

Bell County Historical Commission Newsletter



Summer 2007
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Bell County Courthouse
Belton, Texas 76513

Museum's summer fun still going strong

The Bell County Museum's summer program continues, with summer camp beginning July 24, a photography workshop for adults on July 28 and a luncheon honoring volunteers on August 17.

On August 4 five organizations, including the museum, will honor Bell County Historical Commission reporter Berneta Peebles on her 90th birthday.

Looking forward to Archeology Month in October, the museum staff has scheduled a lecture by Doug Boyd on October 4; the tipi and archeology pits will be on view each Saturday in October, as well.

In partnership with The Institute for the Humanities in Salado and the Public Arts League of Salado, the museum will host a Keith Carter lecture and reception from 5 to 7 p.m. on November 3, according to museum director Stephanie Turnham. Carter's *Ezekiel's Horse* photography exhibit will open on October 13.

Registration information for these events is available at 254-933-5243. The museum is located at 201 N. Main in Belton; hours are 12 noon to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday; admission is free.

More Bell County historical markers to come

Bell County Historical Commission marker chairman Nancy Kelsey has announced that applications for several new Texas Historical Commission markers are in progress.

These include a marker for the Temple Daily Telegram to be dedicated in November, another honoring Goliad Massacre survivor Norman Austin and a third to remember the missionary work in Brazil by Z. C. and Kate Taylor.

In addition, historic cemetery designation applications are being processed for Pleasant Hill Cemetery in Nolanville and Shilo Cemetery near Troy.

Irving to direct Brownwood's railroad museum

Mary Irving, who has directed Temple's Railroad & Heritage Museum for 22 years, has accepted the position as director of the new Martin and Francis Lehnis Railroad Museum in Brownwood, with a grand opening scheduled for the third weekend in September.

The museum, located near the historic Santa Fe depot and Harvey House in Brownwood, will exhibit a "huge collection of railroad china," according to Irving.

Delisi to address BCHC on legislation

District 55 Representative Dianne White Delisi will discuss the work of the recent 80th Texas Legislature at the July 23 meeting of the Bell County Historical Commission.

She is expected to highlight items with positive impact in Bell County, including funding of the new four-year medical school in Temple, the expansion of college benefits to children of service-related disabled U.S. military personnel and efforts to improve border security, according to chief of staff James A. Cooley.

Although born in Rochester, Minnesota, when her father, the late Dr. Raleigh R. White Sr, was serving at Mayo Clinic, Delisi is a fifth-generation central Texan and was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1990. Named one of *Texas Monthly's* 10 best legislators in 2005, she is chairman of the House Public Health Committee and a member of the Public Education Committee.

At the August 27 meeting Tom Heard of Little River will describe his recent work on rolling stock at the Railroad & Pioneer Museum in Temple.

Bell County Calendar

BCHC meeting.....	July 23, 7 pm
'Salado Legends'.....	July 28, August 4
Photography workshop (BCM).....	July 28, 10 am
BCHC meeting.....	August 27, 7 pm
BCHC meeting.....	September 24, 7 pm
<i>Face of Texas</i> exhibit (BCM).....	through September 29
Archeology lecture (BCM).....	October 4
<i>Ezekiel's Horse</i> photography exhibit.....	October 13
Cheyenne culture with Curtis Carter (BCM).....	October 20
Keith Carter reception, lecture.....	November 3, 5-7 pm

THC rep praises BCHC strategic planners

More than a dozen members of the Bell County Historical Commission met recently with Cynthia Beeman of the Texas Historical Commission to discuss ideas for expanding the role of BCHC. Joining the discussion was County Judge Jon Burrows.

"You've got a really good group there," Beeman commented. "I was very pleased at the level at which everyone participated"

Chairman Ron Gates promises more planning meetings after members return from summer vacations.

for the ungenealogist in your life.....

Couldn't care less about family history? Nod off when others recount theirs?

The July 2007 *Smithsonian* magazine offers ammunition for anyone who just "doesn't get it" on the subject of genealogy. Richard Conniff, whose wife and daughter disagree with him, writes that "about half the people living today" can probably claim kinship with Charlemagne.

"Until recently, hardly anybody kept close track of their ancestry," Conniff writes. "They were too busy picking lice out of their hair or fending off the Black Death."

He attributes (other) Americans' fascination with genealogy to several factors, including a desire for "a sense of place, of connectedness," but in going back 5,000 to 7,000 years, he quotes Yale statistics professor Joseph T. Chang: "At that point, everybody is either a common ancestor of all people alive today, or of nobody alive today."

In a *Nature* article, Chang and his co-authors write: "No matter what languages we speak or the colour of our skin, we share ancestors who planted rice on the banks of the Yangtze, who first domesticated horses on the steppes of the Ukraine, who hunted giant sloths in the forests of North and South America and who labored to build the Great Pyramid of Khufu."

Conniff concludes: "Our ancestors are dead, and they should let us rest in peace." A.L.

Youngsport event draws many 'old-timers'

A crowd of at least 125 attended the recent dedication of a Texas Historical Commission marker at the community of Youngsport, nine miles south of Killeen. One visitor reported: "All the old-timers wore starched jeans, starched white shirts and cowboy hats."

Veterinarian Dr. Gene Ray served as master of ceremonies, who told the audience that he lives in the oldest house in Youngsport and said that, at one time, the town had a population of 289. A post office opened in 1871. The community's history began before 1850 when Michael Young arrived with his family. The town's name came either from Young, "reputedly a ship's captain," according to the *The Handbook of Texas*, or from P. G. Young, who owned the town's hotel in 1884. The Live Oak Baptist Church was organized in 1875, and a Church of Christ congregation was meeting in a brush arbor by 1882. The town became a cotton-shipping point by 1884, the *Handbook* states, and comprised three churches, two cotton gins, flour and corn mills, besides the hotel and school.



MARKER DEDICATED: A recent ceremony recognized Temple's Seven Star Cemetery, a site whose history has inspired many stories since the MKT railroad arrived in 1882. Left to right are Bishop John Tolbert, speaker Rev. Al Edwards, Patsy Luna of the Temple City Council, Al Edwards Juneteenth Association president Susan Peoples, association treasurer Willie Floyd and Temple mayor Bill Jones. The designation Seven Star refers to traditions related to the underground railroad, by which slaves often escaped to freedom. Rescued after years of neglect, its fewer than 100 grave markers cleaned and repaired, the cemetery is maintained by the association and is the final resting place for almost 500 persons, including veterans of the Spanish-American War and World War I.

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The commission meets at 7 p.m. on the fourth Monday of most months in Justice of the Peace #1 courtroom, Bell County Courthouse. The BCHC office on the third floor of the courthouse is open from 9 a.m. to 12 noon Monday through Friday. Phone number is 254-933-5917.

(E-mail: hist.comm@co.bell.tx.us)

Whatever happened to the Riggs children?

The e-mail tantalized: "Do you know anything about a couple of little girls kidnapped by Indians near Killeen? My college friend at Texas Tech is a grandson of one of those little girls." Technology is great; the e-mail, from the spouse of an old high school buddy, arrived instantly; the research to find out more went more like the Pony Express during this year's rainy season.

Three years later, the story about the 1859 Riggs Massacre isn't finished -- and may never be -- but it's certainly more complete now that Tom Darby of Albuquerque has furnished information about the later lives of his grandmother, Margaret Ann Riggs, and her sister, Rhoda Elizabeth Riggs, kidnapped from their parents' farm near Sugar Loaf and then escaping, according to local lore, in the vicinity of Comanche Gap. And, like what happens in delving into any historical event, more questions have emerged.

John & Jane Riggs
Murdered by
Comanche
Indians
Mar. 16, 1859

So reads the modest marker in Killeen City Cemetery where the remains of the Riggs couple were reburied during the construction of Camp Hood in 1942. The Sugar Loaf community was in the Killeen trade area until the arrival of the Army. Considered to be the last Indian raid involving fatalities, the 1859 attack resulted in a total of four deaths.

Darby has furnished a brief autobiography written by William Carroll Riggs, younger brother of Rhoda Elizabeth and Margaret Ann. The Riggs family moved to Bell County from Stone County, Arkansas,* in 1857 and lived near Three Forks and Little River for about a year. In 1858 they moved to the northwestern part of the county and settled on Post Oak Creek, about one and one-half miles east of Sugar Loaf Mountain. The two girls and William were born in Arkansas; a second son, John Roland, was born in Bell County in 1858. Ages for the children on March 16, 1859, were Rhoda, about nine; Margaret Ann, about five; William, two; and John Roland, "a nursing infant."

William later wrote about the Indian attack in his autobiography, undoubtedly depending on others for his relentlessly graphic descriptions: ". . . my parents . . . were surrounded by a hideously painted and yelling band of demons, who commenced piercing my father with arrows . . . My father extracted some arrows from his body and threw them back at the Comanche . . . and also hurled rocks trying to defend himself. My mother . . . was lanced and left dead within a few feet of her husband. Rhoda and Margaret were placed on the Indians' horses and were taken away. Our house was sacked and robbed, the feather beds were dragged from it and ripped open, allowing the cold blowing wind to decorate the timber with feathers for miles down Post Oak Creek. Ambrose Lee arrived after the Comanche had departed from our homestead. A horrible scene met his gaze, for in the tall grass he saw my infant brother crawling over my dead

* Stone County was not formed until 1873; William obviously wrote this as an adult.

(continued)

Whatever happened to the Riggs children . . .

mother trying to nurse and my father lying dead just a few feet away . . . Young Pierce had been killed by this same band of Comanche before they attacked my father and David Elms, whose clothing they took and whipped him with their rawhide latigos. The Comanche released David when the war whoop was raised for the killing of my parents . . . The Comanche also killed a young cowboy, George Peavyhouse, near Douglas Mountain.”

So, what happened to the children? According to their younger brother, William, all four Riggs children were taken to Arkansas by their grandparents, Thomas and Rhoda Riggs. During the Civil War the family returned to Bell County, settling at Daar's Creek; from there the family moved to the home of an uncle, Brannick Riggs, in Bandera County. In 1866 the grandfather drowned in the Medina River, after which the family returned briefly to Bell County in the area of Big Indian Creek. Later, probably in Bandera County, the two sisters were married, Rhoda to A. C. Conover and Margaret Ann, at age 16, to John Turner Benton.

In April, 1870, William, according to his longer autobiography, *Chicosa Bill*, started from Bandera County toward California with Brannick Riggs, Brannick's wife Mary, six children, another uncle named James Riggs, his wife, "Grandma" Riggs (Rhoda Casey Riggs, whose husband had drowned in the Medina River), the younger brother John Roland (the "nursing infant" at the time of the massacre) plus two men, O. T. Clark and John Hayden. This group of 15 was joined near Fredericksburg by the P. S. Oatman family and later, by the John Hildreth family.

Traveling with livestock, the train, William writes, formed at night into a circle for defense, with some of the party standing guard. "But we did not experience Indian trouble," he records. They traveled 10 to 15 miles a day, often on dry and dusty roads, but "occasionally heavy rainstorms with vivid lightning and crashing thunder would stampede our cattle and horses."

The party reached Colorado via Raton Mountain (*sic*) in July, 1870. William and most of the Riggs relatives eventually gave up California plans and established themselves in ranching, timber and coal-mining enterprises in the southeastern area of Colorado. Besides selling cattle, they sold timber to railroad companies, including the Denver and Rio Grande Railway and the AT&SF line, as well as coal and dairy products to new settlers. One day in May, 1873, William and a friend encountered and killed a bear, giving Bear Canyon its name.

In 1877 "Grandma" Riggs returned to Bell County, where she lived until her death, at age 77, in January, 1881. She was buried in Williamson County, according to William's autobiography.

The Riggs family's youngest child, John Roland, married Rosetta E. Darling during the winter of 1876-77. In 1882 he was killed by lightning near the Spanish Peaks in Las Animas County, Colorado, according to Mary Elizabeth Riggs, William's granddaughter, in *Story of Bell County, Texas*. William married Margaret Temperance Blackwell on May 1, 1881. "We returned to my ranch home together the next day in a rainstorm. The storm lasted until the mouth of Chicosa Canyon . . . [but then] bright sunshine welcomed us home." The couple had five children, two of whom died in infancy.

By the time Rhoda, now Rhoda Conover, wrote the accompanying, undated letter, she and her family were living on the Pecos River. Rhoda and her husband were parents of at least two sons, Alfred and Frank. By 1904, both sisters were living in Oklahoma Territory. William visited them and posed for a family photo, along with cousin Brannick Riggs.

His granddaughter writes that William and Margaret traveled to Bell County several times to visit with friends and to find the site of the 1859 massacre. Stops in 1909 included the Belton Hotel, Salado (where he watched children come to play at the "beautiful springs"), his grandfather's "old place on Daars Creek," the Harmon place at Holland, the Armstrong family, Summers Mill, Temple (where William

Whatever happened to the Riggs children . . .

watched a demonstration of hypnotism), the office of George W. Tyler, Killeen's Hudson Hotel, Belton's natatorium and the Sugar Loaf cemetery where, for \$10 plus \$1 to hire a team, he installed a marker for his parents' grave, 50 years after their deaths. In Belton he spent 35 cents for a shave, tonic and shoeshine.

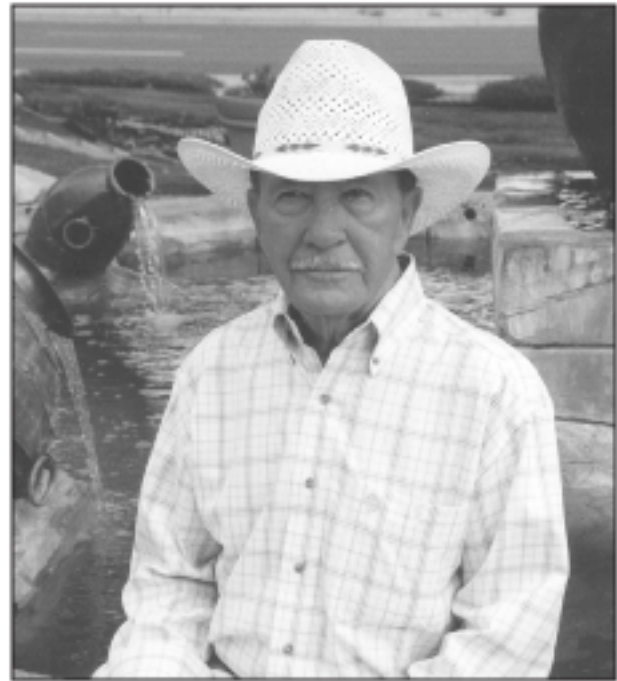
While his wife Margaret visited her family in Weatherford, William went to a fat stock show in Fort Worth where he talked and was photographed with possibly the most famous Comanche in Texas history, Quanah Parker, son of Cynthia Ann Parker and Comanche chief Peta Nocona.

In 1919 William traveled by train to visit his sister. He "made inquiries" in Mena, Arkansas, then caught a ride on a mail hack to a point about four miles from the Conover home. Describing the road as very muddy and rocky, he required some five hours to reach their home in Egger. He spent four nights, then walked 16 miles back to Mena, Polk County seat, to catch a train. In letters to her sister Margaret Ann dated 1927 and 1928, Rhoda was still living in Egger, now known as Cherry Hill. Family members apparently lost track of Rhoda and her family; a Yahoo! People Search finds no Conovers in Arkansas today.

William Riggs died in 1924 and is buried in Trinidad, Colorado.

Margaret Ann and her husband, John Turner Benton, raised stock and reared nine children on the Medina River before moving to the Oklahoma Territory in 1894. There, two more children, Joe Benton and Gladys Benton Darby, mother of Tom Darby, were born. They moved to Gray County in the Texas Panhandle in 1905. Benton died in 1928, and Margaret Ann died in 1936; both are buried in Pampa.

The *Pampa Daily News* obituary noted that "the passing of Margaret Ann Riggs Benton ended a life that covered a dramatic and colorful role, connected to the fundamental development of the Southwest." **A.L.**



Tom Darby, native of Pampa and graduate of Texas Tech University, is a grandson of Margaret Ann Riggs Benton, one of the two Riggs daughters kidnapped by Comanche raiders during the 1859 Riggs Massacre.

Notes on the Riggs Massacre

According to the account recorded by the the younger brother, William Carroll Riggs, the "stranger" was Captain Milton Wesley Damron, an early Bell County tax assessor, a cavalry officer during the Civil War and postmaster in Salado. A Texas Historical Commission marker in his honor was approved in 2006. However, an account of the event in *Story of Bell County, Texas*, published in 1988 by the Bell County Historical Commission, notes that the "stranger" was John B. Slack and that he took the girls to the Damron home near Comanche Gap.

In *The History of Bell County*, published in 1936, George W. Tyler states that the home of Jesse Scoggin ("Fort Scrockings") "afforded the best protection in the neighborhood." In *Indian Depredations in Texas*, edited by J. W. Wilbarger and published in Austin in 1889, the Riggs Massacre is dramatically recorded by J. T. DeShields, who quotes from a letter dated April 25, 1886, written by Margaret Ann Riggs Benton, then living in Bandera County.

The following is a transcribed 11-page letter (undated, but after her marriage about 1870) from Rhoda Elizabeth Riggs Conover to her younger brother, William Carroll Riggs: (Spelling, punctuation, capitalization and sentence structure have been preserved as written except in a few cases in which meaning was unclear in the original version.)

At the time when our parents were murdered, we lived in Coryell Co. 16 miles above Belton near Cowhouse creek, and Sugar loaf mountain, Texas. On 15th of March 1859, my father, and Dave Ellems [Elms] who was 14 years of age, started, to get some poles, (Ellems was working for father at the time, he was driving a team, and my father was [leading?] one, when they were about half a mile from the house I saw father running and some men on horse back after him, I told my mother so, but she never thought about indians, she said, she thought they were Cow punchers killing rabbits, when she saw that they were indians, she started to meet father, and father told her to come back to the house, that they were indians, and intended to murder us, and just as they got back from the house, my fathers brother Thomas Riggs rode up, father tried to give him his two youngest children, but as his horse was not gentle, he could not take them, and so he went to call for help because he nor father had any arms to defend themselves with, when Thomas Riggs went to call for help, we all started to go to our nearest neighbor Mr. Pearce, who lived about 1 mile distant, and when the indians saw us away from the house, they run up to us and killed father, he tried to defend himself with rocks, that was all he had to defend himself with, then they tried to take mother prisoner but she would not go, and so they killed her too, with a lance, but they did not take their scalps, and then they put me behind one of the indians, on the horse, but I jumped as quick as they put me on, I done so 6 or 7 times, and then two of them caught me and put me on again, and at the same time I saw my little sister Magie [Margaret] behind one of the indians on a horse, and so I stayed on too, I was 9 years and my sister five years old at the time.

After they had me and my sister on the horses, they went back to the house, and packed everything on their horse that they could take and what they could not take, they burned, they tried to set the house afire but it would not burn, by this time, Thomas Riggs had circulated the news, and one of our neighbors, Mr.[Ambrose] Lee, took his gun, and came up to where our parents lay murdered, and when the indians saw him coming they left, and Mr. Lee took the two youngest children, William, and John Riggs, which the indians had left there with the dead ones, and brought them to Mrs Pearce and her mother in law, and then he went to get his own Familie, and bring them to Isak Scrockings house, where the people all used to gather if anything happened, while Mrs. Pearce and her mother in law, started with they two little children to Fort Scrockings which was about 5 miles distant, when my aunt Mrs. Whitehead heard that there were indians around, she took her little boy 3 years old, and carried him to the Fort, she was a little ahead of Mrs. Pearce and her mother in law, they all walked (to) it. Mrs. Whiteheads husband was absent at the time.

After the indians took us about 5 miles from our house, they rounded up Mr. Tom Ellems horses, under a large lifeoak tree in which some indians were hid, and the indians in the tree, drew lasos on the finest of the horses, and let the others run, they indians then took the bell off Mr. Ellems big gray mare, and buried it under the tree, after they went away from the tree, they divided, and rode only two, and two together, and every five miles they would all get together again. Along in the afternoon after they captured the horses, they run on to Mr. Pievehouse and killed him, late in the evening the indians had just got together again, they saw some cow punchers, and then they rode faster trying to get in the woods when my little sister fell off from the horse, and then I jumped off, and lay senseless on the ground, I dont know how long I lay there, but when I recoverd, I went back to were my sister was, she was sitting at the same place yet, were the indians dropped her, we then hurried [hurried?] up the road and traveled along it, I had torn pieces off my dress and thrown them along the road, when I was with the indians, and so I knew that we were going towards home, it soon became dark, and after dark we got to an old house, where we stayed all night, the next morning, I was afraid the indians would recapture us, if we would go to the road, so I went around a mountain and got to another house, but it was deserted also, on account of the indians, we were about an our at the house, when a stranger rode up and inquired for the way, then I told him, that the indians had taken us, and that we had got away from them, and did not know what to do, he then told us to go along with him, and he said, that he was a stranger there, and did not know any thing about the indians, nor the way.

(continued on next page)



Rhoda Riggs Conover (left) and Margaret Ann Riggs Benton pose with their younger brother William Carroll Riggs (back row, right) at Anadarko, Oklahoma Territory, in 1904.

A. C. Conover, husband of Rhoda, is seated in front row center.

At left on back row is Brannick Riggs, cousin of the three Riggs siblings.

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We passed lots of houses that day, but they were all deserted, it was about 9 a clock in the night, when we got to where people were liveing, there we got something to eat and to drink, we had'ent had anything to eat, nor a drink of water in the two day, we had been away from home. Then the stranger went to Fort Scrockings, and told where we were, and then my uncle Mr. Whitehead and a neighbor Mrs. Ricked, came and got us back. Mr. pierce got killed about a guarder of a mile from our house, before my parents got killed. Dave Ellems, the boy that was with my father at the time, was wounded by the idians, but he got away from them, and went home.

When we were with the indians, there was one that spoke English, he threatend to kill me, and stuc, his arrows in me, I told him to go ahead, he then laught, and made all kinds of fun, I knew he was a white man although he was painted like an indian, he had curly hair, but I never layed on like I knew, because I was afraid they would surely kill me then. After we were back in the Fort, a white man used to come there, but I was afraid of him, he asked me one day, whether one of he indians had'ent a awful big nose, I told him, yes, but how he knew, and he said he knew them, that they were from the Reservation. I told the people of it, and then they hung him, he confessed that he was one of the party, and gave the names of two other white men, that was with them too, and then they hung them too.

The one they hung first, his name was Tage, but the names of the other two, I dont Remember any more. The indians were Comanches. I wrote all now that I think is nessecery. We are getting along very well now. We have a ranch down here on the Pacos [probably Pecos] river. Alfred is going to school now. We have a few head of stock. The boys and Conover are busy. We are all well and hope the same of you. I must close now, in hopes that we will soon hear of you again. With regards from us, to you all. Your sister Rhoda E. Conover

P.S. Please dont let Jim Riggs get a hold of these papers, because I know he will spaculate of them, and I dont want him to.

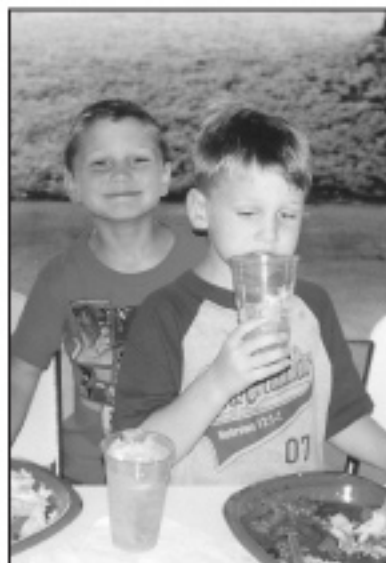
*Texas State
Veterans Cemetery*



Little River Academy

Fort Hood

A Bell County Fourth



Salado



*Belton . . . believed to have the nation's oldest July 4th parade,
first recorded in 1852, presented annually since 1979*