A Little Bit of This, a Little Bit of That

There is no one theme for this issue of Borderlands; rather we include articles on topics that I have always wanted to include but which took years for students to choose, topics like the Texas Blue Laws, Stahmann Farms and the Toltec Building. Before the advent of the big box and discount stores, almost every store was closed on Sunday. Then I learned that the Texas blue laws governed what stores opened, what they could sell and when.

I used to come to El Paso from Southern New Mexico through what is now Highway 28, passing the Stahmann Farms property with the beautiful canopy of shade that their pecan trees formed above the road. I had eaten many a Stahmann pecan and more than a few of their eggs and wondered who the Stahmanns were. I now know, and their pecans taste even better with that knowledge!

When I first moved to El Paso, I was fascinated with that strange triangular building at the intersection of San Antonio and Magoffin Streets. I wondered about its name and its original purpose. Along came Heather Coons and made the Toltec Building her research project and voilà! I had my answers.

We also have followed up on last year’s theme of Strong Women in El Paso. When I found out what LULAC was, I always heard the names Lucy Acosta and Belen Robles, two energetic, smart Latina women, wonderful role models for young women. Articles on them detail just a small part of what they have done for El Paso, Texas and the nation.

Early on, I heard the name Maud Sullivan associated with the El Paso Public Library. When I discovered that she was not the stereotypical plain bookworm, I was delighted. Then I read that she had spent five years living in a tent in the Gila Wilderness, not too far from my home town, with her mining engineer husband while still maintaining cherished elements of civilization. I found out how much she loved our public library and its patrons and how much she did with so little. From Sullivan it was an easy leap to her friend Betty Mary Goetting, another woman far ahead of her time, with her work in bringing birth control to El Paso.

While reading about the Mexican Revolution in David D. Romo’s book Ringside Seat to a Revolution, I came across the name Teresa Urrea. She became a popular topic in my class, but one student, Armando Rosales, became engrossed with her as the subject of his research and went far beyond requirements in his quest to learn as much as possible about her.

Other student research taught me about the Shalam Colony in Mesilla, a utopian community on the Rio Grande, and I wondered why so little had been written about it. Finally, our articles on pioneer El Pasans Simeon Hart and Felix Martinez discuss some of their important contributions to our wonderful city.

So we offer you a little bit of this, a little bit of that. These articles all started as research papers on local history in my English 1302 classes. Student researchers cannot help but learn a great deal about the area in which they live, and that is my purpose.

This issue is dedicated to my friend and mentor, the late John O. West, who so loved the Southwest and who helped me choose the direction that Borderlands has taken these many years.

Heather Y. Coons, Student Editor

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Cover photo of Toltec Building by Heather Coons

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From The Editor

Open the doors and come on in. Welcome to the 2010-2011 edition of EPCC’s Borderlands.

In some respects, this issue is a continuation of our last publication. In the previous issue, we featured women trailblazers of the El Paso area, but, because of a lack of space, not all the women chosen for research had their stories told. So it has been an honor and pleasure to finally give a voice to these incredible women who often defied social traditions in an effort to bring positive changes to our area. I hope that as you read these pages, you are as moved by their dedication as I was.

Herein are also stories of some of the area’s trailblazing men: a farmer, a miller, a spiritual leader and a real-estate entrepreneur. While their talents may have varied, all were ingenious in helping to develop the borderland into what it is today.

We also have a comprehensive piece on the Texas Blue Laws. We discuss its effects on El Paso’s economic development, as well as the battle for the law’s repeal that took place in stores and courtrooms across El Paso and Texas.

To round off such a potpourri of topics, we have an article on El Paso’s Toltec Club, which served as the meeting place of the city’s early social elite. I have to say I’m pleased to finally see it in print, as it is the result of my time as a student in Ms. Vise’s research and writing class. It was this story, and the excitement I felt while uncovering history, that led me to accept the position of Borderlands editor, something I’ve truly enjoyed.

This issue, with its wide variety of information, is the culmination of many different people’s hard work, and without them, Borderlands wouldn’t be possible. Special thanks goes out to those who were willing to do what no one had done, and in the process, make history. And we cannot forget to thank those who took the time to document history while it happened. The students who gathered the research deserve great praise for their hard work, as do the teachers and librarians who tirelessly assisted them.

But the biggest thanks go to the families who have graciously shared their stories. Borderlands extends our thanks to Kurt Goetting, who took the time to speak with student researchers and provided us with some wonderful photographs. I would like to personally thank Alex Acosta Jr. for being so charming and gracious, and allowing me to get to know the incredible woman that he was blessed to call “Mom.” I would also like to thank Laura Hollingsed at UTEP Library’s Special Collections Department for her assistance, as well as Marta Estrada, Border Heritage Librarian at the El Paso Public Library, and Dean Wilkey at NMSU Library.

My family, Robert, Joshua and Amanda, also deserve my thanks for being so supportive and understanding. But it is to Ms. Vise that my deepest gratitude goes. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to expand my horizons through researching and writing about the great history of our region and the incredible people who lived here.

It is my prayer that you, the reader, also are enriched by the articles within. These stories can give you not only a sense of pride in the area, but encouragement to face the struggles that we all have in this adventure called “life.” You can also learn about success and realize that it is perhaps not destiny that decides the path you take, but the willingness to take the road less traveled.

Whatever road you are on, may God bless you and keep you safe. Happy reading!

Heather Coons, Editor