

Comal Settlement

CONTEXT

Comal, Texas (now an annexed portion of Schertz, Texas) sits amidst land through which traverses the El Camino Real de los Tejas Historic National Trail System (AKA: “Kings Highway”) as well as the historic “Post Road” (now FM 482) built in 1915 (Attachment #1). The village was first mentioned in the National Catholic Directory in 1848 (**Reference: “History of Comal, Texas, Notes by Monica Kneuper Fuhrman, preface page by historian Everett Fey**). Comal’s first inhabitants were also among the first founders of New Braunfels, Texas (1845) (**Reference: Fey, Everett, “*New Braunfels, The First Founders*”, Eakin Press, Austin, Texas**). The Comal settlers came to discover that although a beautiful setting, New Braunfels was not the place where a farmer could easily make a living. Thus, the German immigrant farmers moved from the center of town to nearby wilderness areas and began the arduous task of clearing the land for farming operations (**Ferhenbach, T.R., LONE STAR, A History of Texas and Texans, p. 294**). The Comal settlers decided to begin farming operations on land seven miles southwest of New Braunfels amidst land intersected by the Comal Creek and seven and eight mile creeks. By 1860 (**per U.S. Census Record data for Comal County, Texas**), these Comal settler families (Schwab, Friesenhahn, Wenzel, Fey, Schaefer, Kneupper etc.) had established the farms that still today remain productive working farms and are still in the ownership of descendants of these first settlers. Throughout the 20th Century, Comal remained a small agricultural village. Cotton farming provided the major cash crop. A community cooperative cotton gin (still standing) and corn shelling plant owned by Jacob Friesenhahn served all neighboring farmers throughout the area. The sharing of resources was the rule for life in the village. Besides the cotton gin and corn shelling operations, a local grocery was established in 1908 by Louis Kneupper and stayed in operation until June 1973. The store was the center of social gatherings on Friday and Saturday evenings as families gathered to play cards and share conversation while the children played in the field next to the store. Comal’s blacksmith shop was originally established by the Wenzel family but later

(1915) taken over by Bruno Schwab, Sr. The first Comal school was a one room school house built in 1868, later converted to a four room building where for a period Catholic nuns provided instruction for all local children regardless of religious faith or affiliation. Still standing near the center of the village area are several architectural structures (Saint Joseph's Chapel (1905), cotton gin (1900), blacksmith shop (pre-1900), Kneupper's general store (1908), schuetzenverein (shooting range), and Danville school house (Attachment #2). Education and religious commitment among the first settlers (both Catholic and Protestant) was a first priority and many of the Comal family patriarchs were instrumental leaders in forming the first school and church institutions in Comal as well as in New Braunfels.

OVERVIEW

Comal, Texas was once known by names such as Wenzel (in tribute to a founding family), "Eight-Miles" and "Seven Miles Creek" (creek beds that run through the community and are situated seven to eight miles from New Braunfels, Texas). The families that settled the community were first generation immigrants from Germany who arrived aboard the first group of ships carrying prospective immigrant settlers to Texas. The names of a few of these immigrant families dot the landscape of Comal in the manner of streets within the community that bear their names (i.e., Friesenhahn Lane, Hubertus Road, and Schwab Road). These named families and several others built Comal into a thriving and prosperous farming community that survived against difficult odds due to floods, draughts, and pestilence that from time to time struck the town. Below are abbreviated histories of but a few of the families that made Comal, Texas such a storied and historic place.

On November 20, 1845, the Friesenhahn family arrived in the Port of Galveston (Texas). The father, Anton, had died aboard ship during the voyage (**Reference: Notes of shipmate Rev. Whalen**) leaving Anna Maria, the mother, a widow with five children (**Reference: Ship list for Brig Strabo as reported in "The Fey Family 1587-1989", by Everett Fey, p. 51**). Anna Maria married Christoph Syring and according to the 1850 and 1860 U. S. Census, was living in Comal County (outside the New Braunfels, Texas

area – Comal) with her children. Anna Maria passed acreage to her sons. Eventually Roman Friesenhahn undertook operations of the homestead farm, the cotton gin, corn sheller and the seed house. The cotton gin closed sometime around 1940 and the corn sheller operation ended in 1959. The remnants of the cotton gin still stand on the Roman Friesenhahn family farm off Old Nacogdoches Road near FM 482 (Attachment #2). Roman Friesenhahn was a community (rural school district board member)(**Reference: Notes prepared by Comal resident Sharlene Fey, dated 10/19/2010**) and a church leader. The homes of Roman and his son Mark remain on the family property as they were built over 100 years ago and are currently lived in by Friesenhahn family members. Mark Friesenhahn has undertaken a major restoration of the Ferdinand Friesenhahn homestead to bring it to its original condition when built in 1911. Fifth generation Friesenhahns now farm 200 acres of Anna Syring’s original land.

The Peter Ignaz Wenzel family farm was a prominent piece of Comal landscape. Ignatz purchased 100 acres of land in the Rodriguez Survey #99 (Comal) from William Bracken in 1851 (**Comal Co. Deed Records, Vol. D, pp. 70-71**). Peter Wenzel was an educated man and had been a teacher in his native Germany. The community’s need for a school prompted Wenzel to sell two acres of land to the Bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio for the specific purpose of building a school(**Reference: “St. Joseph’s Chapel, Comal, Texas” by Rev. Samuel Heitkamp, New Braunfels, Texas, p. 1**). The one room school (known as Wenzel School) opened December 1, 1868. Peter Ignaz Wenzel died February 2, 1884. In 1905, Saint Joseph Chapel was constructed on the original two acre tract of land donated by the Wenzel family. The Chapel still stands at that location (Attachment #2). The foundation stones of the 1881-1885 school building can still be seen at the property site next to Saint Joseph’s Chapel. The Chapel has been designated as a “Historical Landmark” by the City of Schertz, Texas.

The Carl Schaefer family migrated to Texas from Germany in the winter of 1844 aboard one of the first three ships to arrive with German emigrants wanting to settle in south central Texas. The Schaefer family was a founding family of New Braunfels, Texas and son Philipp was among the first settlers in Comal, Texas. In 1870, Philipp built the

homestead that still stands on the Howard Schaefer farm at 6185 FM 482. Clifton Sahn, one of Philipp's great-grandsons, served on the areas rural school board. Carl and his family struggled to bring two church bells from his homeland to the new land. The bells were tolled during the dedicatory ceremonies of the founding of New Braunfels
(Reference: "First Protestant Church Its History and Its People, By Oscar Haas, p. 1). Those bells were presented to the New Braunfels protestant congregation by the Schaefer family and remain a part of the First Protestant Church of New Braunfels architecture **(Reference: Fey, Everett, "New Braunfels, The First Founders", Eakin Press, Austin, Texas, p. 518)** (Attachment #3). The Schaefer farms remain in the ownership of Schaefer family descendants and are still working farms.

Thomas Joseph Schwab, Jr. arrived in Texas on July 8, 1844 aboard the first of the Prince Karl Solms ships to arrive on Texas shores. He led the first wagon through the Guadalupe River on Good Friday, March 21, 1845 and became a founding father of New Braunfels, Texas **(Reference: "The Schwab Family 1650-2002", by Chris Kneupper, Jonathan Roba, and Vivian (Schwab) Zipp, p. 1).** Thomas Schwab and fellow settler Valentin Fey purchased two parcels of land consisting of 90 acres and 110 acres from William Bracken on April 7, 1849 in the Rodriguez Survey #99 (Comal) which were southeast and northwest of the Comal Creek respectively **(Comal Co. Deed Records, Book A, pp. 557-558).** Thomas's son Valentin Josef Schwab migrated to Comal in 1851 and built his home beside what would become Schwab Road. Valentin's grandson, Bruno John Schwab, lived on the family homestead until 1915 when he bought two acres of land from the Wenzel family where stood the Wenzel Blacksmith Shop. Bruno took over the blacksmith business and became the area's most depended upon blacksmith and mechanic. The blacksmith shop, though vacant, still stands along Hwy. 482 (Attachment #2). The arrival of the automobile led Bruno to open a garage in 1915. That garage still stands along side the blacksmith shop.

Historical/Cultural Significance

Comal, Texas (now an annexed community of Schertz, Texas) was the beginning agricultural venture for first settlers of New Braunfels. Cotton was the cash crop from the latter half of the 19th century through the first few decades of the 20th century. As cotton farming fell on hard times the community transitioned to raising other crops and cattle ranching. Its earliest inhabitants were among the first founding families of the region, to include New Braunfels, Texas (**Reference: Fey, Everett, “*New Braunfels, The First Founders*”, Eakin Press, Austin, Texas**). Two of the farms (Sahm Stock Farm & Howard Schaefer Farm) have been designated as Family Land Heritage Properties by the Texas Commissioner of Agriculture and have been operated by the same families since 1870 and 1890, respectively. The legacy left by the early settlers goes well beyond their devoted stewardship of the land. The community was made up of a few dozen Protestant and Catholic families. Both groups were first founder families of their respective New Braunfels churches. The Protestant families worshiped regularly at First Protestant Church in New Braunfels and one of those families (Schaefer) brought (in 1844) church bells (two) with them from Germany. Those bells were tolled during the dedicatory ceremony of the founding of New Braunfels and today set in front of the New Braunfels First Protestant Church (**Reference: Fey, Everett, p. 519**) (Attachment #3). Many members of Comal founding families devoted much time and talent to assuring the schools survived and grew. The few Catholic families of Comal produced a religious legacy for the greater Catholic society of the region that is unmatched by any community of its size. Their spirituality led to sons and daughters following religious vocations in unprecedented numbers. The families of Comal, although few in number, were close in community spirit and pride.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Aerial view and sketchers of the Comal community area depicting locations of landmark properties still standing within the community.
2. Photos of landmark buildings still standing within the community.
3. Photo of Carl Schaefer with church bells brought by Comal first settlers from Germany to First Protestant Church New Braunfels.