

Old VILLITA



AMERICAN GUIDE SERIES

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Old Villita

Compiled and written by the Writers' Project of the
Work Projects Administration in the State of Texas

MAURY MAVERICK, MAYOR OF SAN ANTONIO
Cooperating Sponsor

Published by the City of San Antonio
1939

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY
THE CLEGG COMPANY
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

To Stacy May
of the Rockefeller Foundation
who gave me the idea of this
study.

"Plans" show on page 4.

Purposes:

1. Raising social, living,
and labor standards of Mexican-
Americans all over the United
States; adding dignity to them as
citizens.

2. To furnish
employment on the project
in arts and crafts; to
constitute a center for the
same.

3. To serve as a link for
peace between our country
and Latin-American countries.

4. To preserve essential Am-
erican history.

5. To demonstrate Southwestern
culture, essentially different
from the rest of the United
States.

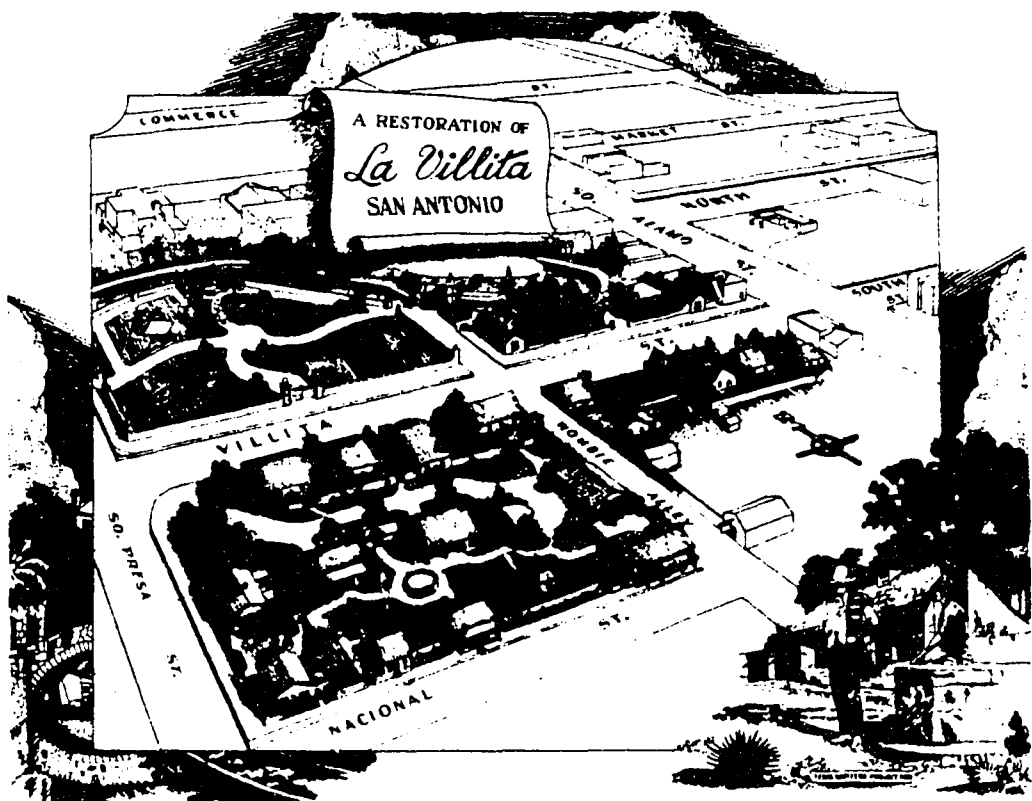
Respectfully Submitted
Maury Maverick

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WORK PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION
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Mayor of San Antonio, Texas

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Maury Maverick
Mayor of San Antonio



A Restored La Villita

In San Antonio, the restoration of *La Villita*, the "Little Town" of the Spaniards, has been begun as a historic and architectural monument. Few American cities have such an area, endowed with great age and a distinct and unusual character, partially intact and altogether adaptable to reconstruction.

It is planned, when restoration is completed, that a block-square area almost in the heart of the city's business district shall present an authentic picture of early-day San Antonio — the San Antonio of adobe houses with hand-carved mesquite doors; of flower-bordered *acequias*, ditches dug to supply water for the fields of Indians; of shady patios with feathery exotic plants, perfumed by rich blossoms trailing over high stone walls. The two centuries of *La Villita*'s existence will echo here in windows with deep recesses, shake-shingled roofs, rough flagstone walks, worn stone doorsteps.

To save this storied district from inevitable destruction, the City of San Antonio, through Mayor Maury Maverick, in 1939 secured the area bounded by Villita, South Presa and Hessler Streets and Womble Alley.

Funds and facilities of the National Youth Administration were secured, and the initial work of clearing the site and of laying bare the ancient construction of the buildings was begun.

Seven houses were selected for restoration, but these will by no means complete the project, as plans have been made to add several buildings and features, so that, finally, a complete and authentic "Little Town," will be re-created.

The district demonstrates in its architectural features the expression of several types and generations of people. When disturbing later construction has been removed, these old houses will

tell much of the architectural story of San Antonio and the Southwest — of the Spanish colonial, Texas colonial, European immigration, and several later epochs.

Of the section, O'Neil Ford, supervising architect representing the National Youth Administration, has this to say:

These houses are not of self-conscious architecture. They were built by men who were seeking a new and permanent security in a new land. The houses they built were elemental structures providing the minimum requirements of comfort and shelter.

Because confusion exists as to the precise date when the houses were built, it was decided not to attempt a restoration to definite years, but only to definite periods. Historians and architects have agreed that the restoration of the Little Town shall be from its earliest construction, about 1722, to include the 1850's, when the last radical changes, repairs, and redecoration occurred. New work will be consistent throughout with the period indicated by each building.

Of restoration methods, Mr. Ford says:

At no time do we expect to affect picturesqueness or "sweetness" at the expense of good sense or structural honesty, either in those things we may build or in the parts we may restore. The men and women of the historical societies are agreed that we will not make this a series of precious little surprises and features of interest, but that we will make every effort to have one general atmosphere of cool shady places, of profuse banks of blossoming native trees and shrubs . . . surrounded by houses returned as nearly as possible to their first condition.

This plan bars all touches of theatrical and bizarre architecture, so easy to fall into in a work of this kind.

Painstaking attention to the authenticity of small details occupies the restorers of *La Villita*. Doors and mantels will be made in the workshops of the National Youth Administration by Mexican woodcarvers; a variety of window types will illustrate the



A house on Hessler Street, showing exposed old stone wall.

form evolved locally; photographs are being made of details in other old houses scattered about San Antonio, and, from these, shop drawings are perfected as a guide to decoration, cabinet work, hardware, and even structural details. Plans call for the type of planting used by early-day Spanish residents in San Antonio, with native trees and shrubs, and even the walks will be of authentic materials.

The prime objective of this restoration program has been to produce, in La Villita's old setting, and on its old foundations, a carefully re-created group of small houses that show clearly what indigenous culture here evolved.

La Villita, restored, will be no museum of buildings, and no mere replica, but a living demonstration of how Southwestern architecture grew.

Tentative plans include the following features:

1. An encircling wall to insure privacy and such isolation as is necessary to create an atmosphere of the past.
2. Restored or reconstructed houses lining the outer borders of the area and having entrances both on the bordering streets and on a large inner court or plaza.
3. The addition of a large structure to be used as a restaurant of typical early-day Spanish colonial type, the cuisine to be Mexican, with service from the kitchens of the main building to vine arbors in the inner plaza.
4. A building to house a Hispanic-American library and museum, planned to be of adobe with the first floor some four or

five feet below the ground level. The second floor, which would be used for meetings and social gatherings, as well as for the display of relics, would be reached by a wooden staircase through a balcony.

5. Along the south boundary of the area, a row of open stalls with stone or hewn wood shelves, where various Mexican arts and handicrafts will be displayed. Small workshop courts will be in the rear of each house.

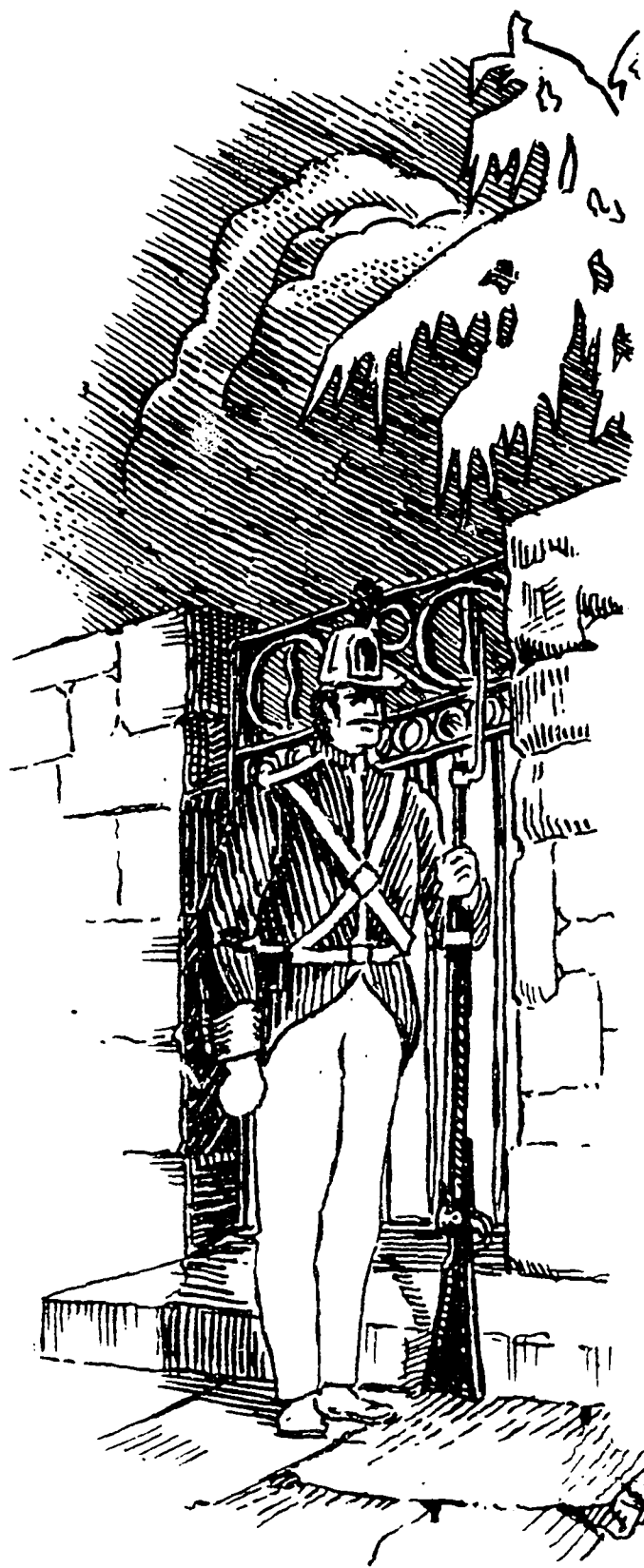
6. The inner court or plaza, which will be beautified by careful planting, the judicious use of fountains, and a typical *acequia*. This plaza will be used for social events, and here diners will be served at tables under the stars, as were those who first sat at San Antonio's open-air chile stands in 1813.

While *dulce* vendors squat in the shadow of the little courts and *tamale* women swathed in *rebozos* scent the air with their pungent pots of steaming edibles, strolling *caballeros* wearing broad, braided *sombreros* and short jackets of green silk will sing to their own stringed accompaniment the songs of old Mexico and Spain — and the notes of the guitars, the odor of *masa* cooking, the soft voices of Latins, will help roll back the years to the time when these songs, these houses, these people, *were* San Antonio.

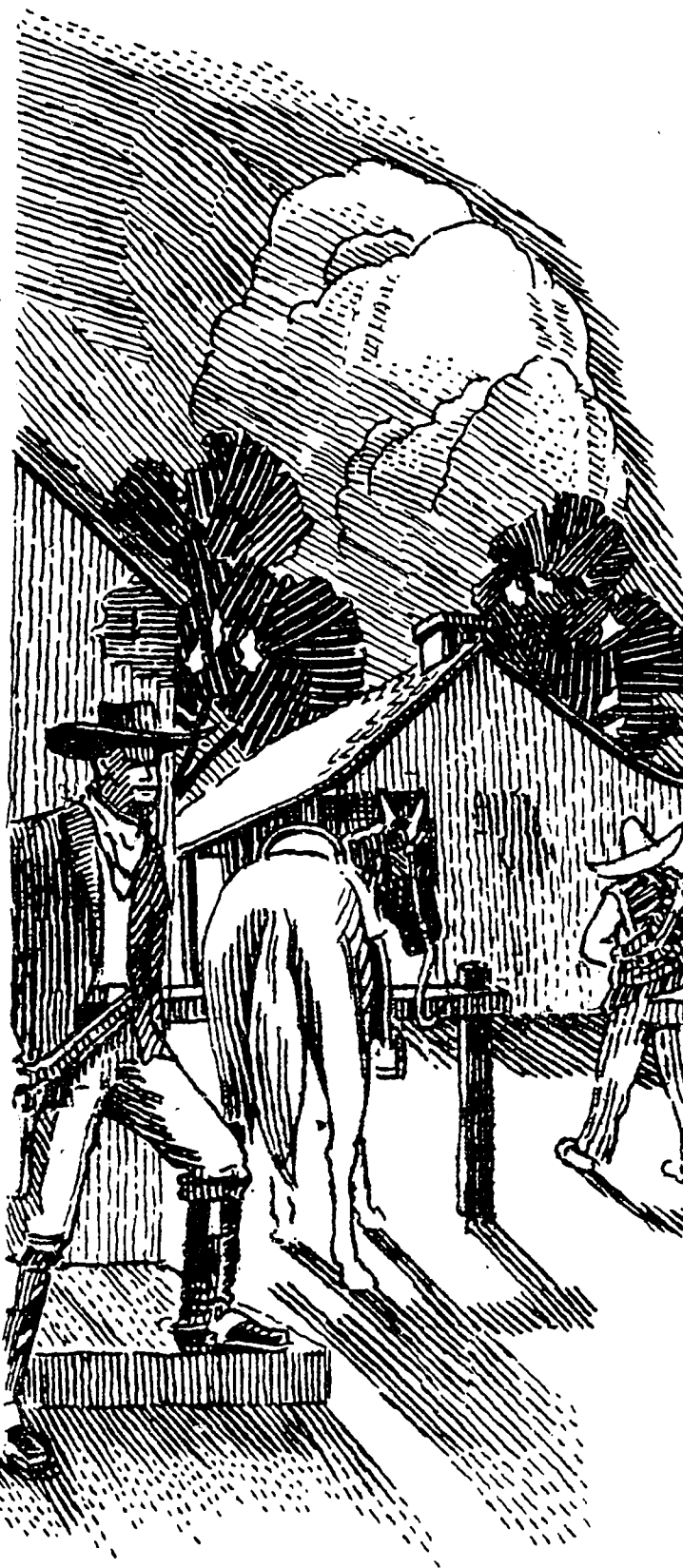
Part of the value of this restored La Villita — as seen by its patrons and sponsors — is historical. Part is architectural. And part is the charm and distinction it will present to visitor and native son alike.



The Story of La Villita



“THE LITTLE TOWN” IS BORN
THE WRONG SIDE OF THE RIVER
STORMY TIMES IN LITTLE TOWN
A CLOUDBURST BRINGS IN
ARISTOCRACY
THE SCENE OF A SURRENDER
WHEN THE ALAMO FELL
NEWCOMERS TO LITTLE TOWN
A DECADE OF CHANGE
PROGRESS AND PERSONALITIES
TIMES CHANGE — VILLITA
DOES NOT



We have no city, except, perhaps, New Orleans, that can vie, in point of the picturesque interest that attaches to old and antiquated foreignness, with San Antonio. Its jumble of races, costumes, languages and buildings; its religious ruins, holding to an antiquity, for us, indistinct enough to breed an unaccustomed solemnity; (all) . . . combine with the heroic touches of its history to enliven and satisfy. — Frederick Law Olmsted, in *A Journey Through Texas*, 1857.

Many others, like Olmsted, have been struck by the visible evidence of history in San Antonio; for here it is possible to see the past in old, scarred buildings. As the oldest remaining residential area of the city that has grown in dramatic stages beside the banks of the San Antonio River, *La Villita*—the “Little Town” of the Spaniards — has stood not on the fringe of events, but within their often stormy center. Villita has had the sometimes good, sometimes bad, fortune to be always a small but highly romantic part of the tale that has been woven beside the twisting river for more than two centuries.

First to dwell on the site, as far as recorded history shows, were the Coahuiltecan. These sedentary Indians had village sites along the river valley; their brush and hide tepees stood under great pecan trees. The women cultivated patches of beans and maize. Where *La Villita* is today, flint tools of these tribesmen are sometimes found, testifying to the primitive community that was the Little Town’s forerunner. Ashes of long-dead fires, found many layers deep, often contain blood-red arrow points made of flint quarried at some unknown distant mine and later shaped here. The great fear of these peaceable dwellers on the river bank

was of cannibal Karankawas from the Texas coast — powerful, evil creatures who came up the stream in canoes, seeking plunder and man-meat.

Here, in the spring of 1536, came a stranger who was to write the first description of the area, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spaniard who had survived the expedition of Panfilo de Narvaez. The red men who dwelt on the banks of the river received the Spaniard kindly. Dr. Carlos E. Castaneda, eminent Texas historian, says:

They (the Spaniards) were . . . given presents of ochre, beads, and a few little bags of silver. . . . They were by this time in the vicinity of present day San Antonio, where the Indians had established a *rancho* because of the natural facilities of the region for settlement. “If this deduction of mine is true,” declares Dr. (Robert) Hill, after many years of painstaking study, “then San Antonio is the oldest identifiable village within the present limits of the United States.”

Since the site of *La Villita* is one of the most desirable in the San Antonio River Valley, it is reasonable to conclude that at least part of the *rancho* described later by Cabeza de Vaca was in this locality. Here the villagers would have been safe from the constant menace of river floods. If this assumption be true, then this is one of the oldest places of habitation to be described as such, in this country.

More than a hundred years elapsed before Don Domingo Teran de los Rios, breaking new trails for the King of Spain, halted at an Indian village on the banks of this river while Father Damian Massanet said Mass and named the valley *San Antonio*.



Known picturesquely, according to Mrs. Esther Perez Carvajal's research, as "The House Where the Sun is Born."

Other *conquistadores* passed this way, and in 1714 the Indian villagers were visited by the French explorer Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, who said it was a "likely spot for settlement."

The river that winds past modern Villita Street received its name in 1709 from a friar who never forgot the "richness of the grapes of all kinds, the quality of the mulberry trees which surpassed those of Murcia and Granada, the abundance of nuts, more tasty than those of Castile . . . and the large number of wild turkeys and deer, to say nothing of the herds of numberless buffalo." Father Fray Antonio de San Buenaventura Olivares had so great a desire to claim this area for God and King and to win the "more than fifty Indian tribes" of the San Antonio Valley that he began a campaign of persuasion which was to end in the establishment of the most famous of all Franciscan missions and its suburb, La Villita.

"The Little Town" is Born

On April 25, 1718, Don Martin de Alarcon, Knight of the Order of Santiago, "Captain General and Governor of the Province of Tejas and such other lands as might be conquered," entered the valley of the San Antonio with men and implements sufficient to found a settlement. The persistent dream of Father Olivares had resulted in this expedition, its tangible manifestations including 1,000 bleating sheep, 548 horses, 200 oxen and as many cows — and, vastly more important, 72 persons who were pledged to convert this wild and beautiful valley into a Spanish outpost of civilization. The friar who had brought all this to pass had quarreled with the dashing Alarcon, and marched in alone, barefooted and dauntless, to found — on May 1 — Mission San Antonio de Valero, known today as the Alamo, shrine of Texas liberty, world renowned because of a battle in which every defender died.

Five days after the mission had been founded, Alarcon established the *Villa de Bejar* on a site near San Pedro Springs. Thus

in the beginning, the civil settlement of present-day San Antonio was west of the mission, and the soldiers and settlers lived apart from the Franciscan outpost that was to rule their destiny. But in 1722, on orders of the Marquis of Aguayo, the *presidio* (fort) of the mission and the homes of the colonists were moved — because of the constant threat of Indian attack — to a spot near Mission San Antonio de Valero. In the archives of *San Francisco el Grande*, headquarters of the Franciscan Order in the New World, is a yellowed document, the report of Father Olivares to the Viceroy, which says:

He (Alarcon) likewise succeeded in establishing a Spanish villa and presidio in the valley of San Antonio, with thirty families, in the most pleasant spot to be found in the entire province where (they) enjoy the greatest advantages and facilities anyone can desire.

Frederick C. Chabot, in *With the Makers of San Antonio*, has this to say of the Spaniards who were to become the founders of La Villita:

Alarcon . . . was therefore instructed to establish a colony of Spaniards on the banks of the San Antonio, with at least thirty families or settlers, with soldiers, conceding to them in the name of His Majesty, all the favors and privileges accorded by the royal laws. . . . It was also ordered that the soldiers in Texas serve for the erection and construction of settlements. It was particularly ordered that at least ten soldiers be left for the defense of the mission . . . on the San Antonio River. . . . It was also ordered that the Spaniards and soldiers, who were to remain at the mission, were to be married and have their families with them, as the Indians were surprised when the soldiers did not bring their wives. . . . Most noteworthy of all (in Alarcon's expedition) was the company of militia.

Chabot's list of the military men who were to create homes for themselves in La Villita include names old in modern San

Antonio: "Don Diego de Escobar, and family; Alferez Francisco Hernandez, and family; . . . Geronimo Carbajal; . . . Antonio Guerra; Don Francisco de Escobar; Domingo Flores, and family; Xtoval de la Garza; Sebastian Gonzales; Joseph Ximines; . . . Don Francisco Juan de la Cruz, Master Mason; Santiago Peres, Carpenter; Joseph Menchaca," and many others whose descendants today are San Antonians.

Conflicting reports of those who actually participated in the founding of the Villa in the valley of the San Antonio obscure the actual number of soldiers and settlers who came to dwell among the Payaya and other tribes of Coahuiltecan. It is reasonably certain, however, that in 1722, when the *Villa de Bejar* was moved to the vicinity of the mission, which was somewhere in the neighborhood of modern Alamo Plaza, the first few huts of La Villita may have been erected. J. M. Rodriguez and other writers, telling the stories handed down in San Antonio's oldest Spanish families, claim that La Villita soon grew as a place of residence of the married soldiers of the mission garrison. Rodriguez in his *Memoirs of Early Texas* says:

Villita, meaning little town, was settled by some of the soldiers who came with the Mexican Army and those who had intermarried with Indians, and who were not supposed to be the very best people. In fact there was a great distinction between the east and west side of the river. The west side of the river was supposed to be the residence of the first families here, and the descendants of the Indians and Spanish soldiers settled on the east side of the river.

From legend and scattered fragments of early-day writings, the story of the presidio and the adjoining area which probably extended to the locality now known as La Villita can be pieced together. Robert Sturmberg in his *History of San Antonio and of the Early Days in Texas* (St. Joseph's Altar Society), wrote:

Viceroy Marquis de Valero, knowing the dangers that beset the newly founded Mission, ordered Martin de Alarcon . . . to send a strong military protection to the Mission San Antonio de Valero. Thereupon, in fact during the same year, 30 soldiers with their families were moved . . . to the new Mission site. A small village was built for them close to the Mission (on the east side of the river), and it received the name of San Jose de Alamo. In later years when the Missions were abandoned by the Franciscan Fathers, the soldiers moved into the Mission. . . . Of the Villita San Jose there is no historic information available to the writer with the exception that the huts or houses were located close to the Mission San Antonio de Valero.

That the modern Villita area must have been at least on the fringe of "Villita San Jose" is attested by old land records and other ancient documents in the archives of Bexar County. Among the petitions for land and deeds to property is one actually describing a typical house of that area:

Mathias de la Cerda sells to Joseph Salinas, a soldier of the presidio: A house of stone and mud, 12 varas long and five wide, with a jacal that serves as a kitchen all of woven twigs and grass . . .

For this house and its grounds the soldier paid "four she mules . . . thirty mares . . . six gentle horses, give or take . . ."

Another typical house is described by a Mrs. H. Lucas, who wrote, of San Antonio in the 1850's:

This was a very primitive town when we first came here. The houses were one-story and built of adobe, one room deep with dirt floors, and no connecting doors leading from room to room; a person went outside to enter another room at the back. The sills were more than a foot high, the window sills were three feet wide and the walls were three feet thick. The windows were iron-barred and one could sit in the window seat and chat with a passerby or flirt with an admirer. The floors were of dirt and kept hard by sprinkling and sweeping with brooms of brushy wood tops.

Soon after the establishment of the mission, Indian neophytes and soldiers and settlers were given the task of digging one of San

Antonio's several *acequias* (irrigation ditches). To water the fields of the Mission San Antonio de Valero — covering land now occupied by tall buildings in the heart of the city — the Alamo Madre Ditch was dug from its source near the head of the river (in the neighborhood of present-day Olmos Park), and one of its branches passed beside the east walls of the mission. William Corner in his *San Antonio de Bexar (A Guide and History)*, wrote, "From here (the mission) it passes on through the Menger courtyard; thence to supply, in old times, the inhabitants of East Villita." Chabot, in *With the Makers of San Antonio*, wrote:

They had worked four years in bringing water from the river to the fields. All the work had been done with bars, and the missionaries themselves had not lacked a single day of work. President Father Joseph Gonzales was especially zealous, and was the one who worked the most, for he appreciated the importance of irrigation to his mission.

The Alamo Madre *acequia*, lined with willows and figs, probably brought the first beauty to the narrow, rutted streets of La Villita. Harking back to those remote days of which there are so few chroniclers, Sidney Lanier, as quoted in Corner's *San Antonio de Bexar*, painted an imaginary picture of the people of that frontier community:

Ah, here they come, the inhabitants of San Antonio, from the church-door; vespers is over; the big-thighed, bow-legged, horse riding Apache steps forth, slowly, for he is yet in a maze — the burning candles, the shrine, the genuflexions, the chants, are all yet whirling in his memory; the lazy soldier, . . . the soldier's wives, the squaws, the catechumens, the children, all wend their ways across the plaza. Here advances Brother Juan, bare-footed, in a gown of serge, with his knotted scourge a-dangle from his girdle; he accosts the Indian, he draws him on to talk of Manitou, his pale face grows intense and his forehead wrinkles as he spurs his brain on to the devising of arguments that will convince this wild soul before him of the fact of the God of Adam, of Peter, and Francis.





The Wrong Side of the River

Tradition says that during the next few years La Villita — linked inseparably to Mission San Antonio de Valero because it was the *villa* of its soldiers — was a poor little district of adobe huts, whose yards and gardens alone were pretentious. Difficulties beset the struggling, isolated Spanish outpost: shipments of food and clothing, of pesos due the soldiers, were few and disappointing when they did come. Yet the plight of the soldiers' families was not emphasized until the morning of March 9, 1731, when fifteen families from the Canary Islands marched in — and were promptly given the title of *Hidalgos*, "sons of noble lineage," by a grateful King who had long despaired of colonizing this wilderness with permanent settlers. The titled *islenos* (islanders) founded the royal *Villa of San Fernando* across the river from the *Villa de Bexar*, on present-day Main and Military Plazas. At once the newcomers adopted an attitude of isolation, closing their homes to the folk from the "wrong side of the river," thus inaugurating a class distinction that was to rankle for many years.

The Rev. Mother Louis (Morin) of the Ursuline Academy, on Navarro Street, is descended from the Curbellos — one of the original sixteen Canary Island families brought to San Antonio. She said (in 1939) that Senor Juan Curbello built his residence on property later known as Bowen's Island — where the 31-story Smith-Young Tower now stands — and that this district, close to Villita Street, was devoted to small "farms" or gardens where flowers and vegetables were raised. Mother Louis said:

Villita was built for the soldiers and their wives; the Canary Islanders were considered noble people and the soldiers' families, common people; and the soldiers' quarters

were thus in a different place from that given to the aristocratic Islanders of the San Fernando settlement.

Sturmberg, in his *History of San Antonio and of the Early Days in Texas*, wrote:

In following this narrative it is well to bear in mind that the Mission San Antonio de Valero and the village San Jose de Alamo located on the east side of the river; and the city of San Fernando and the Presidio de Bexar, located on the west side of the river, constituted two different communities, each having their own civil administration. They even had trouble about their respective water rights for irrigation purposes.

San Fernando was the capital of the province of Texas, and its grandees led a gay, luxurious life as compared with the humble existence on the east side of the river. Gregorio Esparza told of the folk who lived in the *jacales*:

We were of the poor people . . . to be poor in that day meant to be very poor indeed — almost as poor as the Savior in His manger. We were not dissatisfied with it. . . . There was time to eat and sleep and look at growing plants. Of food we had not overmuch — chile and beans, beans and chile.

Evil days fell upon the people of the San Antonio Valley, rich and poor alike, between 1731 and 1750. The Apaches, stirred to fury by the coming of more white men to their old hunting ground, made raid after raid upon the settlements of the King. Horses and burros were stolen from off the very streets of Bexar, and finally, on June 30, 1745, the warriors planned to burn the presidio and wipe out the twin Villas. A boy of the mission gave the alarm, and at once the soldiers and neophytes of San Antonio de Valero went into action. Castaneda, in *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936*, Vol. III, describes the event:

One hundred mission Indians came to the rescue and so stoutly did they attack the invaders that they were soon put to flight. The soldiers and Indians now gave chase. . . . The fate of Fort St. Louis (La Salle's fort in Texas) might have been the fate of San Antonio had it not been for the timely aid of the mission Indians of Valero . . .

A quarrel caused by the policies of a new governor, Carlos Franquis de Lugo soon developed between the religious authorities of the mission settlement and the civil heads of San Fernando. This controversy became serious when the governor ordered the mission guards removed. Growing ill feeling was climaxed in the autumn of 1736 when the *padre* in charge at the mission attempted to close the one small bridge over the river that connected the two Villas. It is recorded that the governor, who had heard that even he was barred from the narrow span, crossed the bridge in heated defiance, faced the *padre* in his cell, and threatened to send the missionary back to Mexico "packed on a mule." Father Mariano de los Dolores, the rebellious priest, was forced to leave the bridge open, but retaliated by closing the church of the mission to San Fernando's faithful. Mission guards were not restored until 1737.

In 1762 Mission San Antonio de Valero was in its zenith. Those dependent upon its bounty drew from the resources of the mission *rancho*, described as having "one hundred and fifteen gentle horses, one thousand one hundred fifteen head of cattle, two thousand three hundred sheep and goats, two hundred mares, fifteen jennets and eighteen saddle mares." (From *Documentos para la Historia de la Provincia de Tejas*, pp. 163-167.)

In that year the walls of the chapel of the mission collapsed, a symbolic event, for the fortunes of the mission flock were never



Old wall uncovered in 1939, showing ancient construction.

again to rise. The following year, 1763, a plague decimated the ranks of priests, neophytes, soldiers and settlers. Of this era Sturmberg wrote:

The decline of the Mission San Antonio de Valero proceeded very rapidly from 1763 on. The savage Indians preferred to follow the French doctrine — preferred the wild and easy life to the orderly life of the mission. The older, converted Indians and their children soon acquired the habits of the soldiers and their families; many of them moved out of the mission into the Villita San Jose de Alamo and their children married with the children of the Mexican soldiers.

Indications are that by this time the region of La Villita was peopled not only by families attached to the mission, but by soldiers of the Presidio of Bexar, a royal garrison maintained for the protection of the Villa of San Fernando and the older mission settlement. In his diary Fray Gaspar de Solis, in 1767, tells only of soldiers attached to the Presidio. Yet the Villa of San Fernando still frowned upon La Villita as the home of less aristocratic Spaniards, the home, as Rodriguez says, of the families of soldiers. Solis, by the way, wrote a remarkable description of the San Antonio River in this area:

The road from the presidio is wooded with mesquite, huisaches, pin oaks and oaks. The river contains fish: barbos, piltontes, seafish, sardines, eels and others. In these woods . . . are great numbers of cattle and horses, many animals such as deer, wolves, coyotes, rabbits, and now and then a lion, some wild cats, wild boar along the banks of the river, blue ducks, geese, turkey, quail . . . screech owls which do not call like those outside, but have a different manner of screeching . . .

The historian Bancroft tells of a law passed in 1778 which dealt a telling blow to the mission and its dependents. The measure provided that all unbranded cattle were the property of the King of Spain, and imposed a fee of four *reales* a head for all such cattle slaughtered. Edward W. Heusinger in *Early Explorations and Mission Establishments in Texas* explains that "Since the wealth of the missions consisted in cattle, which it was impossible to herd together and brand, this double-toothed law practically obliged them to pay four reales apiece for the right to slaughter their own cattle raised on their own lands."

Records disclose that in 1785 the two settlements of San Antonio — that on the east side of the river, including La Villita,

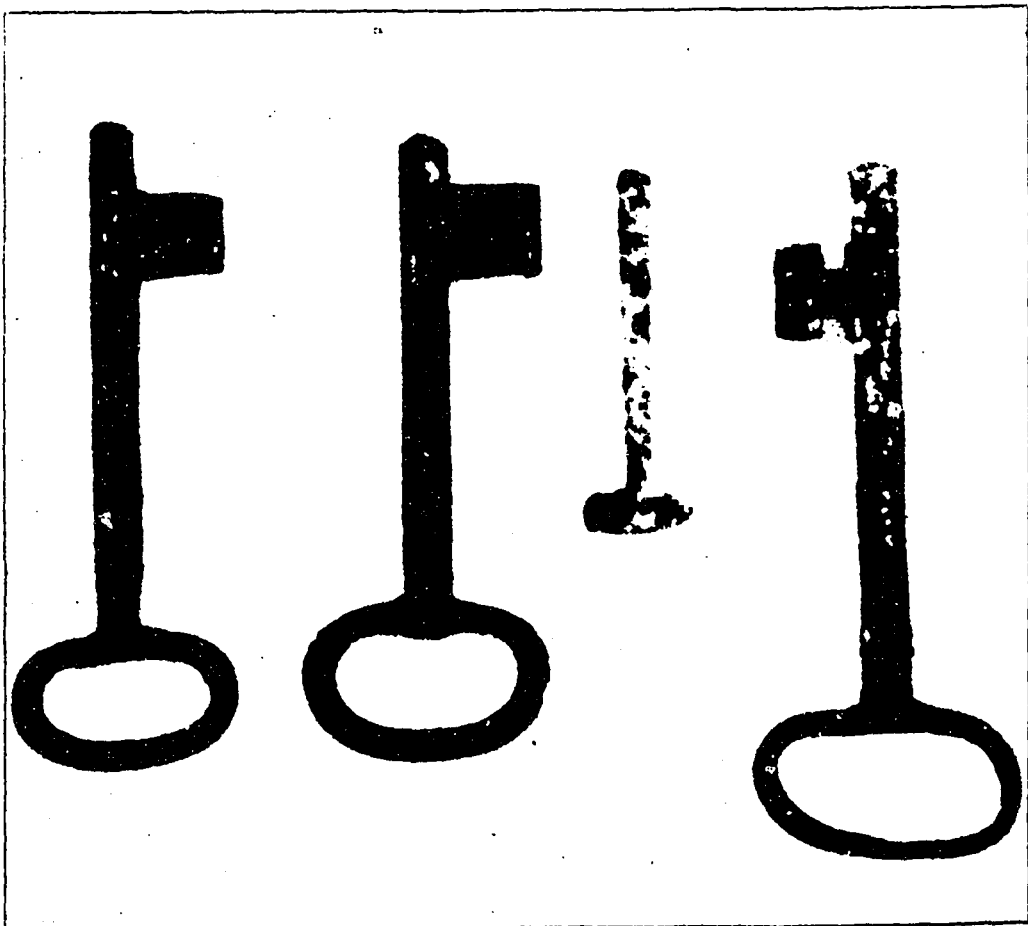
and that on the west side, the Villa of San Fernando — became one civil unit under an *alcalde* — a sort of justice of the peace and mayor combined. Until this year, La Villita and all the mission settlement had been under the jurisdiction of the *padres*.

A movement was now under way for the abandonment of the missions and the secularization of their lands. The Count Revilla Gigedo in his report as Viceroy said, "Neither our acquisitions nor the number of Indians congregated in the actual mission towns do by any means justify the enormous outlay incurred, nor the fatiguing labors undergone by the missionary fathers." In 1790 there arrived in San Antonio refugees from the Presidio of los Adaes, in east Texas, and to these victims of French aggrandizement many of the lands formerly held by Mission San Antonio de Valero were distributed, including, as old land records disclose, lots in the present area of La Villita. By 1793 the mission beside the San Antonio River had been abandoned, and the families who had lived so near it, obedient to its bells, lost their separate identity and became at last simply citizens of Bexar, as this Spanish town was most commonly known.

Speaking of the San Antonio of 1793, Sturmberg wrote:

On the south side of our present-day Gas and Electric Company's plant where there are two bridges, there was located the principal ford for wagons and riders on horseback. For the convenience of the general public a log was thrown across the narrowest part of the stream. . . . Where Villita Street begins or ends on South Alamo Street, there was the main part of the Villita. After crossing the stream one entered at once into the city of San Fernando. . . . Houses were built closely together; they were all the one-story kind and topped with flat roofs. The construction was the only practical one for warding off the attacks of savage Indians. . . . The combined population of the city and Villita never exceeded 2,000 or 3,000 souls, whilst at times, it fell below those numbers. . . . The peninsula, formed by the river and extending to the Alamo, was called Protero. There was also a collection of houses around the Mission San Antonio de Valero (the Alamo) and extending to the Villita.

And now the "Little Town," safe so long under the protection of the *padres* and their soldiers, was thrust out into the often turbulent life of the city beyond the river.



Hand-wrought keys discovered under plaster in a La Villita house.

Stormy Times in Little Town

Forlorn and impoverished, La Villita drowsed on the river bank and remembered better days; and the faithful few who had been taught their *Aves* in the now deserted mission trudged with little relish to the Church of San Fernando across the river — the haughty, gold-trimmed church of the equally haughty, gold-braided *islenos*. Bells that had called them to vespers were silent now, and many an old man, ragged and barefoot, stood abashed in the new church of the Canary Islanders, heartsick for the friendly old mission chapel that had never known nor sought magnificence.

In 1803 the solitude of the abandoned Mission San Antonio de Valero was broken by the arrival of the Flying Company of San Carlos de Parras, which occupied the former living quarters of the monks. This military unit hailed from the Villa of San Jose y Santiago del Alamo in Mexico, and its claim to immortality was to bestow the name *Alamo* upon the battered old mission. Henceforth, records refer to San Antonio de Valero as "the Alamo." Chabot, in *With the Makers of San Antonio*, wrote: "Many of the soldiers of the Alamo Company married Indians and established their homes in the vicinity of the mission. Then Spaniards purchased the old mission lands, and gradually a new town grew up there, which was called *La Villita*." Thus, it is indicated that the period in which the Alamo received its famous name saw also the naming of the eastern part of the old settlement of the mission as "Little Town."

Meantime the germ of freedom had invaded even the isolated outpost of Bexar, and men of republican persuasion were whispering of revolt from royalist Spain. In 1811 a stirring episode took place among the soldiers of the San Antonio garrison, quartered then in La Villita. In his *Memoirs*, Jose Antonio Navarro tells how the spirit of revolt seized 2,000 troops of the royal guard holding Texas between San Antonio and the Sabine River. Navarro wrote:

Stationed there were officers of the most famous troops of Nuevo Leon and Nuevo Santander. . . . San Antonio was at the apogee of its prosperity. Thousands upon thousands of gold and silver coins arrived in the city every two months for the luxurious maintenance of the troops. It was a very common occurrence to see any given soldier spend \$100, for breakfast; and with the same serenity as we might now invite a friend to join us in a glass of beer. . . . Common to all human society the citizens and troops of San Antonio began to suffer some anxiety concerning the political fate of Mexico. . . . The descendants of the first *islenos*, settlers of Bexar as legitimate original *Hidalgoes*, who were those with the greatest daring, suggested methods of humiliating the haughty Spanish governors. . . . Three sergeants were then chosen to seduce the army. They were Miguel Reyna, Blas Jose Perales and Trinidad Perez. These placed the entire troop on a war footing in the barracks, which at that time was in the place known as La Villita here in San Antonio. At dawn, January 22, 1811, they offered this army to the Captain of Militia of Nuevo Santander, Juan Baptista Casas, who accepted the honor and was placed in command of 1,500 men.

The revolting troops, led by Casas, marched to "the Plaza of the Government," and imprisoned the Spanish governor Salcedo, "Herrera, and other Spanish officers who still slept in the deep slumber of the haze of early morning, confident that no one would dare to attempt anything against their omnipotent persons." Navarro added:

This memorable day of January 22, 1811, was the first on which the Mexicans of San Antonio de Bexar announced their desire to break forever the chains of their ancient colonial slavery.

Captain Casas sent his prisoners to Mexico; but the republican revolt had turned, and Casas was finally betrayed by his

own compatriots, imprisoned and at last shot for treason. Thus a resident of La Villita, young and zealous, made the first of San Antonio's spectacular sacrifices for freedom. Others quickly followed; in 1813, the "Republican Army of the North," composed of Anglo-American adventurers, Mexican liberals, and Indians, occupied San Antonio, to be defeated in August, 1813, by the Spanish General Arredondo, whose vengeance against the revolutionists almost emptied La Villita of its men. In the barracks of the town nearly 800 prisoners were assembled, and most of these were shot. Inside a small, almost airtight granary 300 prisoners were retained overnight, and 18 suffocated. That night (August 20) is called *La Noche Triste* (the sad night) in San Antonio history. This was the time when the women of the town were confined in a building derisively called *La Quinta* (the household), and made to convert 24 bushels of corn every 24 hours into *tortillas* for the victorious royalist soldiers.

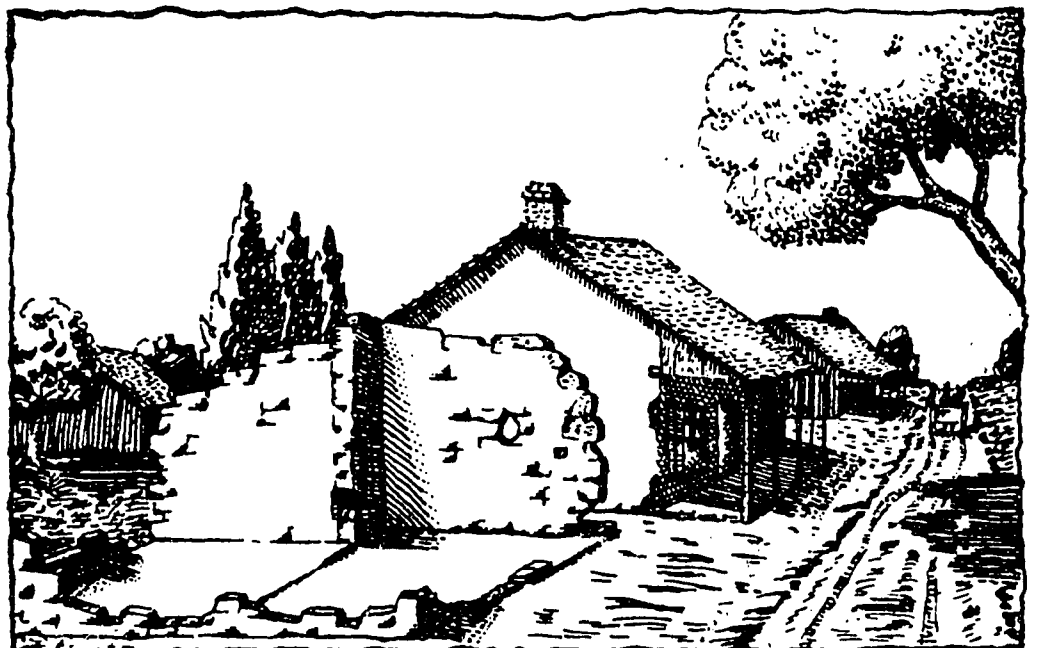
Spanish persecution of the families of liberals was so drastic that the residents of San Antonio, including those of La Villita, fled whenever opportunity for escape was presented. Since La Villita had given birth to the republican movement locally, it suffered most of all.

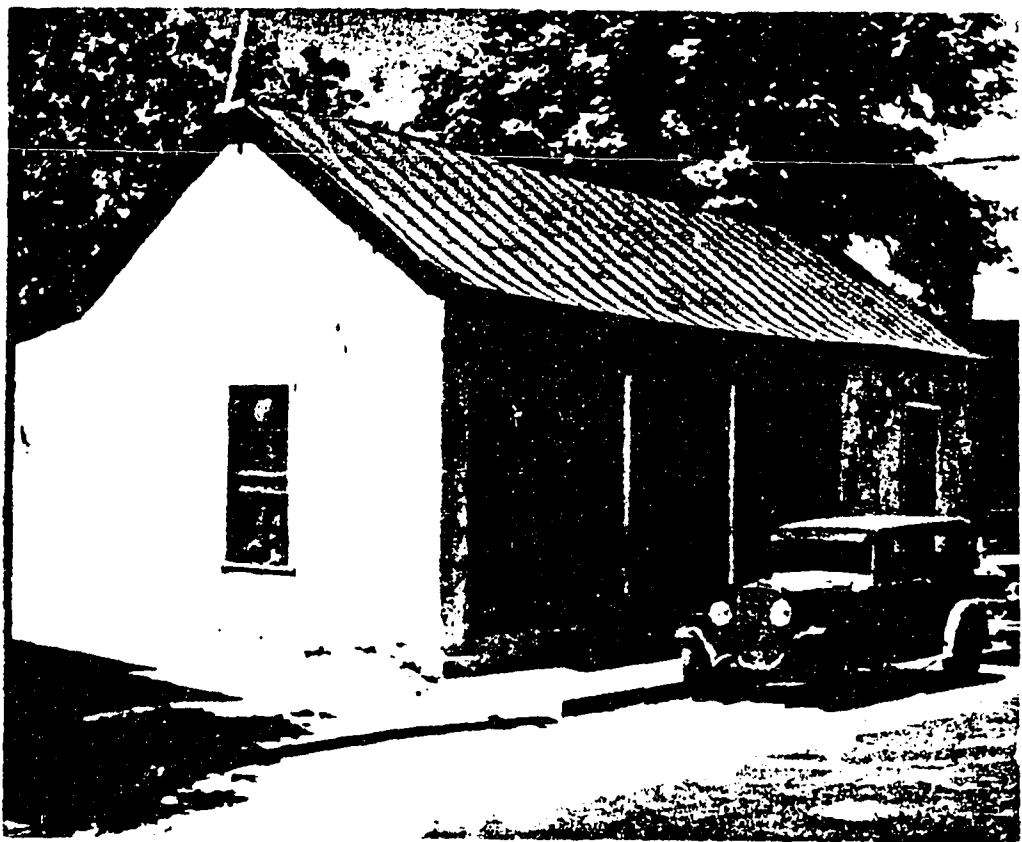
Echoes of the dark days of 1813 are found in the archives of Bexar County, in petitions of the remaining Bexar citizens for shelter, food, or for life itself. There is the plea of Luisa de Luna, for example, who said in a petition to the *Cabildo*, or city council:

That being one of the most unhappy women in this province because my husband Vicente Travieso was one of those carried away by his caprices and want of judgment to help the iniquitous party of the insurrection for which reason they have sequestered everything that belonged to my husband and me . . . And all this has been taken from me as well as my personal clothing and so I have been reduced to misery and want, I and four small children . . . So I apply to the benignity and powerful protection of your highness in order that, moved by pity you will have the charity to give me one of the rooms of the house known as mine, one of the small cows so that my unhappy and unfortunate children will have something to nourish them . . .

This petition ended with the words, *No se firmar* — "I cannot sign." The plea, made on November 22, 1813, was granted that same day when the district commissioner, Don Alvino Pacheco, was ordered to give the unfortunate woman "the house which was seized from the traitor Francisco Farias."

Many of such petitions in the archives name boundaries of property within the present Villita area. Land granted by Spanish authorities was still occupied by means of primitive gestures of possession: the grantee pulled weeds, broke branches from trees, scattered handfuls of dirt about, drove stakes, and otherwise indicated the process of taking possession of the land.





House redecorated by Middle-European immigrants, on Villita Street.

A Cloudburst Brings in Aristocracy

La Villita had been born of piety and nurtured through bloody episodes by its simple faith in the traditions it was heir to from a scarred old mission. Yet it was a humble place, a cluster of primitive houses huddled close for security and reassurance. Its people were humble folk for the most part — largely a mixture of Indian and Spanish blood. Its fortunes, always linked — even though intangibly — with the mission, had reached perhaps their lowest ebb when a natural disaster intervened to change the entire complexion of the area.

In July, 1819, a flood deluged the proud Villa of San Fernando, causing considerable loss of life and carrying away public buildings and the houses of grandees. The waters of the San Antonio River and of San Pedro Creek overflowed every part of the city except the higher ground of the Alamo and La Villita. Governor Martinez reported that "On the morning of the 5th instant, in consequence of a terrific waterspout (doubtless what now would be called a cloudburst) which burst north of the city, the river became so swollen as to run over its banks, causing a general overflow such as has never been beheld in the province before."

Martinez said that the damage was such that "the city may be said to exist no longer," and that its inhabitants, "those who were not victims of the fury of the waters," were reduced to "lamentable destitution." The governor added, "The landed estate belonging to the Royal Domain has been ruined by the overflow." Chabot wrote of the events that followed:

Subsequent to this flood began the migration to *La Villita* . . . where the Martinez family received several royal grants. . . . What today is known as the Cos house, on Villita Street . . . was, according to the abstract of the property, a grant to Don Antonio Martinez.

The Bexar County archives have many petitions of this period from the hidalgos of San Fernando who wished to move to Villita's higher ground. Such a petition is the following:

Donicio Martinez, a citizen of San Fernando, prays for a tract of public land in the new Villita, as the site for a house which he desires to occupy as a dwelling.

Old as was Villita in that day, it is to be noted from this application that, to those of the upper class who now thought it desirable as a dwelling place, it was "new" Villita.

Thus, from the time of the 1819 flood, began the change of Villita from a lowly community of modest homes to an exclusive residential area where lived many of the oldest and most aristo-

cratic families of San Antonio. This character it was to retain for many years. Not all the former land owners in La Villita wished to sell at once, but the inducement of profitable prices for small lots that had been granted them by the King gradually had its effect. For awhile Villita presented the contrast offered by fine and humble houses in proximity. As Mrs. Lucas wrote, "The back yard or patio was either a place with a fountain and flowers or it was just a dust heap with a scraggly cactus in a corner and a skinny rooster in search of insects in the dust pile." (From *Memoirs of Mrs. H. Lucas*, *Frontier Times*, Vol. 3, Jan., 1926).

The Scene of a Surrender

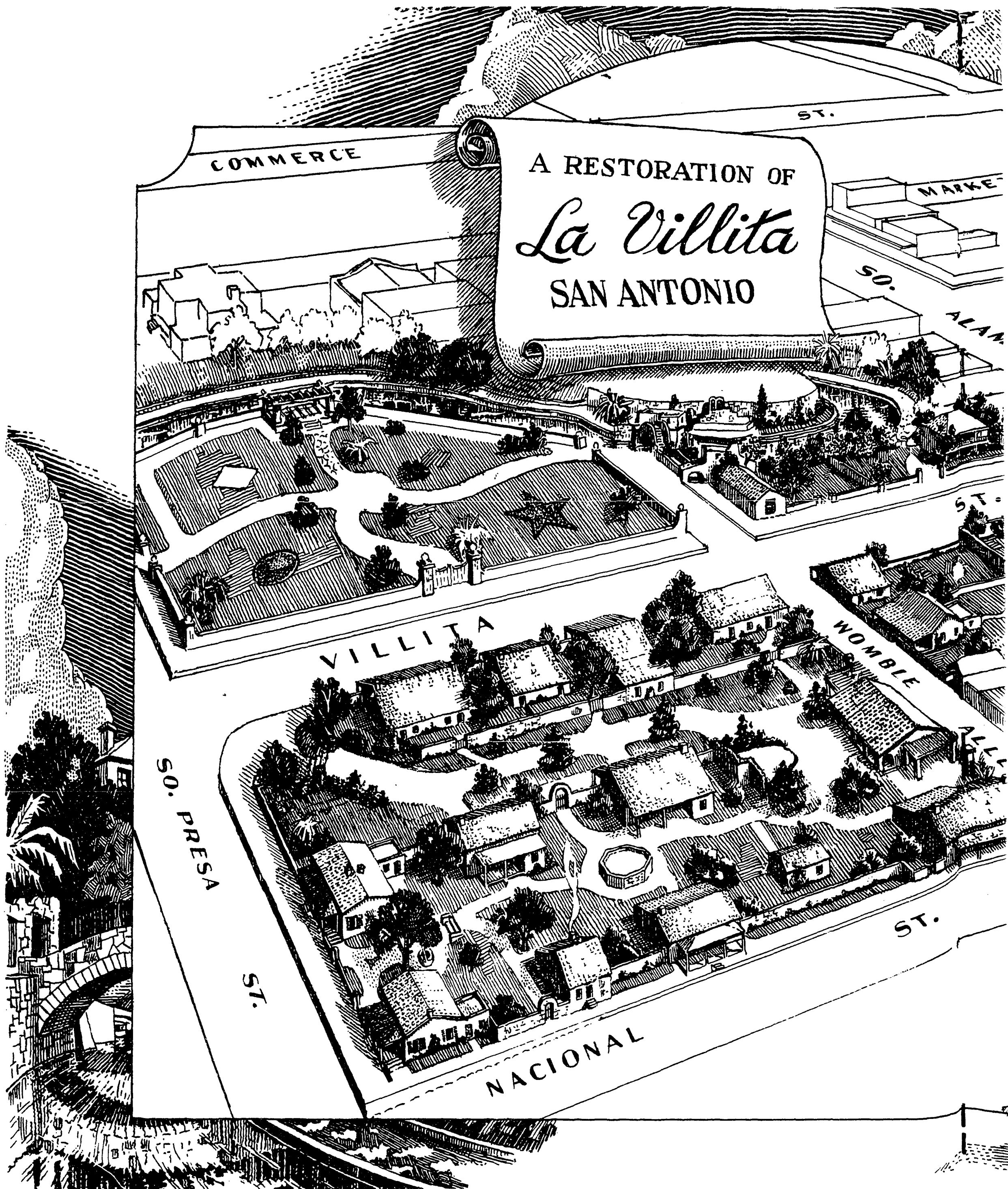
On the streets of San Antonio, as the nineteenth century entered its second decade, *Americanos* in increasing numbers appeared. Although this old town was still predominately Latin, the influx of colonists brought by Anglo-American *empresarios* (colonizers) to widely scattered communities in the now Mexican province of Texas (for Mexico had won its independence in 1821), had naturally increased the non-Latin population.

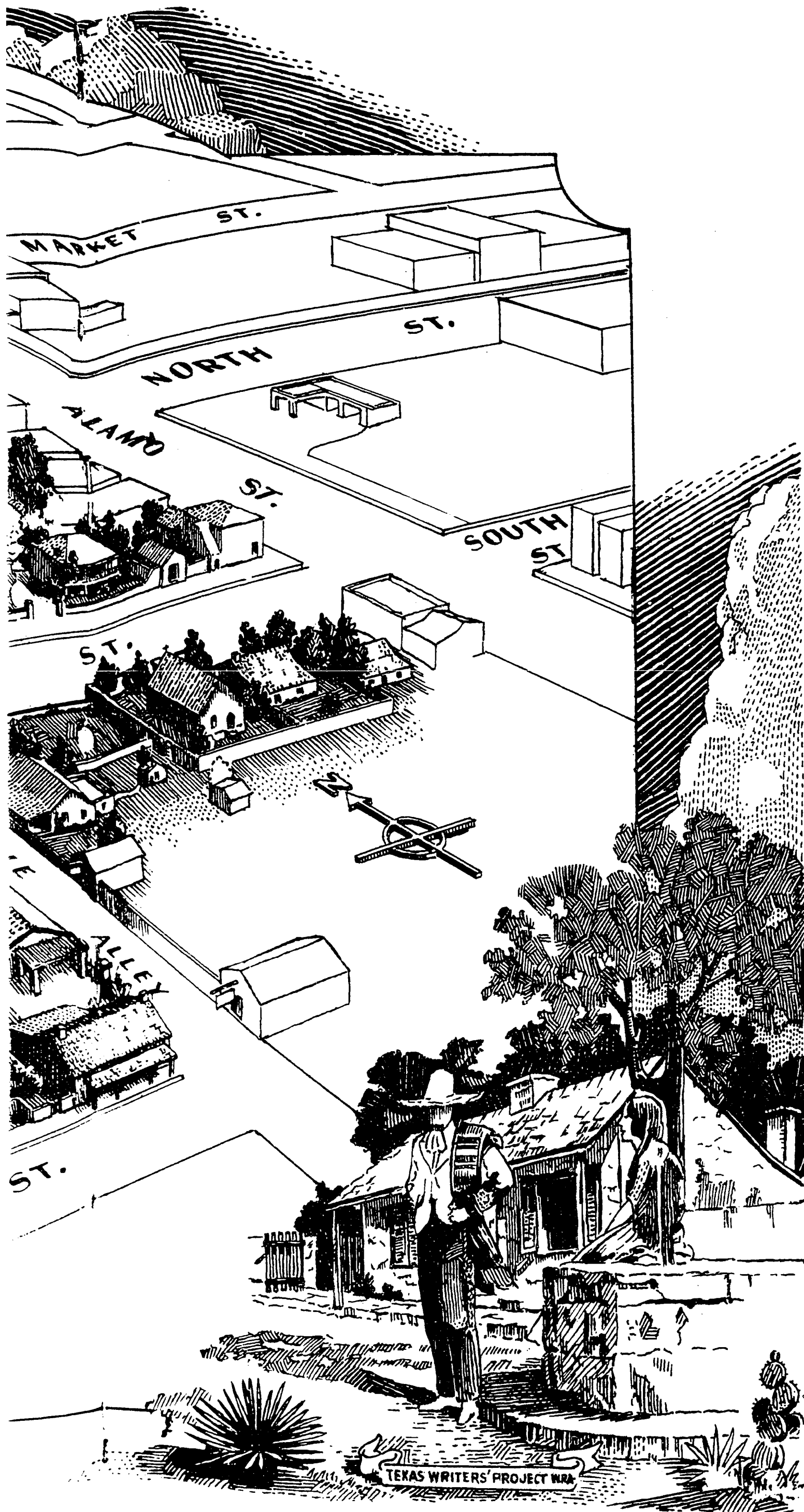
Among the newer residents was Erastus (Deaf) Smith. He had come to Texas in 1819, and wooed a belle of the town, half French and half Spanish, whose parents lived in La Villita. When the couple was wed in 1828 they at once established their domicile in the house which still stands at 301 South Presa Street. Deaf Smith had earned a reputation for courage among the Indians and Spaniards; his name was to become well known in Texas history, and soon, for again the idea of freedom was gnawing at the minds of many who walked the streets of the old *pueblo*. Throughout the province, those newly adopted *Americanos* spoke and dreamed of a day when this land might be wrested from Mexico.

During these years La Villita again knew the scourge of Indian warfare, as indeed did every person dwelling in the San Antonio Valley. The *Menchaca Memoirs* (Chabot) tell how the prices of food rose, because "by reason of the city being surrounded by Indians, the people (were) unable to get out of town." A sack of corn sold for \$3, a pound of coffee was \$2.50, and tobacco was \$1 an ounce. "The people being in such pressure, would at the risk of their lives go out in the country to kill deer, turkey, etc., and cook herbs for the support of their families," *Menchaca* wrote. "The persons who were engaged in agriculture had to go in squads of fifteen or twenty or more to look for their oxen; and while working had to keep their arms with them." *Menchaca* described the murder of one Domingo Bustillos by a Tonkawa, placing the scene near La Villita.

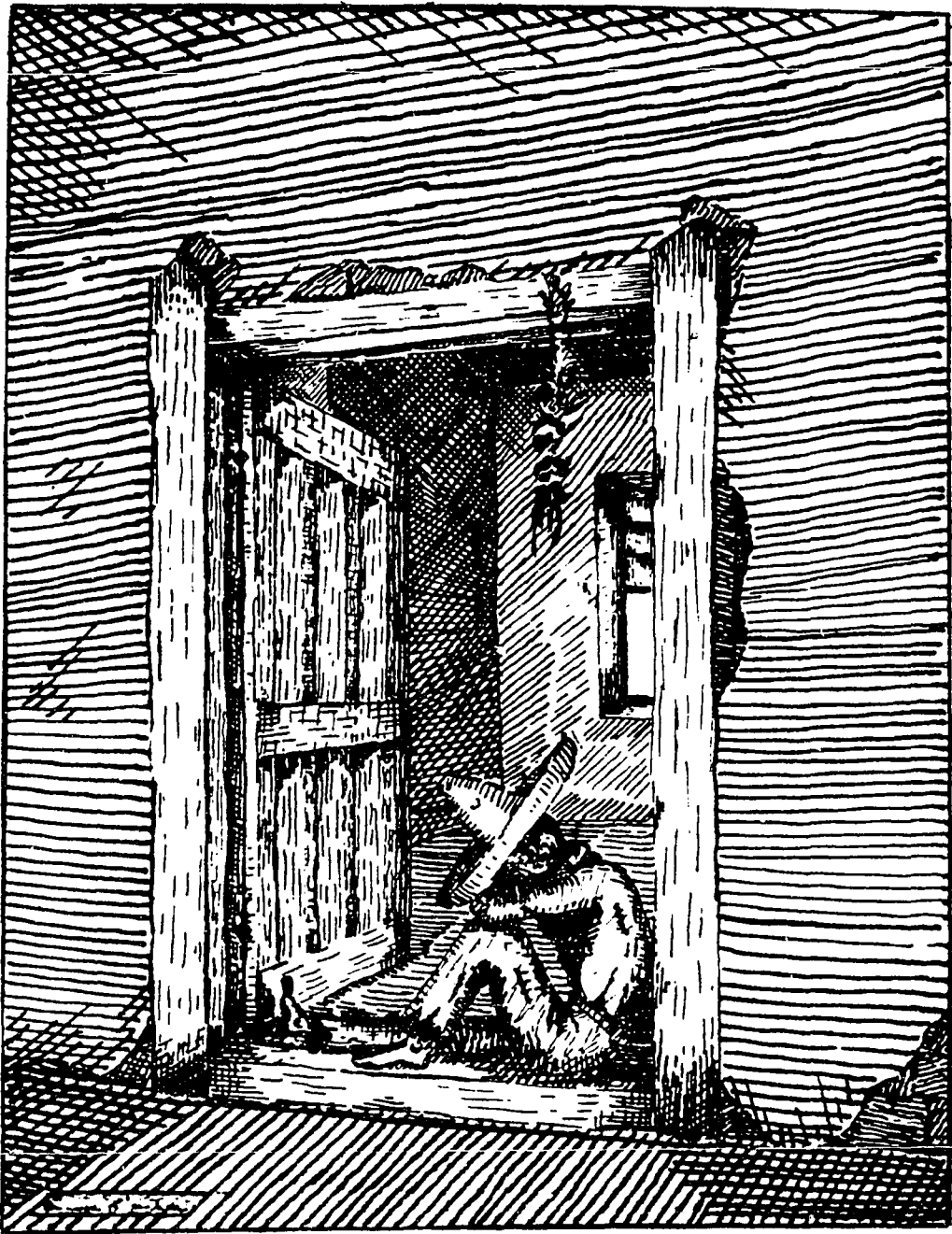
Into this atmosphere of unrest and trouble, in 1828, came a handsome brown-haired, blue-eyed stranger — James Bowie, onetime slave runner for the pirate Lafitte, a chivalrous adventurer







That part of the restoration already provided for includes ancient houses, an outdoor Mexican restaurant, arts and handicrafts workshops, an acequia, subtropical plants, and vine arbors, typifying the San Antonio of many years ago.



generally known — although some credit the invention to his brother Rezin — as the creator of the bowie knife. Bowie met and became enamored of Ursula Veramendi, Spanish beauty of San Antonio, and many were the silks and satins and velvets aired along Villita Street when the dashing frontiersman and the aristocratic beauty were married in San Fernando Church on April 22, 1831. And there were tears in Little Town, when, in 1833, news came that Bowie's lovely wife and their babies had died in Mexico of a plague. That tragedy almost broke the heart of the man whom Texas Indians had given the name Fighting Devil, and he no longer danced with the belles or teased the duennas of La Villita on occasions when the Spanish aristocracy made merry in the midst of growing anxiety. For the talk of freedom had now become a war; in 1835 a motley army led by Stephen Austin, first Anglo-American colonizer and known as the Father of Texas, marched upon San Antonio and encamped along the river near the Old Mill, at a site occupied today by a residence at 1215 North St. Mary's Street.

Bowie had returned, but this time as an enemy, and his old friends kept their relationship a secret. For the town was held by a Mexican general, Martin Perfecto de Cos — young and handsome, but not the man to brook alliances with a rebel Texan.

The Little Town was under the direct scrutiny of the Mexican general, for according to tradition and certain writers, he occupied the adobe house at 513 Villita Street — a small building that remains today as it was then, low, long and narrow, with few windows and thick walls. In the *Rise of the Lone Star*, by Driggs and King, a San Antonio pioneer is quoted thus:

General Cos lived while in this town in a little adobe building which still stands on Villita Street. Father saw and talked to him there. The General conversed freely and seemed to bear no animosity . . .

The Texas colonial revolutionists arrived near the city in October, 1835, and had several skirmishes with Cos' troops, but never near Villita. Then on December 4, when the officers had decided to abandon the siege, and their soldiers — cold, hungry,

ragged and unpaid — had started breaking camp, a bold frontiersman named Benjamin F. Milam shouted, "Who'll go with old Ben Milam into San Antonio?"

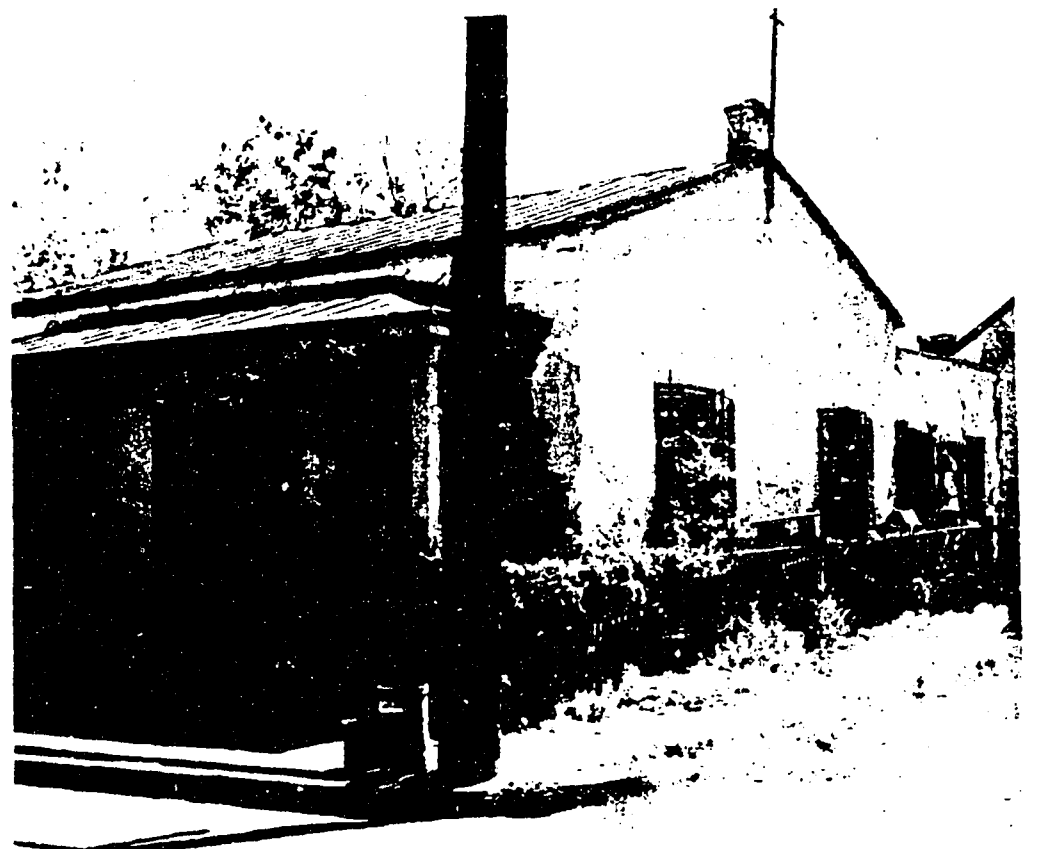
The answer of those Texas volunteers — farmers, tradesmen, lawyers, adventurers — is outstanding in Texas history. They followed "old Ben Milam" into San Antonio, and after five days of fighting, in which Milam was killed, they took the city. And now a historic scene occurred in the little house on Villita Street.

General Cos was a brother-in-law of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, dictator-president of Mexico, and Cos had been sent to Texas to subdue the rebels. In this he had failed. On December 9 he flew a white flag from the Alamo, where at first his guns had boomed defiance and warning to the Texans, and under a flag of truce made a verbal offer of surrender; then withdrew that part of his army which was in the center of the city to the Alamo side of the river. On the cold morning of December 11, in the little building that is now at 513 Villita Street, he faced the Texan commander, Gen. Edward Burleson, to discuss articles of capitulation.

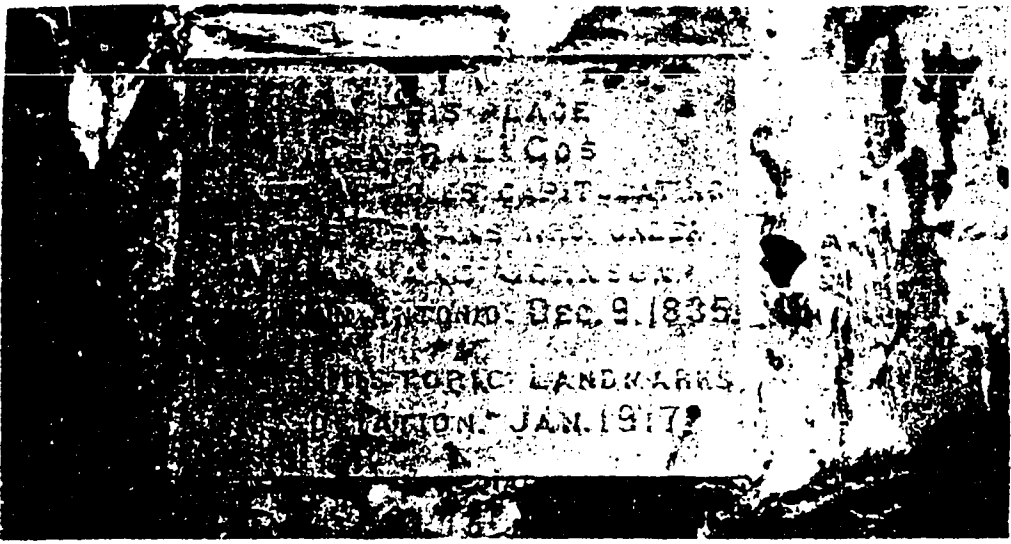
Here the terms of surrender, providing for the withdrawal of the Mexican army from Texas, were written and signed. One condition stressed by Burleson was that a large group of convicts, who had been brought in chains to San Antonio as reinforcements for Cos, must all be taken by the general himself to below the Rio Grande. Brief excerpts from the historic document signed on Villita Street follow:

Capitulation entered into by Gen. Martin Perfecto de Cos, of the Mexican troops, and Gen. Edward Burleson, of the colonial troops of Texas. . . . Being desirous of preventing the further effusion of blood and the ravages of civil war, we have agreed on the following stipulations: First. That General Cos and his officers retire with their arms and private property into the interior of the republic under parole of honor that they will not in any way oppose the re-establishment of the federal constitution of 1824. Second. That the 100 infantry lately arrived with the convicts, the battalion of Morelos, and the cavalry, retire with the general, taking their arms and 10 rounds of cartridges for their muskets. Third. That the general take the convicts brought in by General Ugartechea beyond the Rio Grande.

On December 14, at dusk, General Cos led his vanquished troops from the Alamo and Villita areas. Whooping, jubilant, the Texans swarmed into the Alamo, and the houses of La Villita must have been shuttered and dark, for the Little Town knew not these tall, noisy strangers with their buckskin garb and long squirrel guns.



Rough plaster over stone, with tin roof of later period.



Top — Marker on Cos house, 513 Villita Street.

Center — Cos house, where San Antonio was surrendered to the Texans in 1835.

Lower — Door of Cos house, showing iron grille.



With the return of the fugitives, bustle and animation again filled the streets, where Texans and Mexicans walked about their business without fear or resentment. As we strolled in the main thoroughfares, we were pleasantly struck by the graceful gait of the attractive ladies, whose beauty brought back thoughts of the pretty New York girls I had seen up and down Broadway. . . . Mexicans are great pleasure-seekers and spend their lives in dancing, riding, drinking, eating and sleeping. As we were welcome guests among many of the native families of the city, we visited them often. . . . Everybody looked contented; the men chatted with the olive-hued beauties or talked of horses. Besides conversation, cracking pecan nuts or smoking cigarettes seemed to be the most absorbing pastime of the whole assembly.

Meantime in Mexico Santa Anna prepared an army of more than 6,000 men to crush the Texas revolution. Gen. Sam Houston,

When the Alamo Fell

But as days passed and many of the Texas soldiers remained — although many drifted homeward, confident that the revolution had successfully ended — the eastern bank of the river earned many agreeable things about these newcomers; even shared, in several instances, the enthusiasm of the volunteers for freedom from the tyrannical rule of Santa Anna. Some of the homes of La Villita now even gave of their men to this cause, for the old families had always had a weakness for revolutions.

In Ehrenberg's *With Milam and Fannin*, a soldier who was fighting for the unrecognized Texas rebel government told of the days that followed Cos' departure:

The restoration of peace had brought back to the city many of its residents who had deserted it during the siege.

former governor of Tennessee and now a leader in the Texas cause, sent Bowie to destroy the Alamo so that it would not fall into Mexican hands; but the little garrison that remained was unwilling to evacuate the post. If the Mexican army could be held here, they argued, the settlements of the Austin Colony and others might escape destruction. So, in the winter of 1835-36, the tall *senores* continued to frequent the streets of La Villita. Among them was Col. William Barret Travis, red-haired lawyer known as the "gallant captain", who shared with Bowie the military responsibility, and David Crockett, the famous Tennessee backwoods congressman who had recently said to his late constituents, following his defeat for reelection: "You can all go to hell — I'm going to Texas."

The closeness of La Villita to the Alamo linked the hardships of the Texas soldiers and the uneasiness and privation of the families of La Villita. Food, clothing and money were scarce for both; San Antonio had been cut off by the revolution from its ordinary sources of supply and commerce. As the long winter days passed, rumors of an invading Mexican army made occasional ripples in the deep pool of common hardship and hunger. As spring approached, Mexicans of the town who were in sympathy with the issue of freedom for which the Texans fought, including the father of J. M. Rodriguez, warned the soldiers of the Alamo that an army — now known to have cost Santa Anna \$7,900,000 in its preparation — was being prepared below the Rio Grande to reconquer the rebellious province. Amelia Williams, in her thesis entitled *A Critical Study of the Siege of the Alamo and of the Personnel of its Defenders* (manuscript, University of Texas), wrote that: "Finally Travis told him (Rodriguez) that he and his men had to stay and die at the Alamo, if need be, fighting for Texas."

Rumor became certainty on the morning of February 23, 1836. Before dawn of that day an atmosphere of excitement spread from the humble *jacales* of the poorer Mexican district west of San Pedro Creek. Ox carts lumbered through the rutted, twisting streets, piled high with the household goods of departing San Antonio Mexicans. Travis, pricking up his ears, demanded the reason for this exodus, but most of the hurried travelers were loyal republicans and made evasive answers. As chickens squawked and pigs squealed while their owners carted them away, and cows lowed and children shouted, the Texas leaders stood in the midst of the confusion and realized that the invading army from below the Rio Grande must not only have started, but that its arrival must immediately impend.

Travis placed a sentinel in the bell tower of San Fernando Church, to watch for signs of an approaching enemy. At noon he reported figures with glittering lances moving in the direction of Alazan Creek. Scouts sent out encountered the vanguard of Mexican cavalry. The bell of the parish church rang out the alarm, and soon the soldiers of the Alamo were at their posts. Between 185 and 200 men comprised the garrison, and there were 18 small guns along the fortifications. Each of the volunteers had proved by remaining here that he was indeed determined to "die if need be."

In the flurry that followed news of the rapid approach of the Mexicans, Davy Crockett said calmly to Travis, "And here am I, Colonel; assign me to some place, and I and my Tennessee boys will defend it all right." Miss Williams wrote that "Travis then replied that he wished Crockett to defend the picket wall extending from the end of the barracks on the south side to the corner of the church." That order was to become most important to La Villita, for Crockett's cannon, during the twelve days of the siege, sent its projectiles into that section, and much damage — although it is unrecorded — must have been done.

By two o'clock in the afternoon of that first day Santa Anna's forces had occupied the town. A blood-red flag, the flag of no quarter, flew from the tower of the church of San Fernando. Santa Anna's demand for unconditional surrender was answered by the Texans with a cannon shot fired from their eighteen pounder — Crockett's gun. The siege of the Alamo had begun.

What followed is a story known to all the world, the story of not more than 200 men facing fully 5,000 picked troops in an uneven struggle that was in its effects to end in the independence of Texas.

For the tattered soldiers inside the Alamo there were days of cannonading and a few encounters of a minor nature, as hope of

reinforcements dwindled and finally died. James Butler Bonham, boyhood chum of Travis, had borrowed money to come to Texas and fight beside his friend; he tried in vain to bring relief to the beleaguered garrison. And although the houses of La Villita were deserted, since all women and children had abandoned the city for safer places, much of this historic struggle occurred in and near the Villita area. Proof that at least one of the Mexican batteries was here is contained in a letter from Travis to the president of the Texas convention, then in session to declare independence from Mexico:

Commandancy of the Alamo, Bexar,

March 3, 1836.

To the President of the Convention, Sir: . . . I beg leave of you to communicate to you the situation of this garrison. . . . From . . . the twenty-fifth (of February) to the present date the enemy have kept up a bombardment from two howitzers . . . and a heavy cannonade from two long nine-pounders, mounted on a battery on the opposite side of the river. . . . During this period, the enemy have been busily employed in encircling us with entrenched encampments on all sides, at the following distances, to-wit: In Bexar, four hundred yards west; in Lavillita, three hundred yards south. . . . Their threats have no influence on me or my men, but to make all fight with desperation and that high-souled courage that characterizes the patriot, who is willing to die in defence of his country's liberty and his own honor. . . . God and Texas — Victory or Death.

Mrs. S. J. Wright, in *Our Living Alamo*, has also mentioned the Villita battery. Old reports and maps show that the branch of the Alamo Madre *acequia* that passed beside the Alamo's east walls, now known as the "Villita ditch," separated the besieged Texans and the besieging Mexicans on the east side of the mission fort. General Cos, forced by Santa Anna to break the parole given by him after the Battle of San Antonio, was assigned to attack the southeast fortification (including the chapel of the Alamo, the



only building in the fort that remains today), and his command was stationed near La Villita, when at last orders were given for an attack on the Alamo.

Mexican batteries were silenced by ten o'clock of the night of March 5, as preparations were made in profoundest silence by the Mexicans for a daybreak assault. That night, Little Town must have known the quiet creeping figures of dragoons as they went quietly through the darkness, collecting scaling ladders, crowbars and axes to use in the attack. These soldiers were obedient to the dictator yet fully conscious of the bloody dawn but a few hours distant. None knew better than these hired fighters of Mexico the awful price they would have to pay for the Alamo, for they had sampled the aim of the long rifles, and had tested the endurance and courage of the tall señores.

A Mexican soldier writing to his brother said, in a letter published in *El Mosquito Mexicano*, April 15, 1836:

I marched under the immediate command of General Cos, and I will tell you what I saw. After a long wait we took our places at 3 o'clock a.m. on the south side, a distance of 500 feet from the fort of the enemy. Here we remained on our stomachs until 5:30 (whew! it was cold), when the signal of march was given by the President from the battery between the north and east.

Thus, part of the attacking forces were in the direction of La Villita. At the rise of the moon Mexican troops completely surrounded the Alamo; within, its defenders slept, for this was their first respite in many days from constant cannonading. Sentinels had been posted but they must also have slept, for they gave no alarm. Coffee might have kept them awake; they had no coffee.

At five o'clock on the morning of March 6 Santa Anna stood upon the Commerce Street bridge, whose approach is on the spot then occupied by a Mexican battery. To the wild notes of the *deguello*, a bugle call that for centuries had been associated with "no quarter," the legions of Santa Anna moved forward to awaken the ragged handful of Texans to their last dawn.

Of the battle thus begun on a bleak March day, of the hand-to-hand fighting, the desperate resistance, the death of every male defender inmate of the Alamo, much has been written. Blood ran that day in the old *acequia* that had watered the flowers of La Villita in happier times. Flames of the funeral pyre erected at Santa Anna's command — where the bodies of the Texas patriots were reduced to ashes — afforded ghastly illumination in La Villita that night. Only a few remained there to remember that horror; and for months afterwards, while all living people shunned the Alamo and its environs as a place of death, the homes of Little Town stood deserted.

The direct result of the Battle of the Alamo was the Battle of San Jacinto, where the independence of Texas was secured by the defeat of Santa Anna and his army. Deaf Smith, who had distinguished himself as a scout for the Texas army, in this battle won further renown by destroying Vince's bridge — thereby impeding the advance of Mexican reinforcements, and preventing the escape of Mexican soldiers during the battle. Thus, a resident of La Villita helped avenge the butchery of the Alamo and materially assisted in the conquest of Santa Anna, its author.

Although today removed from the Alamo by modern streets lined with modern buildings, La Villita retains its inheritance as a part — however small — of the epic story of that shrine. Its narrow streets and venerable houses recall the days when Travis, Bowie, Bonham and Crockett were here. Grantland Rice, writing for the *New York Tribune* in 1916, said that they sometimes come back:

There's a tramp of a ghost on the low winds tonight,
An echo that drifts like a dream on its way;
There's the blur of the spectre that leaves for the fight,
Grave-risen at last from a long vanished day;
There's the shout and the cail of grim soul unto soul,
As they rise one by one, out of death's shadowed glen,
To follow the bugle — the drum's muffled roll,
Where the ghosts of the Alamo gather again.

Newcomers to Little Town

While Texas pursued its career as an independent nation in the late 1830's and early 1840's, new faces were seen in La Villita, and again its history and character gradually changed. The land west of San Antonio was still unpeopled and dangerous, and the old city of the Dons was considered a remote and unsafe outpost — threatened by Indians, as in the past, but also, now, by avenging expeditions of Mexicans. Yet more and more non-Latin settlers were becoming citizens. In 1838 the picturesque John Coffee Hays, called "Captain Jack," a mighty Indian fighter whose father had owned *The Hermitage* in Tennessee, came to San Antonio with a company of Texas Rangers, of which historic band he was the first duly appointed captain. In the *Memoirs of Mary A. Maverick, San Antonio's First American Woman*, a footnote on page 28 locates the domicile of Jack Hays within the Villita area:

Some buildings and the original fence of Hays' San Antonio home still stand on the N. W. cor. of Presa and Nueva sts.

Hays was the most daring and skilful type of frontiersman, grammatical, gallant and well bred; time after time he saved Texas settlements from destruction at the hands of the fierce Comanches. Single-handed he once killed an entire advance scout of picked Comanche warriors. The hero of hundreds of battles, he was later to become San Francisco's first sheriff.

The Mavericks, Samuel A. and Mary A., came to San Antonio in 1838, and Mrs. Maverick became a valuable chronicler of her times. She told how Hays and two companions attended a formal ball given by the Yturri family for Mirabeau Buonoparte Lamar, President of the Republic of Texas:

(They) had but one dress coat between them, and they agreed to use the coat and dance in turn. The two not dancing would stand at the hall door watching the happy one who was enjoying his turn — and they reminded him when it was time for him to step out of that coat. Great fun was it watching them.

Mrs. Maverick described bathing in the river, which since earliest recorded history here had been a favorite pastime. Floating bath houses were beginning to appear in the stream; and following the afternoon bath at four o'clock a lunch was often spread; as Mrs. Maverick wrote, "we had a grand good time, swimming and laughing, and making all the noise we pleased." Scenes such as this were occurring where the river hugged Villita Street — where once the Indian wards of the Alamo had bathed.

With the 1840's came an entirely new element to La Villita — German immigrants imported by the society of nobles of which Count Solms-Braunfels, founder of New Braunfels and other Texas German settlements, was a leader. A number of these strangers in San Antonio were attracted to the Villita area because



Two types of construction, on Hessler Street.

of its elevation above the river, and because the dwindling fortunes of many of the old Spanish families were compelling them to sell their holdings here. Others, crowded now by a growing town, wished to move where there were fewer neighbors.

A number of the aged houses of La Villita were crumbling, some were in ruins. Over the walls of some of these new plaster and mortar was placed by the neat Germans; new roofs went on, steep-pitched like those of the Fatherland. Thus a number of the buildings in this area assumed a Teutonic character, quaint and attractive, and prim little gardens replaced the opulence and tropic abandon of the old patios. Others of the old houses remained untouched, for their owners stayed on, a little resentful of the changes wrought by newcomers.

Among these innovations were matters of custom. In mid-afternoons the rich odor of coffee floated over the housetops, as flaxen-haired housewives had *Kaffee klatsch* with their neighbors. Miss Julia Vogt, 505 Sixth Street, remembered how her family observed this genial custom:

We gathered between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, when friends and neighbors would come in. They served coffee and cake, bread and butter, ham and cheese, and sometimes other things.

Miss Vogt also recalled that some of the Villita families who had chickens often had to gather eggs "all over Alamo Plaza, which was all in brush."

Mrs. Anna Guerguin, 108 City Street, also a descendant of former residents of the Villita area, said that her family had five meals a day: "Breakfast, then coffee or broth at ten a.m.; then dinner, coffee at four, and last of all supper." Mrs. Guerguin also recalled that when birthdays occurred, friends went uninvited to participate in a feast and merrymaking. "As their friends had come to their birthdays and were welcome, so they in turn went to their friends' birthdays knowing that they would also be welcome."

A time-honored dish among these pioneer families is a salad made of boiled smoked herrings, beets, hard-boiled eggs, pickles, apples, Irish potatoes and dressing. This concoction was a standby in the new racial parts of La Villita. So also was *Gefeullteskraut*, a veal pocket stuffed with kraut.

And now Christmas in Little Town had a dual personality. The families of Spanish descent still trooped to worship in the church of San Fernando; still placed burning candles in their windows in the week before the birth-date of the Christ Child, to direct the wandering souls of Mary and Joseph to their abodes. Sometimes bands of performers in *Los Pastores*, a play of the Nativity, performed here for their patrons. The San Antonio version of this Christmas drama, one of more than seventy existing in America, originated in the humble *jacales* of the trans-San Pedro area; sometimes the players had sponsors among wealthy old Spanish families.

So on Christmas Eve, from the patio of one of those old Spanish homes in La Villita one might have heard the five thousand lines of rhymed and unrhymed dialogue and song of *Los Pastores*, and from the house next door the merry sounds of a Middle-European celebration of Saint Nicholas. From one household, the shepherds of the play reciting softly, as they knelt before the rustic manger:

Ah, the beauty of the Child,
With a mouth of coral.
It is my wish to cover thee
With the weaving of my love.

From the household nearby, the booming voice of a jolly Saint Nick clad in a red suit and with bushy white whiskers, as he distributed toys amid the uproarious enthusiasm of little and big celebrators.

Mrs. Albert Steves of San Antonio recalled a typical Christmas of the immigrants of those early days here, and particularly the delicious little cakes made with honey and anise seed

which were baked in November in anticipation of the holidays. Although one local store — Pentenreider's — had toys for sale, many of the toys were made at home. Every household had a Christmas tree, and home-made ornaments included chains of glazed paper. Walnuts and pecans were gilded and hung from the tree by strings; but big red apples were the brightest and costliest decorations. The real celebration of the holiday occurred on Christmas Eve; it was inaugurated by a huge turkey dinner, followed by two ceremonies of present giving — one at the Christmas tree for the children, the other in a separate room for the grownups. The children of the household invariably gathered around the dinner table and sang *Holy Night*. On Christmas Day families exchanged gay, informal calls, and were served cookies and wines.

Yet though this new racial element, with its inherited love of music, art and drama, brought new life and the promise of a different type of achievement to La Villita, this area and indeed the entire city remained predominately Spanish — was still a frontier outpost. Julia Nott Waugh in *Castroville* and Henry Castro quotes the diary of Auguste Fretelliere, who wrote:

The city of San Antonio at that time (1844) had about 1,000 inhabitants, nine-tenths of whom were Mexicans, and the Spanish language was generally spoken. . . . The one which is now Commerce Street bore the name of *El Potrero*. On it were about twenty Mexican houses, that is to say buildings of rock and adobe with flat roofs of mortar and gravel. They were one-storied and had usually only one door, and two windows with iron grills. A man might think himself in Palestine. These were the best houses. The others were *jacales* made of mesquite sticks more or less chinked with clay, with roofs of *tules*, a kind of rush that grew very abundantly in the San Pedro.

It is safe to assume that at least part of the houses of La Villita answered to one or the other of these two descriptions, and that they were in sharp contrast with the increasing number of residences of German families. Many of these immigrants, such as the Bardenwerpers, were of noble descent, and their homes were rapidly becoming centers of musical and dramatic efforts. Mrs.



Europeans added narrow porches, in La Villita.

Sarah Eagar, who is credited with having been the first non-Latin girl born in San Antonio, moved in 1846 with her parents, the Wilson Riddles, to a house on South Alamo Street. Mrs. Eagar in 1939 — active and in possession of all her faculties at the age of 97 — said that the boundaries of La Villita were then considered to be from Villita to Martinez Streets and from South Alamo to South Presa Streets. The Riddle place, however, was decidedly on the outskirts of the smaller, older area near the river. Mrs. Riddle, who was from Virginia, found living conditions in San Antonio primitive and asked her husband, "Why did you bring me to this country?" To which he replied, "To see if you could stand it."

Wilson Riddle had been one of the victims of the several Mexican invasions against San Antonio in the 1840's, before he moved to the peaceful rustic environs of La Villita. He died, only one year after he had become a resident of Little Town, of the results of a harsh imprisonment in Mexico.

To Villita in 1847 a new kind of figure came, a threadbare, earnest young minister, John Wesley DeVilbiss. He found "five or six ladies in the city (San Antonio) representing nearly as many churches — a Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian, and some others friendly to the gospel." The Reverend Mr. DeVilbiss attacked the practice of holding cock fights on the main plazas on Sunday mornings while he was preaching, and was rescued from a "ducking in the river" at the hands of the town's gamblers by the warnings of the above-mentioned ladies. This Methodist parson and his colleague in San Antonio, the Rev. John McCullough, a Presbyterian, were hard pressed for quarters to house their infinitesimal flocks. The two Protestant preachers held services jointly; but DeVilbiss had his own Sunday School class, of which a member was Augusta Evans, the writer, who lived for a time in La Villita. Soon after this, DeVilbiss "took the preliminary steps toward building a church in the city." He told his story in *Reminiscences of a Superannuated Preacher* in the book entitled *Life of John Wesley DeVilbiss*:

I secured an eligible lot on Valita (sic) Street, and we elected five trustees . . . I left San Antonio . . . and . . . visited New Orleans, Cincinnati, Pittsburg, Wheeling, Lexington, and Frankfort, Ky., and various other places. I did not get much money, but obtained a great deal of material for building, together with many things I knew would sell in San Antonio. Among other things, I obtained a good bell in Cincinnati, the price of which was \$110. When I returned, I paid for our lot in hardware that I brought on, and felt that we were succeeding. We still worshipped at the courthouse on the main plaza. I made a frame upon which to hang our bell, and placed it on our Church lot. I wanted to let the people see that we had made a start. Our bell was on one side of the river and our worship about a quarter of a mile from it on the other. I was sexton as well as preacher, and would ring my bell and then go over to meet my congregation. The Mexicans gave me the very significant cognomen of "El padrecito que tiene la campana," "the little priest who owns the bell."

But Protestantism in the form of a church building was not yet to invade La Villita — Roman Catholic by ancient inheritance. The Reverend Mr. DeVilbiss sadly tells us that he never built the church for the bell; he was persuaded by Mr. McCullough to assist in building an adobe church "on Main Street . . . with the understanding that we should occupy the house conjointly, and when we built they would return the material (furnished by DeVilbiss) either in kind or in money. Our bell was moved over to the new church. . . . This was near the close of the year 1847. About this time I learned that the title to our church lot was not good, and we lost the lot, and did not receive even indemnity for the purchase money. This was a severe stroke to me, as I had felt that with the lot we had at least a good foothold on the soil of San Antonio; but now, after two years' hard labor, we had no place to call our own."



A Decade of Change

The environs of La Villita were described in 1849 by John Meusebach in the manuscript collection entitled *Wurzbach's Memoirs and Meusebach Papers*:

There was a long row of dobie, flat roofed buildings running from where the Post Office now is to the Grand Opera House, from there close to the Alamo Church and grass and pear (prickly pear cactus) growing on the top of the houses; all along the bank of the river there were Mexican huts covered with grass. What is now Commerce Street was a lake of water with two rows of cotton wood trees as far as the Alamo Ditch. There were but few houses on the east side of the river. What is now West Commerce Street was very narrow and all small houses, the most of them flat and grass roofs and pear hanging into the street; the two plazas were surrounded by the same kind of houses.

Still other racial elements — notably Polish and French — came to La Villita in the 1850's and 1860's. Erasmus Andrew Florian was of the former group; a political exile from Warsaw, he came to San Antonio to help found one of the city's first banks. The Florians moved to La Villita when it was considered San Antonio's most aristocratic section, according to Miss Mamie Florian, 826 North St. Mary's Street. "I still pronounce the name of this district 'Veeheeta', which early residents called it," Miss Florian said in 1939. "Our old home is just across the street from the present Villita Art Gallery. La Villita was the home of the elite in San Antonio." Miss Florian said that one of their neighbors was Augusta Evans.

In 1858 the German citizens — including those of the Villita area — formed the Casino Association, a select social organization, and erected a club and opera house on Market Street (part of the old building is today occupied by the San Antonio

Water Company). This center of social and cultural life was at the back door of La Villita, just across the river. These residents also founded, in this year, the German-English School, whose old rock buildings — all intact — are occupied today by the San Antonio Junior College. This school at the present 419 South Alamo Street served the little boys and girls of La Villita for many years; in it they learned both German and English, and the girls learned to sew, paint china, and make wax flowers. Julius Berends, promoter of the school, was a former nobleman. He arranged for the first school building to be dedicated to the poet, Friedrich von Schiller. Terms lasted eleven months of the year. Some of the boy students rode horseback to school and gave riding exhibitions between classes.

In *The Alamo City*, Pearson Newcomb thus described La Villita during the 1850's:

Alamo Street continued south from Commerce Street along the river to La Villita, a village consisting largely of thatched roof dwellings, relics of the mission building period.

La Villita, the little village or residence section established in the mission building period on the south bank of the river, still retains some of its quaint semi-ancient buildings.

Yet, though many of its houses were still unchanged, the Little Town must have showed unmistakable signs of transition. Dozens of families whose forebears came directly to San Antonio from France, Poland or Germany now occupied the old Spanish buildings, and had infused their particular types of plants, trees, architectural ornamentation, and customs into the area. Architectural changes especially became manifest, as Miss Florian testifies:

In the early 1860's the little settlement of La Villita was considered an aristocratic residential section. Houses were scarce in San Antonio then; when my parents bought ours in La Villita, it was made of stone, and had only four rooms. My family added a room on each side, and there was a kitchen and servant's room in the yard.

The Florian residence at 510 Villita Street is an example of the sturdy type of architecture chosen by those who remodeled the old houses. Stone was the commonest building material, as it was cheap and durable; the builder was in each case the architect and designed or remodeled his house according to his needs.



Progress and Personalities

Across the street from the Florians lived the Diaz family, and here Rafael Diaz (who became a Metropolitan Grand Opera tenor) spent his boyhood. At that time the Florian place reached back to Hessler Street; then, as today, Womble Alley ran through from north to south, crossing Nacional Street.

The Lutheran Church of St. John, known to early residents of Villita as the Rooster Church because of the rooster on its weather vane, was already drawing its congregations to Nueva Street when the Florians became residents. The Florian children on Sunday mornings watched the members file inside, the women each holding a prayer book across which a freshly laundered white handkerchief was folded. Residents of the Villita section were hospitable, Miss Florian remembers, doing much leisurely visiting.

Where the Public Service Company building is on the corner of Villita and South Presa Streets, for a time lived the family of Dr. Clifford in a house that, Miss Florian said, "stood up high from the ground as if it were on stilts."

Mrs. Mary Elmendorf, 220 Arciniega Street, also remembers much of La Villita during the 1860's. Her grandmother, Mrs. Louisa Wueste, lived in the building occupied in 1939 by the Villita Art Gallery, 511 Villita Street. This housewife was an artist whose paintings adorn many San Antonio homes — all of the portraits cameo-clear, vibrant with feeling and color. On the northwest corner of South Presa and Nueva Streets lived the artist Ivonski, a friend of Mrs. Wueste. Ivonski had come with the European colonial rush to Texas, had fought Indians, and milked cows. He was an exile from his country and eventually returned.

Mrs. Elmendorf remembers another one-time occupant of the house at the corner of Villita and South Presa Streets. His name was Lemnitzer, and he was a cabinet-maker, a wood carver and "a fixer" — "he fixed anything that needed mending." Lemnitzer compounded a salve which was used by many of the residents of La Villita; but though the salve is only an odorous memory, many of Lemnitzer's hand-carved wooden candlesticks and other articles of household use remain as prized possessions among descendants of his former patrons.

An enterprise that later became a large factory started on Villita Street, where Gustave Duerler inaugurated a candy manufactory. Mrs. Elmendorf said:

Behind the Duerler home was a little adobe one-room house which faced Hessler Alley, as Hessler Street was called then. This little humble place was where the later Duerler candy manufacturing company had its sure beginnings. It can be said that candy was one of the products of old Villita; when a child I used to stand and watch them making it — pink candy, and white.

On the corner of Nueva and Presa Streets, Mrs. Elmendorf recalled, was the little grocery store of the Teutonic Mr. Kresser; the groceryman's wife was French, and when politics changed in Europe relations in the family were sometimes strained, "for Mrs. Kresser never forgot she was a Frenchwoman." Mr. Kresser built some small stone houses which he rented as apartments; these buildings were in a yard which had a well that served all the "apartment" dwellers.

Next door to the Kresser property on Presa Street, stood a one-story adobe building called "the haunted house." Children so feared this place that many of them refused to pass it, even while on their way to the little grocery to buy candy.

At the southwest corner of Villita Street and Womble Alley, in those days, lived a shoemaker named Scheuermann. He made high shoes of a sturdy build, and for years shod most of the pupils of the German-English School.

One of the residents of Villita Street was a fortune teller, Mrs. Geissler, who lived in a small adobe house near the shoe-

maker. The lovelorn, the hard-pressed, the bereaved, all found their way to the tight-shut doors of the mystic.

On the south corner of Villita and South Alamo Streets was the McAllister residence, a one-story house. This was a musical center; a daughter married Professor Katzenberger, who promoted, directed and participated in lively, hearty home-talent "operas." A neighbor in the Villita area, a Mr. Lapentz, sponsored amateur dramatic events, especially featuring plays of Schiller and Goethe. Much of the early local effort toward development of music and the drama originated with one or the other of these. Daughters of the families of the district starred in theatricals held in the Casino, and were applauded mightily.

In the McAllister home the powerful soprano of the Professor's wife, Anna, was frequently heard practicing roles in *Martha*, *The Bohemian Girl* and other operas. Here the amateur performers were drilled and trained, with five of the six McAllister children taking part in each performance. So successful were the presentations that the oldest son, Willie, organized one of the city's first orchestras; the second son, Joe, a violinist, later became an orchestra leader. A daughter, Lula, became the first supervisor of music in the city's public schools.

Mrs. F. W. McAllister, 123 Slocum Place, had this to say of those old days in La Villita:

Looking back upon the residents of La Villita in the middle of the nineteenth century, one realizes the contribution made by the old countries to Texas. Considering this block-wide and three-blocks-long area of San Antonio, bounded on the west by South Presa, on the east by South Alamo, extending northward to the river and southward to Martinez Street, one is amazed by the number of interesting, cultured residents in that very small district.

A descendant of one of the French families of La Villita, Miss Biencourt, still lives on Villita Street in a residence next to the Art Gallery. Her great-grandparents were named Desmazieres and lived in a two-story stone house in the Villita area; orchards of peaches, pomegranates, persimmons and grapes surrounded the house, and the grounds were green and cool. In this home, in 1861, a dinner was given for Robert E. Lee and other Virginians. Mrs. Sarah Eagar, then a pretty young lady home from boarding school in Mississippi, tells that someone proposed a toast, mentioning a threatening war. She said that Lee lifted his glass and answered, "If Virginia secedes I go with her."

Many Villita families had slaves, yet some of them were Unionists. Conflicting emotions shook the Little Town during the Civil War, but the fighting was distant, and life continued here much as usual except that most of the men were absent.

Little Town area, from a nearby skyscraper.



Times Change . . Villita Does Not

Following the Civil War, La Villita settled down to a placid and undisturbed existence. Modernity came slowly but surely to the other San Antonio streets of the Dons, but not so surely to Villita. Joined to the city now by law, by geography, and by extended settlement surrounding it, the Little Town nevertheless remained a close, closed community; its families in many respects lived as villagers of a section distinct from the remainder of the municipality. Old names were perpetuated, old customs continued, and although progress entered the venerable doors in the form of the individual achievement of its residents, La Villita presented an almost unchanged face to the world.

A storm in 1868 damaged some of the aged Spanish buildings. At eight o'clock of the night of May 19 a terrific pounding of hail-stones began, and when it had finished roofs were torn, walls scarred and in some places broken, chimneys were crushed and windows smashed. Repairs entailed some redecoration.

La Villita was joined to the city beyond by bridges made of planks laid on barrels that floated on the water. White canvas bath houses also floated on barrels; bathing in the river was an increasingly popular pastime.

Charles Herff, member of a pioneer San Antonio family, recalled that when a cholera epidemic descended upon San Antonio at the conclusion of the Civil War, a new activity occupied the small boys of La Villita — as indeed it involved all the youngsters of the city. The municipal recorder announced that for every two rat tails delivered to the then city hall, called the "Bat Cave", he would pay five cents. The ancient nether regions of the houses of La Villita had a thorough exploration by small businessmen searching out rats.

Mr. Herff added:

Smallpox was prevalent every winter but we did not fear it. On the corner of South Alamo and Villita Streets stands an old two-story stone building and formerly there were two stone one-story buildings adjoining. These buildings were a hotbed of smallpox. Along these buildings on South Alamo Street ran a flagstone walk. School children were told to use this sidewalk and to by no means fail to spit on it. This was considered a preventative. We firmly believed this.

In the 1870's the families of La Villita were leaders in many developments of a cultural character. Prof. L. J. Schuetze, 520 Hays Street, recalled the old Saengerfests and Volkfests of this decade, large gatherings in San Antonio of German singing societies from all parts of Texas. Parades opened the conventions, and displays of fireworks, pageants, concerts and contests occupied the entire community for several days. These celebrations were usually climaxed on Bowen's Island, near La Villita, with mammoth picnics. Noted actors were presented at the Casino Club, and at Turner Hall amateur and professional vied for honors in many a melodrama. In 1872 Sidney Lanier fraternized with the artistically-inclined old families of La Villita, participating in local *Maennerchor* musical events. Lanier composed *Field Larks* and *Blackbirds*, a score for wind instruments, while in this atmosphere of hearty and enthusiastic musical endeavor.

Professor Schuetze spoke of the environs of La Villita in the 1870's and 1880's, revealing that many of the families living close to the river in the Villita and adjoining areas had ducks and geese, and these fowls congregated on Alamo Plaza at an iron fountain erected to furnish water for horses and mules. The Professor said:

When I was a child I was afraid to pass that corner of Alamo Plaza, for the many ducks and geese were a real menace to youngsters, whom they invariably chased.

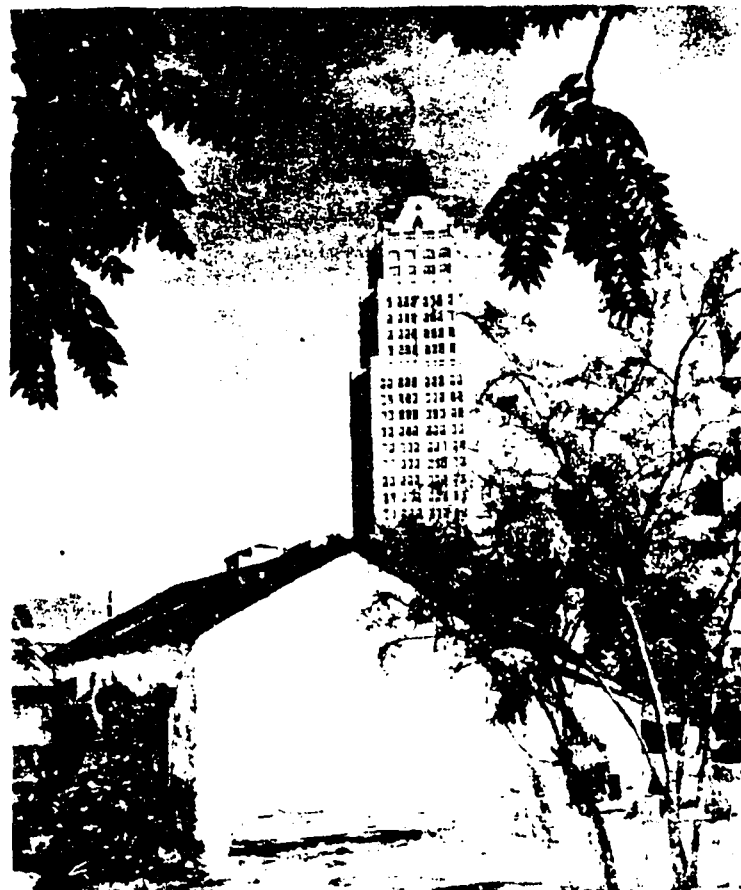
During the wild period from 1870 to 1890, when San Antonio was a wide-open town enriched by drives of longhorns to northern markets over the celebrated cattle trails, La Villita looked sedately on from its perch across the river; it had no part in the lurid night life and frequently fatal gunfights. In the gay 1890's its sons and daughters attended the "magnificent balls" and other social events of the lavish decade, but the ornate gingerbread architecture so cherished then did not invade Villita. A few of the old families moved to more spacious, less crowded sections, but their old houses were little changed, sometimes not at all.

And so the twentieth century arrived, bringing skyscrapers and paved streets; the paving was welcomed by Villita, which had long waded through mud or walked over ruts in the narrow thoroughfares. But the skyscrapers stopped just short of the old village.

Today, surrounded by the noise and bustle of a modern city, La Villita faces its greatest transformation — its restoration to the heydays of yesterday. Through its forlorn recent years, when the section stood forgotten and largely in disrepair, various civic-minded groups have urged its complete restoration. That the section has endured is due largely to the loyalty of its families, many of whom cling to their faithful old houses of stone and adobe. Since the acquisition of the block-square area by the City of San Antonio, its shabby little streets have been invaded by engineers, architects, artists, historians, city fathers, pioneers — all interested in or actually engaged in the project of restoration. Neglected so long, La Villita still seems a little aloof to all this interest and to-do.

The little village of the *padre's* day is being born again. To its creaking old bones youth is returning. When the present plans have been fulfilled, there will be patios again, with palms and poinsettias; there will be the tang of *tamales* in the air, the soft sound of *tortillas* being patted out by copper-colored women on *matates*, the plaintive notes of guitars accompanying such wistful melodies as *La Golondrina*.

The San Antonio of the distant past will be presented here, and on historic ground. Strife and turmoil may grip the outside world, but not this rejuvenated village of two centuries. Perhaps its future visitors may sense in it an unchangeable serenity, the seclusion and poise of time itself.



The modern city background of the Little Town.

