



'Dickens on The Strand' relives Victorian times

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In the eerie gaslight of a December night, it's easy to imagine great whaling ships moored sleeping in Galveston Bay. The quays alongside the once-busy port teem with squint-eyed bakers hawking hot cross buns, with streetwise urchins pinching purses and picking pockets. Ladies and gentlemen elbow through the throng, buying sweetmeats and listening to Christmas carols all around.

If you're quick, you might catch the Artful Dodger with his hand in your pocket. Or see crusty old Fagin training his army of thieves and junior miscreants.

But when the mist disappears and the gaslights go out, the world of Victorian England won't vanish forever. It exists for two days each December, courtesy of the Galveston Historical Foundation and its production of "Dickens on The Strand."

The festival, a re-creation of the Victorian England immortalized by Charles Dickens, will be Dec. 7-8 in downtown Galveston. Five blocks of restored Victorian buildings facing the wharves will become the London of Dickens and create a world where *Oliver Twist*, *Scrooge* and *Tiny Tim* can come to life again.

Tim Kingsbury, marketing director for the festival, says the Strand lends itself to a make-believe Victorian era because most of the buildings along the street were built between 1859 and 1890, when Galveston was known as "the Wall Street of the South."

The port was a bustling center of commerce and cotton for 50 years until deeper harbors replaced Galveston as a financial center and sapped the town's vitality. With their hey-day past, the quay-side warehouses remained as a legacy of Galveston's prosperous history.

The buildings themselves are relics of history and hardship. They housed Union occupation forces during the Civil War, and survived an extensive fire in the 1880's and at least two hurricanes. Most amazing

of all they survived the death of the Galveston economy during the first half of the century. But it may have been the death of Galveston that saved the life of the historic buildings along The Strand, Kingsbury says.

"The city just died," he says. "In San Antonio, Dallas and Houston, the cities grew and they tore all their old building down to build new ones. Ours weren't torn down, only abandoned."

So the area lay fallow for most of the first half of the century, until the 1960s, when a renewed interest in historical conservation spurred the restoration of the area. What began on a small scale, with a few private residences and a few hundred volunteers, grew to include the Strand and involve over 3,000 foundation members.

This renaissance of the downtown area included not only returning the buildings to their Victorian respectability but also returning the district to its former glory as a busy commercial district. The old warehouses and storefronts were turned into watering holes and shops, creating over 60 restaurants, pubs and boutiques in all. If the camera-toting tourists strolling the streets were Victorian merchants or sailors, the restoration would be complete.

The festival will be held in the middle of the old financial district. Merchants and entertainers costumed in the cut-aways and cravats from Victorian England will join with visitors in re-creating the spirit of a Victorian Christmas.

"About 150 booths will be set up," Kingsbury says, "selling everything from mistletoe to handmade Christmas ornaments, flowers and baskets. But whatever is sold inside has to be handmade. We don't have anything from Japan."

Food sold inside the gates will also be authentic Old English. Visitors will be able to sample plum pudding, cakes and pasties, and authentic Scotch eggs. They can quench their thirst with ale, cider or beer.

Kingsbury says he expects nearly 200 merchants to sell their wares during the weekend. Everything sold must be like something made in

