



PRESERVATION PARTNERSHIP

Gillespie County Helps Save Historic Country Schools

Gillespie County Commissioner Donnie Schuch at the original Cherry Mountain School, which dates to 1883. The commissioner's grandfather attended classes here. His father and sister attended Cherry Mountain's larger "new" school, which opened in 1929. (Photo by Liz Carmack)

Texas Hill Country ranch land thick with mesquites, bluestem grass and purple salvia isn't an unusual sight. But on this particular patch in western Gillespie County, a closer look at the bucolic scene reveals a pitcher's mound and home plate.

Two dozen paces away, the 1916 Pecan Creek School sits on freshly mown grounds. For 39 years, classes met in this one-room limestone schoolhouse, and students played baseball during recess. But when the diamond became private property more than four decades ago, the trees and wildflowers took over.

Pecan Creek School might have suffered a similar fate if it weren't for a unique public-private partnership. Gillespie County owns the school facilities, as well as the four and a half acres they occupy, and leases them to

the Pecan Creek Community, which looks after the property.

The group of about 50 former students and relatives gathers monthly for socializing over Texas 42 — a domino game — in the old school house. They also host an annual barbecue fundraiser in the adjacent school pavilion, now enclosed and air conditioned.

Partnerships like this one across the county have helped preserve 12 historic schools in all. The cooperation protects and

promotes a slice of Texas Hill Country history that illustrates the importance of education to the German immigrants who settled here.

"It's part of our responsibility as county officials to protect our local heritage. We may be one of the only counties that have gone to these

lengths to preserve our country schools," said Gillespie County Commissioner Donnie Schuch. "Once the schools are gone that history is lost."



Calvin Friedrich and his sister Sandra on Jenny the mule, their ride to school, in front of the Pecan Creek School in the late 1950s. (Photo courtesy Sandra Kammlah)

Schools Reflect German Roots

German immigrants settled this area and established Fredericksburg in 1846. Keen on education, within a year they erected an octagonal building in the center of town that served as the community's first school and church. A replica, the Vereins Kirche (Society's Church), now sits in the town's market square.

As the population grew and Gillespie County formed, land owners donated property around the county for schools, and by the early 20th century, local children attended 44 rural schools scattered across the countryside. Many of these — such as Pecan Creek, White Oak, Meusebach and Luckenbach — were named for natural landmarks and settlers.

Each school served the families of a close-knit community. Students traveled on foot or by hoof, sometimes many miles, to attend.

"The first year I went, I rode a donkey with my brother," recalled Sandra Kammlah, who attended Pecan Creek School from the first through fourth grades during the early 1950s. "The next year he rode a horse. We'd just let them loose in the school yard. On days when it rained, our dad would pick up dry clothing at home and bring it to us so we could change."

Schools such as Pecan Creek hosted springtime and Christmas celebrations. Students staged plays; families brought covered dishes and the men cooked goat, mutton and beef on the school's barbecue pit.

Teachers often boarded with a local family and taught multiple grades in one room. "You would hear other classes being conducted," said Helen Birck, who attended Cherry Spring School for the fifth through ninth grades in the late 1950s and early 1960s. "When we went to Fredericksburg schools, I remember them saying 'Why are those country school kids so smart?'. It was because we got the same lessons over and over."

While instruction was in English, students often spoke both German and English, except during WWII when German was forbidden.

Hellen Feller shows visitors to the Pecan Creek School teaching tools used during the 1950s and '60s. (Photo by Liz Carmack)

German-to-English translations cover the chalk boards of the White Oak School, which is now on the Pioneer Museum grounds in Fredericksburg. The school originally served a community 20 miles southwest of town.

A board at the back of the school's classroom reads: "Arbeit macht das leben süß. Faulheit schwächt die glieder," which translates to: "Work makes life sweet. Laziness weakens the limbs."

The 1920s whitewashed building with board-and-batten siding was the community's second school. The first opened in 1890, and the teacher earned \$30 a month. The school taught grades one through eight before it closed in 1950.

Today, as visitors walk through its screen door, the recorded voice of former student Charles Feller describes school life in the 1940s. Feller purchased the school to save it from years of neglect and to preserve and share its history.

At 83, Feller's childhood memories remain vivid. He pointed to a tiny sliver of a closet to the right of the teacher's desk. "That had the school's library," Feller said. "Books were traded with other schools to expand on any one school's reading catalog."

In 1949, the Gilmer-Aikin Law kicked off consolidation of most rural schools in Texas. As a result, many of the county's country schools were shuttered and sat empty for decades as they became the property of the local school district. In some instances, school ownership reverted to the families of those who had donated the land upon which they were built.



As the decades passed, many of the county's rural schools were sold, destroyed or otherwise succumbed to the elements.

County-Community Partnership

But in the 1950s, community "clubs" organized in some areas to maintain their rural school properties. The buildings took on new life as community centers where far-flung neighbors could gather to socialize.

"I can remember being a little boy going to club night every first Friday of the month," Schuch said of the annual Cherry Mountain School celebrations. Schuch grew up in the Cherry Mountain Community, eight miles west of Fredericksburg, and his grandfather, father and sister all attended the school. "I remember Coke, Iron Brew soda and Nehi Red in tubs of block ice. When we were kids, we were eager to get together and play tag, volleyball and baseball."

But not all schools were protected this way. In the 1990s, growing concern among residents about the remaining schools' fates spurred them to form the Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools. "We worked through (state) legislation and worked with the county so we could hold onto these properties," said Friends president Carol Wahrmond Birmingham.

The group successfully championed a constitutional amendment, which Texas voters approved, that allows school districts to transfer "certain



Carol Wahmund Birmingham (left), president of the Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools, and Helen Birck (right) at the Cherry Spring School, which held classes from 1885-1962. Gillespie County owns Cherry Spring School and 11 other country schools and leases them to community groups. Birck attended Cherry Spring, as did her father. (Photo by Liz Carmack)

surplus district property to a municipality, county or nonprofit organization in order to preserve the property.”

“If it hadn’t been for the Friends being established and the county stepping in to take on the properties, we might not have any schools left,” Birmingham said.

“The best thing we have going for us is cooperation,” Feller said.

The county owns 12 schools in the Friend’s group that are leased to their community groups: Wrede School, Meusbach Creek School, Luckenbach School, Lower South Grape Creek School, Williams Creek (Albert) School, Nebgen School, Rheingold School, Cave Creek School, Willow City School, Crabapple School, Pecan Creek School and Cherry Spring School.

Another three schools — Cherry Mountain, Grapetown and Junction — are owned and preserved by their local community groups.

Many schools can be rented for private parties such as weddings, reunions, birthday celebrations and other gatherings.

Hotel occupancy tax (HOT) grants made available by Gillespie County and the City of Fredericksburg to

eligible applicants have also helped community groups pay for much-needed preservation work on the historic schools, including restoration of roofs, patching original German fachwerk construction and repairing building foundations, Schuch said.

Preservation Boosts Heritage Tourism

The unique history and culture of Fredericksburg and Gillespie County, along with its museums, historic buildings, wineries and more have made this area a popular destination, attracting new residents and tourists.

The county’s population has grown by about 26 percent since 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2016, it was estimated at 26,521.

Visitors to Fredericksburg have also increased over the last decade, based on hotel occupancy tax receipts, said Amanda Koone, director of communications with the



German immigrants who settled Gillespie County made education a priority. A chalk board inscription in the 1920s White Oak School, now on the Pioneer Museum grounds in Fredericksburg, reads, “Work makes life sweet. Laziness weakens the limbs.” The school originally served a community 20 miles southwest of town. (Photo by Liz Carmack)

Fredericksburg Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The county’s rural schools provide another reason for tourists to visit. In 2016, the 12 schools that are part of the Friends group alone logged more than 10,700 visitors.

Schools that participate in the county-community partnerships are required to invite the public to at least one open house annually. But many also hold fundraiser barbecues and other events at which the public is welcome.

Former students are on hand during these events to give tours and answer questions as visitors learn that a globe was once considered high-tech and students had to pump drinking water from a cistern.

“When people come here you see the look of on their faces — the questions asked by the kids,” Kammlah said. “It’s important to share this because young people just don’t realize how education was back then.”

Preserving the schools is part of a bigger goal, Schuch said. “It’s not just about the schools; it’s preserving our heritage.”

The county’s economy benefits as a result.

“Our county officials are very cognizant of the importance of heritage tourism and are very interested in preserving these historic structures,” said Dr. Jim Lindley, a retired physician and former volunteer executive director of the Pioneer Museum. “Agriculture is driving things, but tourism has become important to our economic health. We are very blessed to have county officials who understand that.” ★

TOUR THE SCHOOLS

The Gillespie County Country Schools Driving Trail features four driving routes to 17 historic schools. Find a map, school histories, information about school open houses and more at www.historicschools.org.