

/08/2007

## Once upon a time in the Hill Country

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### Leon Springs

By Pamela Price, Hill Country View

Driving up Boerne Stage Road from Leon Springs past the generic strip malls and roadside car wash, just as the hills begin to fill the Texas sky, one encounters three distinctive signs of the community's heritage. Near the first big curve of the winding two-lane roadway, behind a crop of plastic signs advertising everything from pet sitting to new home sites, there's a cluster of improbably old, abandoned stone houses begging regard.

Though the property's posted, gawking from afar is allowed. (Just kindly pull off the road first.)

History types collectively regard the site as emblematic of many larger issues facing the Boerne Stage Road corridor, particularly the substitution of authentic, character-filled vistas with cookie-cutter retail construction. To some, to borrow from Joni Mitchell, an erstwhile paradise is being paved for a giant parking lot. An invaluable sense of place and history, preservationists suggest, is at stake, not to mention natural beauty.

Yes, where casual drivers see a funky bunch of buildings, conservationists see the Hill Country's past, present and future summed up. Mind you, the place is not advertised for sale. And it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But ask any local preservationist about the Leon Springs site for which they are most concerned, they will likely answer "the von Plehwe place" and nod solemnly.

Then, if you are lucky, they will share the real story behind those three quirky buildings. And offer a wee bit of hope.

Marlene Richardson, who is co-writing a book on the area's rich history, says that Captain George von Plehwe first arrived in the Hill Country in the 1840s. His purpose? To escort John Meusebach, founder of Fredericksburg, on his mission to negotiate a treaty with the Comanche Indians that would allow for further European settlement. A member of the King's Guard, the Prussian von Plehwe returned home to Bavaria and met his future bride, Sophie, who, it turns out, was about as close to a being a princess as one could be without actually being descended from royalty.

"She had been raised by the Queen of Prussia, because her mother and father had been killed when she was 3 years old," says Joanna Parrish, chair of the San Antonio Conservation Society's Historic Farm and Ranch Committee, Parrish and her co-hort are

working to document and preserve numerous historic Bexar County farm sites. “She was taken into the charge of the queen, who raised her. (Sophie) was an opera singer, and she had an education, of course.”

A July 1925 San Antonio Express-News article by Penelope Borden reports that Sophie had appeared at Berlin’s acclaimed Royal Opera and counted among her friends famous scientists, historians and writers. Imagine then the culture shock when the couple relocated to Texas in the late 1840s. In the words of Borden, “Just what the transplantation from polished court to rude camp and the adaptation to utterly foreign surroundings cost them is easier to imagine than to describe.”

“At the time, this area, and Boerne especially, was known for being a most healthful environment,” says Richardson. Thus, as Captain von Plehwe was widely reported as being ill, the move was predicated on the promise of wellness.

“They (settled) 100 acres of land,” says Parrish. “For the first year, because of his health perhaps, they lived in tents on the property, and she was the one who oversaw the construction. The houses have higher pitched roofs, which is something they would have been used to in Europe, because they have snow back there. Her house was the little two-story one, with the staircase on the outside. He lived not in the next one, but in the one furthest to the west. That may have been because they suspected he had TB, but then he lived to be quite elderly for the time.”

Parrish says that the middle house, the kitchen, was an early stagecoach stop, one of several required to manage the various lines traveling through the region. Later, according to Parrish, the von Plehwes built a larger home, which remains nearby but is hidden by subsequent additions and remodeling.

As the property was a working farm, there was ample labor for the couple. From an old article in her association’s newsletter, Parrish has learned that locals recalled Sophie plowing with her velvet robes wrapped about her waist. Descriptions abound, too, of rich meals and lively discussions in the household, with the lady of the cabins holding her own kind of court.

Leaving no direct heirs, the couple was interred on the property, which has changed hands a few times since the von Plehwes died over a century ago. For a while, it was an artist’s colony that inspired notable landscape painters, including Robert Wood and Rolla Taylor, to take brush in hand. The buildings, now abandoned and dilapidated, have set quietly amidst oaks, weeds and wildflowers, attracting press from time to time and making their way into historical tours.

Conservationists say they’ve contacted the property’s current owner, singer-songwriter (and resident of The Dominion) George Strait, via letter several times, citing the tax advantages for placing at least a portion of the property in trust. No formal replies have been received, but the fact that the houses remain untouched offers hope. (There was no response to a phone inquiry made to Strait’s representative on the value and long-time

plans for the property.)

Preservationists talk of similar situations across the area, expressing hope for “win-win” situations in which old buildings like the von Plehwe cabins might be imaginatively incorporated into new commercial developments. In theory, with a bit of marketing, the pioneer past would serve as a draw for modern dollars. Remember the Alamo?

“If you have something unique, why not play it up,” says Parrish. “And you don’t have to set aside every piece of land. Just the sections that have particular significance.

“This is just such a great story,” says Parrish of the von Plehwe’s houses specifically. “It shows the determination of the pioneers. The conservation society recognized (the property’s) value as early as the late 1920s. We’re hoping that a future developer will recognize the value, too.”

Parrish sees an opportunity for the site to provide creative inspiration once more, too. “I keep saying, ‘Why can’t George Strait write a song about it?’”

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