

Los Archivos Españoles, *Abiertos!*

Bexar County Spanish Archives keep Texas history alive / By Staci Semrad

Every chance he gets , Bexar County Clerk Gerry Rickhoff visits the county's new historical archives center, sits at a small table on the far side of the room, and reads by a window overlooking Plaza de las Islas (Main Plaza) and San Fernando Cathedral.

The brittle pages of Texas history soon immerse him in the chaos of battles between settlers and Indians, fury over land rights, passionate marital issues, and murders on the frontier.

On this particular day, he looks up, glances out at modern life on the plaza where considerable history has taken place, and ponders the parallels between the past and present.

“Humans haven't changed since the Greeks and the Romans,” he concluded.

And that, he said, in addition to the fascinating content of these documents he has spent 12 years preserving, is why they remain relevant today.

“You can find a lot about who we are by learning about where we've been,” Rickhoff said.

The Bexar County Spanish Archives, with records from the 18th and 19th centuries, opened in March, 2006 and has become a valuable resource for people seeking a better understanding of Texas life in its early days. The facility contains more than 20,000 books and documents, including:

- original Spanish and Mexican land grants;
- wills and estates;
- decrees;
- maps;
- mission records;
- cattle brands;
- jail records;
- voting records, including those from the first elections of the Republic of Texas;
- minutes from the first commissioners court meetings; and
- marriage licenses and other records of many of the state's founding families.



Many of the center's documents are gems, but its most valuable monetarily is a marriage contract with the father of Ursula Beramendi, signed by James Bowie in 1831. In this original document, Bowie promised to pay her father 15,000 pesos if the marriage with her didn't last at least two years. Also distinguishing the collection is its predominantly old-style Spanish language material from Spanish rule in the 18th century, all of which has been translated into modern English. Each document reveals information about life as it was centuries ago and the stories of a diverse people, Rickhoff said.

From dust to shine

In the weeks after Rickhoff was elected county clerk in 1994, he surveyed county clerk office space and discovered these historical documents and government records deteriorating in unsecured storage closets.

"I started reading the translations myself and realized their power and that they predate this country," Rickhoff said.

Limited space at the courthouse had hindered efforts to index, restore and preserve the documents for public use. Rickhoff knew immediately a secure facility was needed to house the archives and provide a place for restoration, digital imaging and public viewing. A few years later, while looking for such a home for the documents, he got the idea to build the new facility.

"There's very much a sense of history in our community that drove it," he said, noting people's interests in genealogical and other research purposes. "The will of the community wanted this done." The timing was right to take action as new technology, such as digital imaging and the Internet, was improving preservation processes and viewing capabilities.

He pursued the idea with a team of people from various disciplines, including the county judge and commissioners and the Infrastructure Services staff.

"The county family kind of came together," he said.

After securing funding through the \$5 records management fee that counties collect for the initial filing of each document, he worked with a local architecture firm to design the \$700,000 center. Construction began in 2004.

The grand opening ceremony last spring was attended by representatives from the Native American tribes of Bexar County and an official delegation from the Canary Islands, from where early San Antonio settlers came in 1731 at the invitation of the Spanish government. Several other people with historical interests also attended, including Dr. Felix D. Almaraz Jr., The Peter T. Flawn Distinguished Professor of Borderlands History at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

They toured the facility, which has a climate-, lighting- and humidity- controlled vault, fireproof file cabinets, document-preservation work stations, and a public viewing area with computers and a film reading station. The documents are digitally imaged, with the end goal of making the entire collection viewable on the Internet by researchers and historians around the world.

“I’m quite familiar with the old environment, when (the documents) were stored away in some back corner in some back file,” Dr. Almaraz said. “...When I went on the tour, I thought, ‘My! This is a jewel of Bexar County government.’”

While researching in the archives from 1976 to 1990, he worked at a little table in the county clerk’s office, read under an extra powerful magnifying glass and made frequent trips to the bathroom to clean the dust off of his hands, he said.

The documents have since been cleaned and restored, and some books that were once falling apart have been rebound, he said. While functional and historically important, the center is also aesthetically pleasing with the style of old Spanish Texas woven into the decor. Hardwood exhibit cases and built-in bookshelves showcase early documents and visiting artifacts. The furnishings and fixtures also reflect the region, with wooden floors of Texas oak and a sleek table of Texas granite. On the walls hang replicas of historical maps of the area.

“When you come into that room, you know you’re in a special place that was designed for a specific purpose,” Rickhoff said. “It dignifies the historians and dignifies the records.”

The center is dedicated to E.Z. Mull, Rickhoff’s former chief deputy of operations, who died in 2005 after serving in the county clerk’s office for 12 years. Mull was a key player on the committee that made the center a reality.

Last year, Rickhoff and his team earned a Best Practices Award from the Texas Association of Counties. While proud of the award, Rickhoff considers his efforts a mere fulfillment of his job duties. County clerks, when sworn in, promise to “preserve, protect and defend” public records, Rickhoff said.

“They’re not just words to us. We take those literally,” he said. Archivist Alfred Rodriguez manages the facility for Bexar County and has seen the number of daily visitors and information requests double since the facility opened. Visitors may come on either an appointment or walk-in basis to view the documents.

Historians and genealogists are the center’s most frequent guests, he said.

Glen Ely, who has years of experience creating Texas history documentaries, has been finishing his Ph.D. dissertation at Texas Christian University. His focus is 19th century West Texas history. “Having worked at county clerks’ offices across the entire state over the last 25 years, I



can tell you without reservation that the Bexar archives are the finest, bar none – first class and first rate,” he said. “... No other county can boast so vast a treasure trove of archival history.”

Rudi Rodriguez, a member of the board of the Texas Historical Foundation, appreciates the center’s vast information on the history of Tejanos – descendants of the first Spanish, Mexican and indigenous families on the Texas frontier. He is president and founder of Texas Tejano.com, a private company whose mission is to educate the general public about Tejano people from 1690 through the late 1800s.

“Very little has been known or written about the role Tejanos played in the history and development of the state,” he said. “This new archive clearly attests to the record and role of Tejanos at the dawn of Texas.”

Though impressive, the Bexar County Spanish Archives are not comprehensive. They represent only half of the known documents and records once belonging to the county. The other half – primarily letters predating the Republic of Texas – resides at the University of Texas at Austin. For seven years, the university and the Bexar County clerk have been in a dispute over possession of these documents, a disagreement stemming from their original transfer to UT in 1899. Getting them back from Austin and rejoining them with the collection in San Antonio is Rickhoff’s next objective.

“This is the work I love to do,” he said. “This is the stuff that makes me get up in the morning.