

A Brief History of Aquarena

Prehistoric and Historic Background of San Marcos Springs

The area surrounding the San Marcos Springs has been inhabited during every known period of human habitation in Central Texas, from Paleo-Indian through Historic. The springs and rich assortment of aquatic and terrestrial plant and animal life that flourish at the springs were and continue to be a strong attraction to people.

Paleo-Indian artifacts have been recovered in excavations in and around the headwaters of the San Marcos springs and from underwater excavations in Spring Lake conducted by *Dr. Joel Shiner*. Shiner proposed that Paleo-Indian groups were semi sedentary and lived for long periods of time at the springs. Many artifacts that have been recovered during this period were from disturbed deposits. Because Paleo-Indian sites are few and their geological content is often mixed, this period is poorly understood within Texas. The artifacts from this period date back over 12,000 years ago. (Bousman and Nickels, 2003)

Archaic Occupation

The period between 7,000 B.C.-A.D. 800 is known as the archaic period. Surveys and excavations along the San Marcos River, Blanco River, Sink creek and Purgatory creek reveal abundant occupations. Projectile points become more refined, cemeteries appear and hunting shifts from deer to bison.

Proto-Historic Period

The period between the earliest European contact and permanent settlement is called the Protohistoric period.

During the 1500's Spanish explorers reached the Texas coast and began expeditions into Central Texas. The first to reach the coast was *Cabeza de Vaca*, followed by Coronado and De Soto. Only a small number of De Soto's expedition may have actually reached Central Texas. It was not until the late 1600's that Spanish explorers began to travel extensively through Central Texas establishing the Camino Real (King's Road).

Alonso de Leon's expedition was the first recorded crossing of the San Marcos River in 1690.

As these expeditions increased, direct and indirect contact with Europeans had a dramatic and negative affect on Native American lives through disease, internal turmoil and a dramatic decline in population.

Historic Period

Spanish Settlement in Central Texas first occurred in San Antonio with the establishment of the Alamo. The first Spanish settlement in San Marcos wasn't until 1755. Historic records indicate there were several missions in the San Marcos area for the *Tonkawa* Indians. However the exact location is not known.

The mission in San Marcos was eventually abandoned for numerous reasons, including drought, immoral behavior by soldiers, unhealthy conditions and Apache attacks.

Spanish visitors continued to travel through the area whose letters described "Having halted near the head of the San Marcos River...I have seen with wonder that it owes its origin to a huge rocky bluff, which emits from an ill-proportioned mount such a volume of water that it (at) once becomes a river...).

The first permanent Spanish settlement near San Marcos was along the San Marcos River downstream, near Westerfield Crossing, named San Marcos de Neve, founded April 1, 1808. The small village was abandoned in 1812 due to Tonkawa and Comanche Indian harassment and severe flooding.

Anglo Settlement

Following the Mexican and Texan revolutions a series of forts were constructed within Texas to provide protection to settlers in the 'Northern and Western' frontier. In 1840, Post San Marcos was erected at the headwaters of the San Marcos River to facilitate the building of a more direct road between San Antonio and Austin. Again the exact location of the fort has never been determined and it was disbanded by 1841.

The Settling of San Marcos

In 1831, *Juan Veramendi*, a native of San Antonio received a land grant of two leagues of land in the area that is now San Marcos. In 1845, *General Edward Burleson* and Dr. *Eli Merriman* bought a portion of that land. The portion that Burleson acquired included the headwaters and springs of the San Marcos River. In 1846 Burleson joined with William Lindsey and Dr. Eli Merriman to found the town of San Marcos.

The town was officially established in 1851. From the time that Burleson purchased the land around the headwaters and the springs became associated with him.

Edward Burleson

Edward Burleson, born in North Carolina, was a professional soldier, Indian fighter and an archrival of *Sam Houston*. He originally moved to Texas as part of Stephen F. Austin's second colony in Bastrop County.

During the Texas Revolution Burleson was commissioned as Commander in Chief, a position he later relinquished to Sam Houston. Ironically, at the Battle of San Jacinto, while Houston lay sick in his tent, Burleson led the command leading to the surrender of *General Santa Anna*. Burleson spent the years following Texas Independence fighting Indians, Mexicans and eventually settling in San Marcos. In 1846 he joined with William Lindsey and Dr. Eli Merriman to found the town of San Marcos. The town was officially established in 1851. In 1848 Burleson built a cabin on the hillside overlooking the headwaters of the San Marcos River.

He also built the first schoolhouse in San Marcos and the first dam across the San Marcos River.

That dam was built to run a gristmill located where the "Salt Grass Restaurant" is at the end of Spring Lake.

Burleson farmed the land that we now call the Pecan Grove and had grazing animals. He also had slaves. Though not considered a politician, Burleson was elected Vice President of the Republic of Texas, and later a representative and Senator for the State of Texas. On December 26, 1851, General Edward Burleson died from pneumonia in Austin. He was serving as senator and had been elected President pro tem at the time. He was buried in the Masonic Cemetery in Austin, which was later purchased by the state in his honor in 1854 making him the first person buried at the State Cemetery.

After Burleson's death his estate was passed down to relatives and eventually sold in 1866 to L. M. McGhee. It was sold several more times until it was sold in 1900 to *Edward L. Green*, which is the name of the street than runs behind the original property. It doesn't appear that Green ever lived in on the property and the original cabin finally collapsed in 1917 due to heavy rains.

A. B. Rogers

In 1896 the San Marcos population was three thousand people. There were two banks, a waterworks and three weekly papers. *A.B. Rogers* came (to San Marcos) in 1897 and established himself as a mortician and opened a furniture store on the corner of Hopkins and Austin Streets (now LBJ). He purchased Rio Vista and started a park and playground there. Rogers, an entrepreneur at heart, once said, "I've been buying up water property on this San Marcos River, Spring Lake and Rio Vista, for years and hanging onto it because some day it is going to be really worth money. He purchased the land around the headwaters in 1926 and built the Spring Lake Hotel, which opened to a crowd in 1929. During this same time period the buildings of the old Mill tract changed hands several times from A.B. Rogers to the Texas Public Utilities Company to the Texas Power & Light Corporation. In 1939 it was transferred to the Lower Colorado River Authority.

Aquarena Springs

In 1949, **Paul Rogers** bought the land from his parents for \$20,000. He rigged a paddle boat with a glass bottom and began to take family and friends out to see the bubbling springs, plants and animals that thrived in the clear waters of Spring Lake. Encouraged by their enthusiasm he went on to develop Aquarena Springs theme park using glass bottom boats as its main attraction. Rogers continued to add buildings and attractions to the park including a submarine theatre, sky ride, space needle, pioneer village, restaurant and hillside trails. Aquarena Springs became a favorite tourist destination throughout the 1960's, 70's and 80's. It was most well known for a swimming pig named 'Ralph' who began each underwater show by diving into the lake to drink from a milk bottle that a trainer held. Once the baby pigs were weaned they wouldn't jump in the water and had to be replaced with a new baby "**Ralph.**"

In 1958 Paul Rogers bought the dam from LCRA then sold it to the Southland Ice Company. The Ice factory manufactured ice until 1976 when it finally stopped production due to the introduction of electric refrigerators. In 1977 the Ice factory was sold back to Aquarena Springs and five years later it was opened as a restaurant. Paul Rogers died in 1965.

In 1985 the Paul J. Rogers Trust sold Aquarena Springs to Baugh/Moore I Joint Venture for \$2,631,168.90. In 1994, Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University-San Marcos) purchased the land for an undisclosed sum. Today Texas State University-San Marcos has converted the area to an environmental education center under the direction of the River Systems Institute. "The River Systems Institute is dedicated to studying, preserving and interpreting the remarkable aquatic system that surrounds it" **Andy Sansom**, Director of the Institute explains, and to "extend that attention and concern to the freshwater systems across the state, the nation and the world."

The hotel was remodeled and reopened as the Texas Rivers Center on April 27, 2006. At the grand opening, Texas State University-San Marcos President Denise Trauth announced the deposit of 33,108 acre-feet of its San Marcos River water rights into the Texas Water Trust in perpetuity for environmental flows. Speaking of the partnership between Texas State University-San Marcos, Texas Parks & Wildlife and the National Park Service, Trauth described the Texas Rivers Center as "a kind of rivers incubator, with scholars, researchers and biologists all working together...for the permanent protection...of one of the largest springs in the United State and a state-of-the-art environmental education program for rivers and springs."

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PAUL ROGERS

A.B. ROGERS

RALPH

TONKAWA

JOEL SHINER

ED BURLESON

ANDY SANSOM

EDWARD L.

GREEN

JUAN
VERANMENDI

ALONZO DE
LEON

ELI MERRIMAN

STEPHEN F.

AUSTON

SAM HOUSTON

CABEZA DE

VACA