

Friday, June 2, 2006

A Bit of San Antonio Riverwalk History

With all the recent debate over what businesses should be allowed on the San Antonio Riverwalk, I thought it might be interesting to review a short history of this San Antonio landmark.

The stream, known to the Payaya Indians as Yanaguana, was variously utilized over the first three centuries by Franciscan missionaries, explorers, soldiers, and even a settlement of Canary Islanders.

Through the late 1800s and early 1900s, San Antonio's increasing population and expanding boundaries experienced an increasing degree of problems brought about by flooding. In fact, if flood control measures had not been taken in the 1920s, later commercial development along the river would have never happened.

Engineers in 1919 struck an ominous chord with a study predicting that heavy flooding of the San Antonio River could damage the city severely. It was a warning that came through with devastating results.

On September 9, 1921, a cloudburst over the Olmos Basin and San Antonio River put 9 feet of water on Houston Street downtown, which resulted in flooding that killed 50 people and caused millions in property damage.

Expedient remedies were called for by many of the frightened residents and businessmen who wanted to ensure that such a tragedy would not reoccur. For three years after the calamity, flood control plans were worked on by city officials and the Army Corps of Engineers, whose plans called for straightening the river in several spots.

By 1926, the commissioners were receptive to the moral story presented to them two years earlier and the final flood control plan was approved. The plan would aid the river bend during periods of heavy rainfall by utilizing a new bypass channel. A floodgate and two dams helped accomplish this goal and the bypass channel was completed in 1929. The major feature of the plan, the building of Olmos Dam, was completed in 1927 north of the downtown area, in Olmos Basin.

In their desire to preserve the natural course of the river and prevent the demolition of historic sites called for in the plans, Miss Emily Edwards and a band of concerned women organized in March 1942 to form the San Antonio Conservation Society.

Since 1962, eight hotels and a major shopping center have been built and currently anchor positions on the River Walk. They opened in the following order: El Tropicano, 1962 (reopening in 1991 as the Holiday inn Riverwalk North); Hilton Palacio del Rio and Hotel La Posada, 1968 (La Posada reopening in 1970 as La Mansion del Rio); Travelodge on the River, 1971; Marriott Riverwalk and the Hyatt Regency San Antonio, 1979; Holiday Inn Riverwalk, 1987; and Marriott Rivercenter and Rivercenter Mall, 1988.

Restaurants of all sizes, shapes and culinary colors abound. More than 50 dining establishments are present along the River Walk. Casa Rio Restaurant was the first, opening in 1946. Every year brings in new prospects. Recently, the Hard Rock Cafe and Planet Hollywood have joined in the success.

Events produced by the Paseo del Rio Association are direct descendants of those envisioned by people who desired to use the waters of the San Antonio River in creative ways. These events periodically lend an additional ambiance to the River Walk.

Posted by Christina Whipple in San Antonio Real Estate at 22:49

Any business that preserves the original spirit of the San Antonio River Walk should be allowed. Thanks for this great, and very informative article. Anonymous on Oct 10 2006, 21:08