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ACHS NEWSLETTER

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ANNUAL MEETING ATTRACTS LARGE CROWD FOR PROGRAM ON EARLY ROCKPORT THEATERS

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The 2017 Annual meeting of the Society turned out a large crowd for a wonderful program on early Rockport movie theatres.

On February 23, ACHS hosted the annual affair at the Fulton Mansion's visitor center. The special program, *A Night at the Surf: Remembering Rockport's Movie Theatres*, was prepared by Joe Herring and presented by David Herring, both of whom had worked at Rockport theatres as teenagers.

Special guests for the program were former employees of the theatres, and several offered memories of their experiences.

The program stemmed from the popularity of the cover photo on the 2017 ACHS Historical Calendar, which featured the Surf Theatre pictured shortly after its opening in 1949, a photo supplied by Brian Barnard, son of the theatre owner Ed Barnard. Ed's grandson Alan Barnard was in attendance and spoke briefly as well.

The Surf Theatre was originally the Rio, which opened in 1937. In 1949, Barnard enlarged and modernized the Rio at its location on South Austin Street. In 1953, he opened the Cove Drive-In Theatre south of town. The Surf closed in 1957 and the Cove in 1981.

A digest of the Herring presentation is on page 5 of this Newsletter.



New ACHS board member John Jackson picked up his ticket for "the show" at the replica Surf Theatre ticket booth, occupied by ACHS board member Jeanie Schindler, who worked at the Surf as a teenager. John's mother, Neva Jackson, won the prize for naming the Surf in the late 1940s. Photo by Janie White.

At the meeting, the Society made a modification to its by-laws to improve the trustee and officer nomination process, and elected John Jackson to a three-year term as trustee.

Rotating off the board were Sandra Garrison and Janet Taylor.

The
ACHS
 Dedicated to
 preserving the
 history of
 Aransas County
 since 1985

FROM THE LAB: A message from the President

I have had the honor and privilege to have served as your president for the past three years. I have enjoyed working with the board in preparing programs and carrying on the work of the Society.

But it is time for someone else to assume leadership. Organizations thrive on new insight and knowledge, and it is a good time for me to step aside. I still have two years remaining on my term on the board and will continue to serve in that capacity.

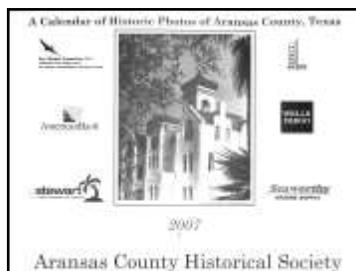
ACHS is a 100-percent volunteer organization; it receives no public funds and is supported entirely by memberships and calendar sales. For more than thirty years, it has been working to help save historical sites as well as documents, photographs, and other memorabilia related to Aransas County history.

ACHS has made great strides in the last several years. One was the development of the Lab in the old Rockport School, which serves as our home. It houses our collections of books, documents and photographs and has become a center of activity, especially on Wednesday afternoons.

Another was the Society's work with the *Rockport Pilot* to secure preservation of its oldest extant newspapers (1939-1959), first on microfilm and then digitally in a searchable format. We hope to complete that effort in the near future by getting the remainder of the *Pilot* preserved in a similar format before the Big Hurricane comes along.

Still two more great ongoing projects of ACHS are the annual Historical Photo Contest and the publication of the Calendar of Historical Photographs. The Contest has led to the location and preservation of hundreds of photographs that otherwise might have been lost. It also serves as a perfect companion to the Calendar. Published since 2007, the Calendar embodies untold thousands of hours of volunteer work in photo enhancement, research, writing, compilation, promotion, and distribution.

The Photo Contest and Calendar have enhanced still other ACHS venues. Our just completed February Annual Meeting is an excellent example. The cover photo of the 2017 Calendar featuring the Surf Theatre prompted a discussion in a program planning session of



The cover of the first ACHS Calendar of Historical Photographs, 2007.

the Board which in turn led to the development of an entire program on Rockport's early theatres. If you missed the meeting, a digest of the program is included in this newsletter.

Speaking of the newsletter, it is now in its thirteenth year in its present format. Not only does it promote the ongoing work of ACHS, it also includes historical features that are worthy to be saved. For example, the Summer 2004 issue includes a wonderful article by Jay Tarkington



A large crowd turned out for a 2009 program on coastal shipwrecks by archaeologist Mike Hoyt.

on the so-called "windswept" oaks in our community, a piece that every resident should read.

ACHS's public programs are still another facet of its work. Initially, these programs were held in conjunction with the Annual Meeting, but later became separate events. Over the

years, the topics have covered almost every facet of Aransas County history. One of the highlights was Tamara Saviano's presentation last fall on the Rockport years of musician Guy Clark, which attracted the largest crowd ever in my memory for an ACHS program.

And, the Society is still hard at work on producing its forthcoming Aransas County history. This monumental book will include family and business histories, photographs, and an overview historical narrative. We anticipate it will be ready later this year and we appreciate your patience and understanding.

There are other projects that ACHS is associated with, from genealogy to cemeteries to historical surveys, and its members do as much as they can as volunteers. I want to express my heartfelt thanks to all those volunteers with whom I have been associated during my thirteen years on the board for working hard to preserve our past for future generations. As an historian, I appreciate being able have resources at hand so that our history can be told with as much accuracy as possible.

When I first came on the Board in 2004, our president at the time, Phil Albin told us, "Let's do something, even if it is wrong. We can fix the mistakes later." Well, that group jumped in and did something and is still doing something and working hard at it, and we haven't had to fix many mistakes! Phil, I know you are proud, as I certainly am, of what the Aransas County Historical Society has accomplished during its 32 years of existence.

—David Murrah

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE SURF AND COVE THEATRES

Based on an essay prepared by Joe S. Herring for the Annual Meeting of the Aransas County Historical Society, with additional information provided by: Janie White, David Herring and David Murrah

When were movies first shown in Rockport? Mary Pearl Herring Patrick who was born in 1902, remembered that the first picture shows were shown in the “old ‘Airdome,’ an open air theatre without a roof.” One movie she recalled was *The Black Box*, a serial produced by Universal Studio in 1915. She also remembered *Dante’s Inferno*, released in 1911 as the first full-length Italian film.

Where was the Air Dome? A 1914 fire insurance map shows a movie theatre location at the southeast corner of Magnolia and North streets in Rockport. How long it was there, we do not know.

The first walk-in theater was the Rio, established in the early 1930s by four local businessmen, Travis Johnson, Fred Johnson, A.C. Glass and Charles Picton. It was acquired 1937 by Ed Barnard and operated under the Rio name until 1949.

While Ed was in the Navy during WW II, the Rio was managed by Fred Booth, a retired Engineer. After returning from the war Ed made plans for a new theater in a new building. In the summer of 1946, he announced plans for his theater and solicited movie patrons to submit proposed names through a contest.

There were nearly 350 entries, and seven submitted the name “Surf” which Barnard chose as the new name. Joe Herring was one of the seven. A drawing was held on the stage of the Rio Theatre and Neva (Mrs. Norvell) Jackson was the lucky winner of a year’s free pass. The other six won a week’s free admission.

The new Surf Theatre was proposed to be on Austin Street, perhaps to be between Concho and Cornwall, and facing the harbor. Barnard planned to keep the Rio as well for Spanish language and B movies.

However, the new theater never happened. Instead the old Rio was enlarged and remodeled in January and February of 1949 and reopened on March 1, 1949 as the Surf Theatre with rest rooms, central heat and air, new seating, and improved projectors. The opening feature was a near first-run color movie, *The Return of October*, featuring Glenn Ford, which came out in 1948.

By the early 1950’s drive-in theatres were becoming popular. There were two drive-ins in Aransas Pass, the Trail and the Tarpon, which got a good bit of business from Rockport.

In February 1953 Ed Barnard started construction on the Cove Drive-In Theatre, which opened April 12, 1953 with a showing of *Abbott and Costello Go to Mars*. The Cove was located South of town, on the west side of what is now Business Highway 35, just south of the “Triangle” where Loop 70 intersects.

Joe Herring worked at the Surf as manager beginning in 1951. Staffing at the Surf consisted of a Cashier who occupied the box office, sold tickets and answered the telephone; a Projectionist who operated the projectors; a Popcorn Boy who prepared and sold popcorn; and a Manager who took tickets and coordinated the other activities. No candy or drinks were available at the Surf—only popcorn at 10 cents for a small bag and 25 cents for a large one.

At the Cove Drive-In, the movie program, staffing, duties and wages were similar to the Surf. The Manager handled the cash register in the snack bar rather than taking tickets, but otherwise



The Surf Theatre in September 1949, six months after it opened. This photo prompted the article by Joe Herring and became the theme for ACHS’s Annual Meeting program. Photo by theatre owner Ed Barnard, colorization by David Murrah.

performed substantially the same duties as at the Surf. In addition to the Popcorn Boy, there were one or two additional employees in the snack bar to handle the preparation of drinks, hotdogs, etc.

At the height of its popularity in the early 1950s, the Surf’s weekly schedule started with a movie playing Sunday and Monday, a different movie playing Tuesday and Wednesday, another movie playing Thursday and Friday, and a movie playing on Saturday only. First run (or even second run) movies were rare. Usually the best movie of the week played on Sunday and Monday. Saturday was reserved for a “Cowboy” movie - Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, the Cisco Kid, or similar, usually accompanied by a one-reel serial and a cartoon. Starting in the mid-1950s Saturday showings were frequently a double feature with one feature being a Spanish language film.

Attendance at the Surf and the Cove Drive-In continued to be good for several years, but TV was beginning to have an impact and by 1956 attendance at the theaters was falling off. During 1956 and 1957 steps were taken to deal with the reduced attendance. At various times these measures included opening the Surf only on weekends; closing the Surf during periods of particularly low attendance; adding Spanish language movies and double features on Saturday, an occasional “Adult” movie, special pricing, etc. During these lean times there was no Popcorn Boy, his duties being taken over by the Manager.

The last movie ad for the Surf appeared in the Rockport paper in late August 1957, with a Labor Day weekend showing of *Oklahoma*. By that time, owner Ed Barnard had been using the

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 6)

WALKING TOUR MARCH 18

The ACHS Lab will be one of the stops on the upcoming first annual “Stroll thru Rockport,” sponsored by Healthy South Texas.

The Stroll begins at 9am Saturday, March 18, at the Friends of the History Center, 801 E. Cedar, and is free and open to the public.

The walking tour designed to combine physical activity with the opportunity to learn about Rockport’s colorful historical buildings, events and people. Walkers can choose to walk a 2-mile route or a 4-mile route. Costumed docents at various sites will provide facts and anecdotes, while healthy snacks or water will be available at several locations.

The first 100 participants to complete the walk will receive a commemorative pin. Participants can also complete a scavenger hunt which qualifies them to win fun prizes at the event’s completion.

Registration for the walk is 9-10am March 18 at the Friends of the History Center, 801 E. Cedar at Church Street, Rockport. Parking is available at Magnolia Park, at Live Oak and Cedar Streets.

Event co-sponsors are the Aransas County Health Coalition, the Friends of the History Center, Rockport-Fulton Chamber of Commerce, the Rockport Cultural Arts District, Aransas Pathways, the Aransas County Historical Commission, and the Aransas County Historical Society.



The large crowd at the ACHS were entertained by a presentation on early Rockport theatres by Joe Herring and read by his brother David. The program was held at the Fulton Mansion Education and History Center. Photo courtesy Janie White.

(THEATRES CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5)

theater as his real estate office for several months.

Meanwhile, Barnard continued to operate the Cove Drive-In until August 1960 when it was closed, then remodeled and enlarged, and then sold to Emory M. Spencer. It reopened in March 1961, only to be destroyed by Hurricane Carla the following September. It was rebuilt and reopened in late November 1961.

Hurricane Celia then destroyed it in August 1970, but was reopened in March 1971 under new owner Tom Davis. Still another storm in the early 1980s damaged it once again, and the drive-in never reopened. Wesley Morgan was the last manager of the Cove Drive-In.

The developer of the Surf and Cove theatres, Ed Barnard was an all around good guy. Besides owning and



HISTORICAL COMMISSION DEDICATES NEW MARKER AT AIRPORT

Former airmen Ken Hartlein (from left), Dallas Ford, Bob Crager, and Gordon Stanley were on hand to unveil a historical marker at the site of the Rockport Air Force Station on February 7. Looking on are Pam Stranahan, ACHC chair, County Judge C.H. “Burt” Mills Jr., airport manager Mike Geer, and ACHC member Geoff Bywater. Photo courtesy Veronika Cahmel.

ACHC SURVEY WORKSHOP MARCH 20

The Aransas County Historical Commission is conducting a workshop on Monday, March 20, to create a survey of buildings in the downtown heritage district of Rockport. This workshop will be held 5:30 - 7:00 PM at the Rockport Aquarium. You will learn the importance of the survey, how to record information, styles of architecture, the historical context and protocol for naming photographs.

Participants will work in teams and be assigned 30-50 buildings to record. They will receive a notebook for recording buildings, instructions for describing architecture and tips for taking photographs. This survey project will last from March 20 to May 15 and require approximately 20 hours.

The workshop will be led by Angalee Marano, Hannah Hawes and Pam Stranahan. You are encouraged to join us at the Aquarium Education Center to learn about Rockport history and contribute your time to record and photograph the heritage of the downtown. Light refreshments will be served.

operating the theaters he was heavily involved in local civic activities, being in the Volunteer Fire Department and serving as Fire Marshal for a time; he served on numerous volunteer civic committees and commissions. He was pitcher for the local baseball team and he may have been instrumental in organizing the Live Oak Country Club,

Ed was married to the lovely Maureen Kane. After the theaters went out of business, He and Maureen owned and operated the Duck Inn Restaurant until his untimely death in November 1968.

On South Austin Street, you can still see the foundation of the Surf Theatre. Both the Surf and Cove theatres provided a great place for high school and college kids to work, and certainly produced—or should we say—“sparked” many memories.

[EDITOR’S NOTE: If you would like a copy of Joe Herring’s full comprehensive essay, please send a request to ACHS, Box 702, Rockport, TX 78381 and enclose one dollar to cover copying and mailing.]