

Old West rebuilt in nearby towns

By Molly Pepper
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Without its splashy new paint job, Winkleman Village might look just like any deserted boom town.

As it is, even driving by on Highway 290 at 55 m.p.h., it's easy to see the town's neither antique nor abandoned. It's actually an "old" western amusement park without any rides.

The village was founded by Ray Winkleman Jr. in 1984 for profit and for fun.

Although some houses in the village are meant to be private residences, they are only for the people who work in the village, because the area is meant to be more of a tourist attraction than a community.

The town isn't finished yet but it does have some craft and antique stores, a gourmet restaurant and an old-fashioned saloon. Only a few of the stores are open now; most are waiting until February or March when tourists come to Texas to see the bluebonnets, and business becomes better. The saloon and restaurant are also closed until then and gearing up for the peak tourist season.

Shopkeepers say business was good last year from March until September. In the spring the roadside by the village is a rainbow of different wild flowers, shopkeepers say, which brings people in from all around.

Some of the structures in Winkleman Village are as old as they seem. Several of the shops are authentic antiques, brought in from all over Texas and re-

stored in Winkleman. Each shop has an index card tacked up by the door telling where the building came from. Other shops were built at the site.

Local merchant Sarah Fleming says the village was recently bought by Signature One, the conglomerate of business investors from Arizona who geared up Disneyland. The group has plans to revive the village starting in February, she says.

In phase one of the revival project, the new owners will sponsor 15 crowd-drawing events, including a chili cook-off, a barbecue and mock gun fights, Fleming says. According to Fleming, Signature One is planning to open similar villages in Florida and California.

The general store looks as it must have looked in the late 1800's.

Both side walls are lined with goods ranging from hats and jeans to groceries and homemade picante sauce. There's even a pot-bellied stove to gather around and play checkers or sit next to and talk. But no one does this anymore, according to Chappell Hill store owner, Harry Lesser.

Chappell Hill is a small town 10 miles east of Brenham off the beaten path of Highway 290. The population numbers less than 200.

It has one bank, one post office and a genuine general store.

Two of the main attractions in the town are the Stagecoach Inn and Harry Lesser's General Store.

Lesser, 92, is the third generation of Lessers to own the store, which he in turn, plans to pass

on to his son. The store hasn't changed much since it was built in 1894, Lesser says.

A Circle K moved in further down the main street but Lesser hasn't tried to compete with it by changing his store or what he sells there, and that includes his policy not to sell beer. He doesn't sell beer because he doesn't approve of intoxication, he says.

The Stagecoach Inn was originally built in 1850 by the town's founder, Mary Haller and her husband. The Inn provided comfortable lodging for stagecoach passengers.

Soon after it was built, the Inn was sold and changed hands several times until a couple from Houston, Harvin and Elizabeth Moore, bought it in 1976 and restored it.

Besides an interesting look, Chappell Hill has an interesting and different history — it's one of the few towns in Texas that traces back to a woman.

The woman was Mary Hargrove Haller, builder of the Stagecoach Inn and wife of the owner of the local trading post. Married less than a year, she bought 100 acres of land while her husband was out of town buying supplies.

She then laid out the town, named the streets and designated the lot sizes.

The name Chappell was her mother's maiden name and the addition of hill was obvious by the location.

Soon after she started the city in 1847, Haller began a Methodist school of higher learning for men and women. Later the school was divided into Soul University for men and Chappell Hill

Female College for women. Soul University closed in 1878 and its charter was used to start Southwestern in Georgetown. The Chappell Hill Female College closed in 1912 and its charter was used to start Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

The town has two festivals every year which bring in tourists from all over Texas.

One is the Scarecrow Festival held in October. Houses display scarecrows in competition with each other and at the end of the week, prizes are awarded for the best ones.

The Bluebonnet Festival is held in April while the bluebonnets are in flower. The festival brings in tourist from all over the state with its parties and parade.