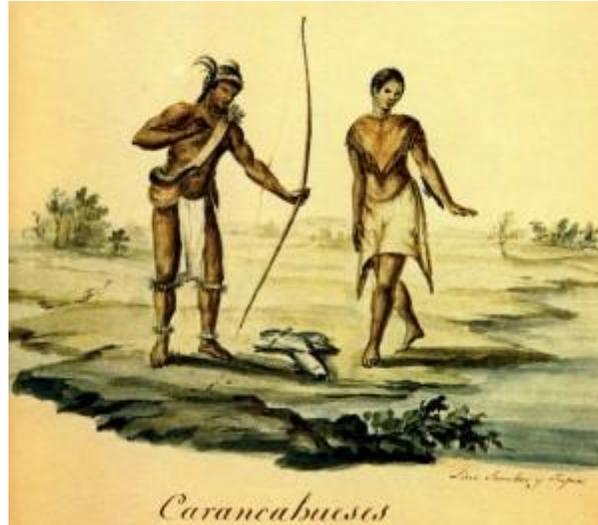
A railroad the length of the proposed jetty had to be built out into the sea to accomplish this job. A steam locomotive, crane, pile driver and flat cars full of rock had to be transported by barge to the construction site. After the rocks were dumped into the sea the cars had to be returned by barge and traded for loaded ones. The job required tons of dynamite, thousands of trees, millions of pounds of stone and more than a hundred laborers.

## The Pass: A Route to Sustenance

Long before Spanish and French explorers sailed along the Texas coastline indigenous peoples, the Karankawa, claimed the lands from Galveston to Corpus Christi Bay as their own. Nomadic by necessity, the Karankawa migrated with the seasons following the food sources.

Fall and winter offered the bounties of the inshore waters such as redfish, oysters and turtles, while spring and summer required the skill of a hunter to kill bison and deer found inland. Karankawa families traveled in small dugout canoes to move between their summer and winter homes. Roots, nuts and fruits gathered during the inland stay rounded-out the Karankawa diet.

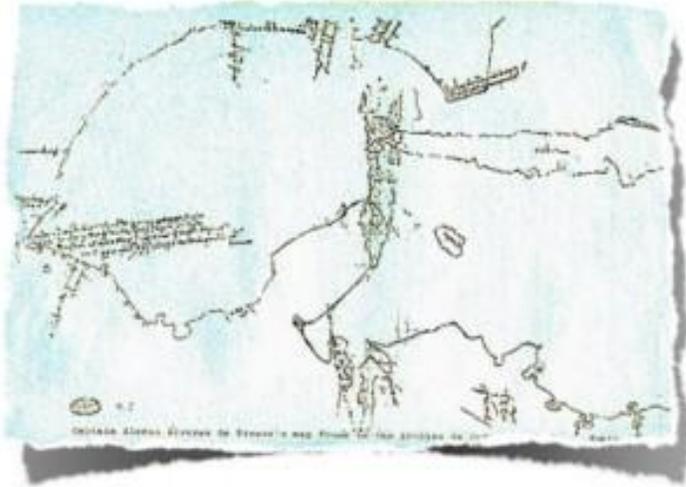




### **The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca (1542)**

“To this island we gave the name of the Island of Ill-Fate. The people on it are tall and well formed; they have no other weapons than bows and arrows with which they are most dexterous. The men have one of their nipples perforated from side to side and sometimes both; through this hole is thrust a reed as long as 2 ½ hands as thick as 2 fingers; they also have the under lip perforated and a piece of cane in it as thin as the ½ of a finger. The women do the hard work. People stay on this island from October till the end of February, feeding on the roots I have mentioned taken from under the water in November and December. They have channels made of reeds and get fish only during that time, afterwards they subsist on roots. At the end of February they remove to other parts in search of food, because the roots begin to sprout and are not good any more.”

## The Pass: A Route to Exploration



### The Spanish

Wealth, power and fame enticed Spanish exploration away from the Caribbean colonies to the American mainland in the early 16th century. Alonso Alvarez de Piñeda set sail from Jamaica, intending to sail east around Florida. Strong winds forced his fleet of four ships to change course and sail west into unknown waters. In 1519 Piñeda sailed into the Aransas Pass and named the bay Corpus Christi.

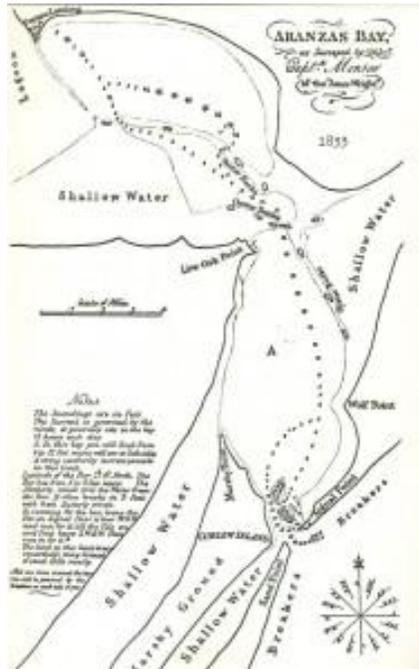
Running along the Gulf Coast from the Florida Keys to southern Mexico, Piñeda noted rivers and inlets along the way, creating the first map of the region

### The French

More than a century later, French ships entered the Gulf. With the backing of King Louis XIV, René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle left the port of La Rochelle, France in 1684 with plans of wedging a French settlement between Spanish holdings in Texas and Florida. La Salle's flotilla consisted of four ships laden with the necessary men and provisions for the French to stake their claim. The expedition ended in death, misery and failure; the Gulf of Mexico remained Spanish waters.

\*\*In 1995 Texas Historical Commission archeologists discovered La Salle's ship the Belle in Matagorda Bay. Artifacts from this famous ship can be viewed at the Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History and the Texas Maritime Museum in Rockport.

## The Pass: A Route to Settlement



The shallow, narrow pass that connects the Gulf of Mexico to inland waterways was a necessary feature to get goods and people onto the isolated central Texas coast. But the constant movement of this natural channel often led to maritime disasters, especially when combined with rough seas. An 1834 account describes such a journey:

“We arrived at the pass, which we found stormy and bad. Notwithstanding the dangers of trying to cross the bar, the captain announced his determination to enter at any hazard. As our little schooner reached the bar, a rough sea broke on her, and a heavy swell threw her from the channel and she became unmanageable .... Another heavy sea struck her ... [lifting] the vessel into shallow water, where she was permanently fixed.” John Linn

Three centuries of exploration proved the importance of the pass, resulting in more accurate charts, but failed to harness or tame this important waterway.

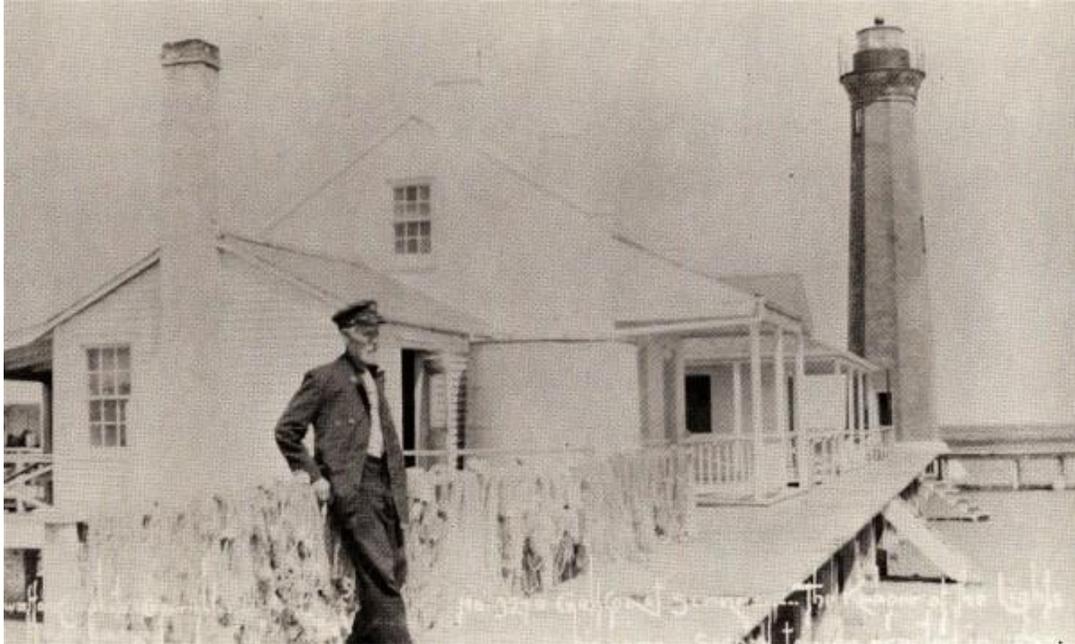


## ARANSAS PASS GETS A LIGHT HOUSE

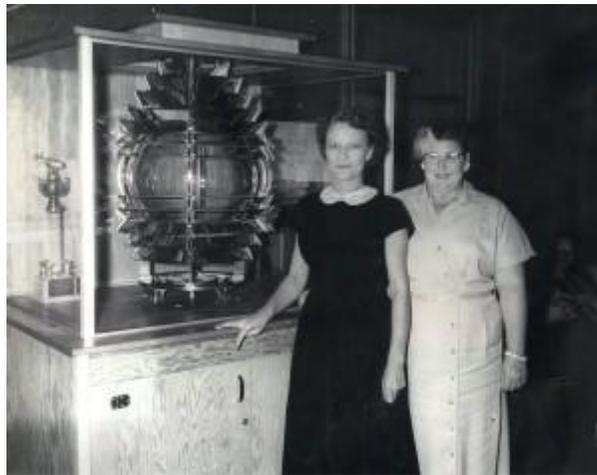


After much discussion and some political maneuverings a lighthouse for Aransas Pass was approved in 1853. The United States Government permitted the purchase of 25 acres from the state of Texas for \$31.25.

Construction began February 16, 1856 and the job was finished by July 26 of the same year. Some interesting bureaucratic bungling followed; it was not until July 15, 1857 that the lens was installed and the station showed its light to the world.



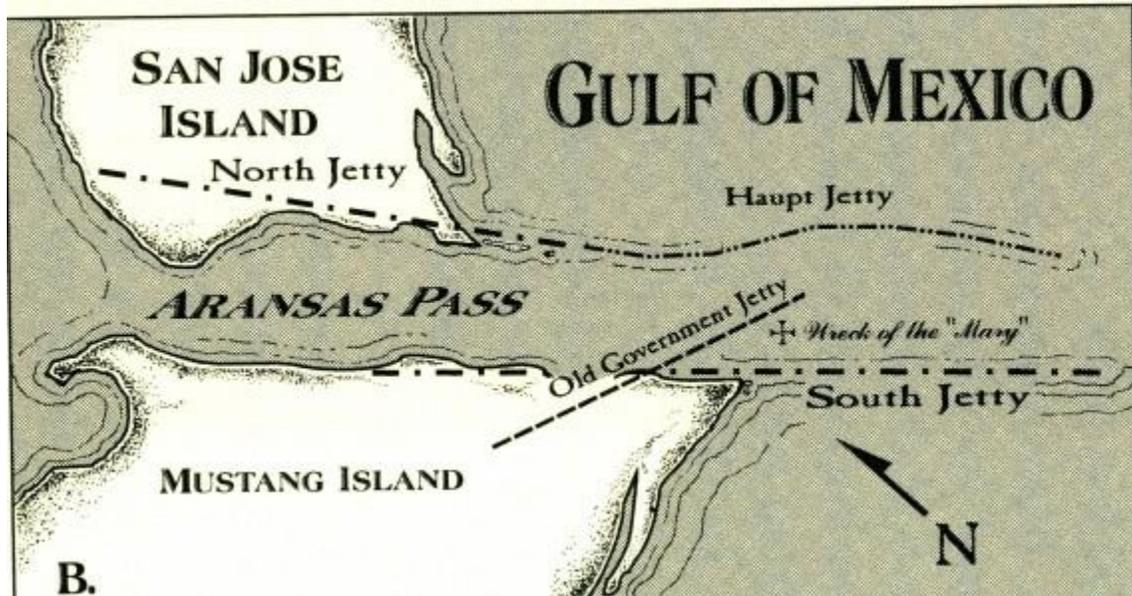
## **FOURTH ORDER FRESNEL LENS**



This lens was the heart of the Aransas Pass Light station from 1865 until it was de-commissioned in 1954. This is the second lens to light the Aransas Pass tower. It was installed immediately after the end of the War Between the States.

The first lens was either destroyed or removed and buried by Confederate troops. They were ordered to disable the tower so it could not be used by the invading Yankees.

That lens has never been found.



## **THE PASS MUST BE CAUGHT**

With the coming of the lighthouse it became even more apparent that the channel must be tamed. The first attempt was made by a group of business people from Rockport. They raised \$10,000 to build a 600' long rock revetment along the south shore of the pass. A survey by the Army Engineers two years later showed "no trace" of the rock wall. The pass had rolled right over it.

## **THE U.S. GOVERNMENT TRIES ITS HAND**

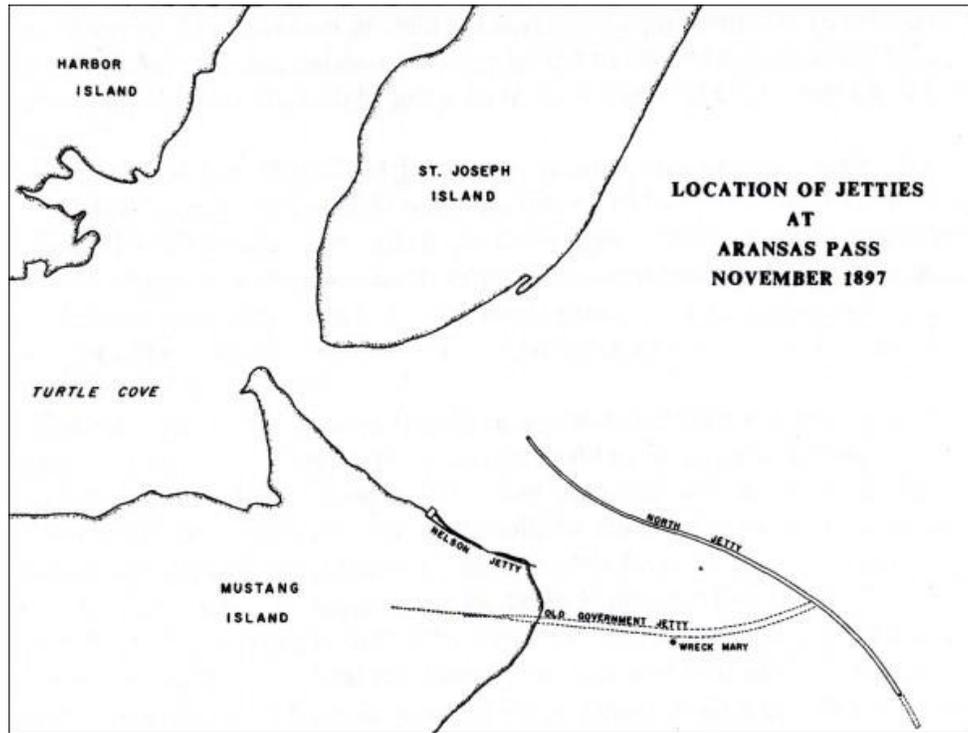
The next chance to catch the migrating channel was led by Major Mansfield of the Army Engineers. The job took five years starting in 1880 and ending in 1885.

A 5500' long jetty was built of a brush "mattress" covered with stone. It started on Mustang Is. and ran to the wreck of the Mary, a steamer that sank in the pass 10 years earlier. From there it turned sharply to the north. Stone rip-rap was placed along an area of Mustang Is. to help prevent the shoreline from eroding away.

This one, known as the "Mansfield" or "Old Government" jetty, greatly improved the situation by slowing the migration to 70' per year. They were now on the right track.

Immediately after finishing the Mansfield jetty the Army concluded that a second one on the San Jose (north) side of the channel was necessary to complete the job. But the city of Galveston ended those hopes by successfully lobbying to have all available funds spent on improving their pass.

## THE ARANSAS PASS HARBOR COMPANY



Largely because Galveston received all the available money for channel improvements, The Aransas Pass Harbor Company, a private group, sought and won congressional approval to tame the pass in 1890.

The state of Texas added that if they delivered a 20' deep channel by 1899 the company could buy all the land they needed to build a major seaport and town next to the pass for \$2.00 per acre. The match between man and the channel went into round three.

The company went to work and built two jetties, one from Mustang Island called the Nelson Jetty, and one from San Jose called the Haupt jetty.

## THE HAUPT JETTY: A GRAND IDEA THAT DIDN'T WORK

The Aransas Pass Harbor Company hired Lewis Haupt, a professor from Philadelphia, and his associate H.C. Ripley of Galveston. They called their creation a "Reaction Breakwater" and claimed it would "produce reactions similar to those of concavities in streams" and that this single jetty, unattached to land, would if built to 3750' produce a channel 15' deep; if extended to 6,200' it would generate a depth of 20'. They began the job in August 1895 and declared it finished in September 1896.

It did not work.



Now the company was nearly broke and running out of time. They decided to make one last go-for-broke effort. They hired a company to use 23,350 pounds of dynamite to blow out the channel to the needed 20'. This desperate attempt failed but it must have made a mighty sound. (Regional historian John Guthrie Ford calls this the "Big Bang")

The Aransas Pass Harbor Company was broke. The pass had won again.

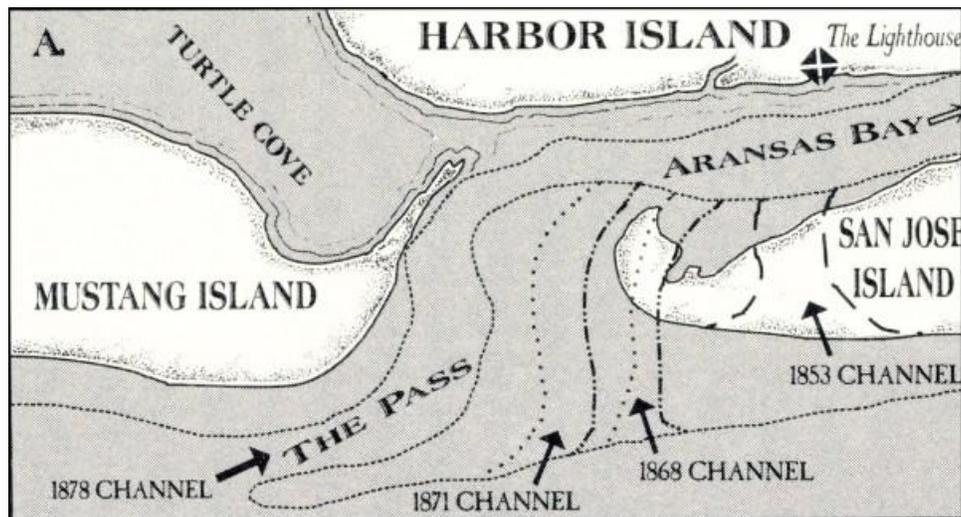
## THE GOVERNMENT TAKES OVER THE FIGHT

Thomas Benton Wheeler, secretary of the failed Aransas Pass Harbor Company, still believed the job could be done. He went to Washington D.C. to convince Congress and the Army that they should once again take on the struggle to control the channel. ‘We have done the hard part’, he reasoned, ‘now you can come in and just finish it up.’ After much political wrestling and shifting, the U.S. government agreed to take on the job.

In reality, the Harbor Company had left behind a big mess and the situation was now much tougher than before their failed attempts. The Army Engineers faced the task of cleaning up two badly deteriorated south jetties and either fixing the questionable Haupt jetty or demolishing it and starting over from scratch.

Professor Haupt must have been a good talker, for he convinced the Army Engineers that the construction had been improperly done but could easily be fixed, thus saving money (and rescuing the Professor’s reputation). The Army Engineers bit and set about to repair the botched job.

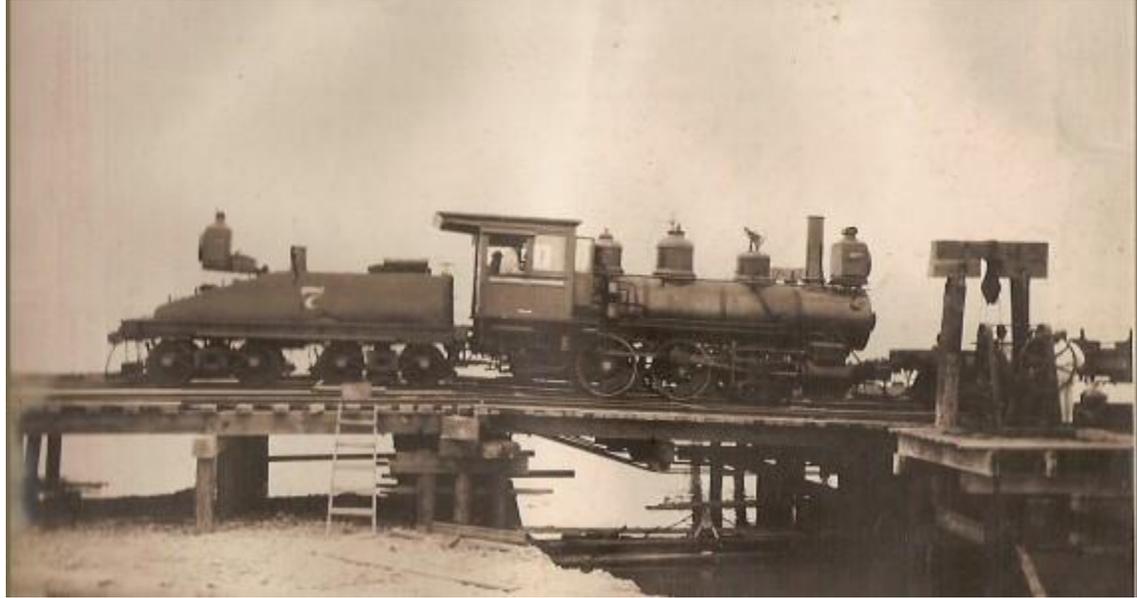
They quickly discovered that mere repairs would not solve the problem. Instead, they extended the odd, free standing jetty to join with the shore line of San Jose Island like a normal jetty. Then they addressed building a brand new south jetty from the Mustang Island shore.



Only the U.S. Army was big enough to do this one. And they did. In 1910 the job was initially finished and the pass was at last open.



Our town, Tarpon, took the name Port Aransas and the area we now call Harbor Island became the first major seaport for the area. There was a week long celebration when the first ocean going ship, the Brinkburn, was docked.



## **THE LITTLE TRAIN THAT COULD**

Building a jetty is a huge undertaking and the folks who did it had to think big. The first task was to lay a railroad line out into the sea. This required bringing an 0-6-0 steam locomotive, a steam pile driver and a steam crane mounted on flat cars to the island.

The heavy equipment was delivered to Morris & Cummings Cut on the San Antonio & Aransas Pass line, then loaded onto specially made barges with train tracks on them, transported to the Mustang Island work site and unloaded.

Thousands of trees made into pilings and tons of steel rails were brought over and the building of the railroad to nowhere began. When the rail line was finished flat car loads of rocks were dumped into the sea beginning at the farthest end of the line, a mile from shore. The work continued until the jetty finally connected with the shore. Then everything was loaded up and hauled away. Everything, that is, but the bell from the engine; it is now on display at the museum.