

Pictures from Three Rivers' Past

By Richard Hudson

Three Rivers is an old town in South Texas built in the early part of the twentieth century about eighty miles straight south of San Antonio. A small town of old, empty and decaying buildings, Three Rivers sits in a shallow basin where the Nueces, Frio, and Atascosa rivers meet.

True, some of the town's old structures are still in use. There are newer ones cropping up here and there, though not around the town square – mostly along Highway 281 north of downtown where Highway 72 branches off and runs northeast up a hill past the water tower and cemetery into the distant brush country. The old buildings flank the perimeter of the late 1950's vintage, brick municipal building that sits nestled among tall, leafy pecan trees in the town's main square. Most were built in the 1920s and 30s. And some, as far back as 1913 when the town originated, still remain.

It is a ranching and farm town; a hunting town and an oil town. It is a town of working men and women, a place where it is reasonably comfortable in the winter and extremely hot and humid in the summer with temperatures soaring beyond 100° Fahrenheit. And though it is a humid place, it is a dry place. Prevailing moisture soaked winds blow in from the southeast off the Texas Gulf, but drought is more the rule than rain. It is a place, the inhabitants say, where one does not "perspire, you sweat."

At one time Three Rivers had the first glass factory in Texas. It is gone, the bottles it once made now the possession of collectors. The town is built around the municipal building on town square where there is a marker commemorating the man who envisioned the town and built it. The only picture show in town, the Rialto, sits across the street from the municipal building. The town bought it some years back and on Thursdays the movies are free to the community.

The huge Valero Oil and Gas refinery, which occupies the southwest corner of the town, is the town's most imposing landmark. Cresting a hill off Interstate 37 five or six miles away the refinery looks like the town, especially at night with all its lights pricking pin holes in the darkness. The federal prison six miles west of town off Highway 72 and the refinery employ most of the people in Three Rivers and the county. Nolan Ryan's steak house sits down the road from the prison and faces Choke Canyon reservoir where people boat, fish, and tell Nolan Ryan stories while keeping a watchful eye for "gators" or "lagartos" as the Mexicans once called them. There are several gas stations, a few cafes, a handful of antique and curio stores where wives shop while their husbands hunt trophy white-tail deer on the vast ranches, Stendebach's auto parts, two funeral homes, and Mandy's beer joint next to the Rialto employ a few people. Ranching and hunting employ the rest.

There is one thing Three Rivers does not have. It does not have historical markers, except where the glass factory once stood. But even it is easy to overlook as you bump across the railroad tracks on your way out of town. In front of the municipal building on town square sits another marker commemorating the town's founder, Charles R. Tips. But there are no others. Three Rivers is a place rich in history, but the visitor and the traveler passing through would not know this. It is a visible place with an invisible past.

Charles R. Tips, an enterprising man in his early twenties, whose father was the president of The First National Bank in Seguin, Texas, built the town an hour's drive south of San Antonio where three rivers converge – the Atascosa into the Frio above town and the Frio into the Nueces several miles below town. Tips, a graduate of the University of Texas, worked in his father's bank when he dreamed of establishing the town. With the help of his father he managed to pull together some investors to fund his dream.¹ A lady rancher from Cuero provided the land and brought the railroad without which the town would not survive.

The town was first named Hamiltonburg for Annie T. Hamilton, the lady from Cuero. She paid the San Antonio, Uvalde and Gulf (S. A. U. & G.) Railroad to build a depot on her land in 1913.² Tips, subsequently,

¹ Sellman, Collins D. From Acorns to Live Oaks. George West: Grace Armantrout Museum Association. (This pamphlet is available currently in the Armantrout Museum located in George West, Texas.)

² *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Three Rivers, Texas."
<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/article/s/TT/hjt5.html> (accessed August 12, 2009)

organized the town site and sold lots for businesses and houses to Americans and European immigrants moving there. Tips changed the name to Three Rivers because just north of the town site there was already a community named Hamilton. The US post office approved the name change on May 1, 1914 to prevent confusing the town with the community.³

Tips liked to think of himself as the last Empresario in Texas. There were some differences, however. The first Empresarios received large land grants from Spain, then from Mexico to split among immigrants settling in Texas. Irishman John McMullen partnered with James McGloin, another Irishman, to bring immigrants from their troubled fatherland in 1829. They moved into the Live Oak County area shortly after the last Mexican settlers left. Repeated Indian raids drove the Mexicans from their substantial stone ranch house on Ramirena Creek in the southeastern part of the county.⁴ A remnant of McGloin's colony stayed in that unforgiving, Indian infested country even after he failed to complete his Empresario contract.

Tips did not have to deal with a grant from the Mexican government, so in that sense he was not a bona fied Empresario. He was, in his time, a modern Texas land developer whose building project was underwritten by a consortium of investors. He did not fight Indians either, which eliminated the biggest obstacle to development and settlement.

³ Sellman.

⁴ Sparkman, Ervin L. The People's History of Live Oak County, Texas. Mesquite, Texas: Ide House, 1981, 4 – 12.

Also, the first Empresarios and settlers were Catholic or were forced to convert to Catholicism if they wanted to sell and buy labors and leagues of land – a condition imposed by the governments of Spain and later Mexico on anyone who wished to settle in their territories.⁵ Tips, on-the-other-hand, was Protestant. Had he applied for an Empresario commission back then, he would have never been granted one unless he had converted or feigned conversion. Unencumbered by the political foibles that gradually stripped Spain and Mexico of their grip on Texas, Tips took to the task of building and populating Three Rivers in the same spirit as the Empresarios of days-gone-bye. And in that sense, he staked his claim and began what became a remarkably successful career as one of Texas' foremost early twentieth century land developers. And Tips did not sell labors and leagues either. He sold bonds to build utilities, infrastructure, and a cemetery for Three Rivers. He sold lots to businessmen and homeowners in order to create a town that could support itself through commerce. Mrs. Hamilton's provision of land and arrangements with the railroad guaranteed that Tips' would turn his dream into a reality.

Like the Empresarios before him, Tips knew he must advertise to draw people and businesses to Three Rivers. They advertised with handbills and in newspapers across the United States for entrepreneurial spirits to come settle the land. Tips, however, did something the old Empresarios could not do. He hired a photographer to take pictures of the houses and businesses as

⁵ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Anglo-American Colonization."
<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/AA/umal.html> (accessed August 2, 2009).

they were erected in 1913 and 1914 where massive patches of cacti and brush had grown. He used the pictures in his land promotion enterprise and they worked wonderfully. Though Tips had the prints, the photographer retained ownership of the negatives and it was this simple fact of ownership that the negatives were used eventually to settle a personal debt and disappeared from sight and mind for close to seven decades.⁶

While researching the history of Three Rivers, Texas, in the early part of 2009, the author was in Patty Reagan's beauty shop listening to ladies talk about their town as they were getting coiffures. In the course of the conversations, one of the ladies said that Stanly Stewart's son, Roger Stewart, had a photo album of Three Rivers from 1913-14. He lived west of town off Highway 72, first house past Nolan Ryan's steak house. His number was in the phone book, so following a call to ensure he would be at home, the author drove out to his house.

Roger Stewart produced the album. He said his father made ten such albums. He had one. Patty Reagan, as it turned out, had one as did her brother Tommy Forehand, an oil and gas lease attorney in George West. Roger did not remember who possessed the other seven albums.

Roger's father provided accounting services for the people of Three Rivers. He also dabbled in photography and became good enough at it that he opened a photography business in conjunction with his accounting services. He took pictures, mostly after 1950 of most everyone and everything around Three Rivers. Some people said he was so good that he would

⁶ Stewart, Roger. Personal interview. July 6, 2009.

take a Quaker Oat Meal box, punch a small hole in it and use it for a camera. People brought negatives, too, and old photos of all sorts for him to reproduce. He saved these photos thinking that some day they would come in handy for telling a pictorial story of Three Rivers and Live Oak County. Roger is saving his dad's photos – ten large plastic file boxes neatly stacked in a metal shed off the edge of his carport behind his house – for when Three Rivers opens its own museum.

No one remembers the name of the photographer. All that is known is that in 1916-1917 he lived in the Three Rivers Hotel when it was operated by Fred Lippard. The photographer could not pay his bill, so he left his suitcase for payment. The original album of photographs was in the suitcase. The album passed on to Mrs. C. O. Lippard who in 1982 loaned it to Stanley Stewart to reproduce. He made ten albums and sold them for \$250 each to local people who grew up in Three Rivers.

“The one improvement he made on the

original album,” said Roger Stewart, “is to provide descriptive captions for the photographs and name the people in them. There were none in the original album.”⁷

Roger loaned his album to the author to scan. It took close to four days to scan the photographs and captions. The photographs were scanned as TIF files at a high resolution of 800 dpi. The photographs were not altered or manipulated to enhance the image. This can be done, however, by importing the images into Adobe Photoshop.

The photographs present a rare look at the construction of a small town in South Texas at a time when Mexico was engaged in a revolution and Europe on the brink of World War I. The photographs are truly historic. Some of the original buildings are still there and being used or lived in. Perhaps it is time for Three Rivers to recognize its past with carefully placed markers throughout the town. The past should never remain invisible to the passerby.

⁷ Stewart, Roger.