



In Mexico, they call it *la frontera*, and, indeed, this is the frontier
between the future and the past.





by MARIO SÁNCHEZ

(previous page) interior of fort with gunport to right;
(above) the distinctive entrance of the Jesús Treviño Fort
topped by a sundial (right) exterior and gardens of Zaza-
goza-Domínguez house; photography by Robert Parvin

IN APRIL 1919, *ARCHITECTURAL RECORD* INVITED ITS readers to detach themselves from “the stress of today” and to explore “the vastness of the mesquite plains and the quiet of the sleepy towns” along the Texas/Mexico border. These towns, the author noted, “make it difficult to realize that one is actually within the confines of [the U.S.].”

San Ygnacio, the town that captivated the magazine’s architectural eye in 1919, continues to entice the traveler today. Located on the Rio Grande, 30 miles southeast of Laredo, the townsite still offers the same sandstone houses, narrow streets and well-

worn sidewalks, or *banquetas*, that were in evidence in the photographs of *Architectural Record*. Equally important, the Mexican customs and lifeways, also noted in 1919, continue to be preserved by the town’s inhabitants. Intimately tied to Mexico, San Ygnacio reflects the give and take of the borderlands that blurs political boundaries and emphasizes the cultural continuity of the Texas/Mexico border.

That continuity dates back to the 1740s when Spain selected José de Escandón, an enterprising colonizer, to settle the Lower Rio Grande region stretching from Laredo to the Gulf. Between 1749



and 1755, Escandón founded civil settlements on both sides of the river, including Camargo, Mier, and Revilla (later Guerrero) on the south bank, and Laredo and Dolores on the north bank. In 1767, the settlers received a royal emissary from the King of Spain to lay out the plazas and streets of the emerging towns in accordance with the Laws of the Indies. Land grants were also bestowed as a reward for the pioneers who were safeguarding the distant frontiers of the Spanish Empire.

With few, if any, nearby settlements to their north or to their south, the families who colonized the Lower



Rio Grande came to rely upon one another. The bond they established between their communities is evident today in their shared family trees, language, ranching traditions, folklore, and architecture.

Perhaps no other piece of architecture in the region—or in the entire borderlands—embodies this shared heritage more than the Jesús Treviño Fort in San Ygnacio. Established in 1830 by Jesús Treviño, the original structure was a one-room fortified dwelling similar to those built immediately upriver in the late 18th century at Dolores and Corralitos. This single room, or *cuarto viejo*, was periodically visited by Treviño, a native of Guerrero, to tend to his herds of sheep and cattle. The 18 x 20-foot room still stands with its earthen floor and its single exterior opening closed by a four-inch-thick mesquite door mounted on pivots lined with leather.

By 1848, when the war between the U.S. and Mexico ended, the descendants of Treviño moved permanently to the fort to protect their lands, now under U.S. jurisdiction. At that time an intense building campaign started in which the fort grew, both as a family residence and as a refuge that protected nearby settlers from periodic incursions by Native American tribes.

Between 1851 and 1854, the *casa larga* was added to the original dwelling. This space included hand-hewn cypress beams inscribed with decorations and dates of construction. Interior and exterior walls were covered in plaster, while rooftops and floors were covered with *chipichil*, a mixture of lime

and aggregate from the banks of the Rio Grande. A massive fireplace and the entryway with its distinctive rounded parapet were also built at this time. The latter is topped by a sundial carved in sandstone. To fully enclose and defend the 84 x 128-foot rectangular compound, a nine-foot wall was added, punctured by gunports, or *troneras*. By 1871, the last room was built. It showcased the latest architectural innovations available in San Ygnacio, including a pine floor and milled wooden beams with a beaded edge. The tradition of inscribing dates on the beams, however, was not forgotten.

As the fort grew, so did the town. By 1874, San Ygnacio was platted with a plaza, streets, and a lot for its new church, which replaced the fort as the place for community worship. But despite the fact that mass was now celebrated at the church, the fort continued to be a focal point for the residents. Public gatherings were held at Christmas and in September on the feast of the town's patron saint. In the 1920s, with the advent of movies, motion pictures were shown on the whitewashed walls of the courtyard, or *corralón*. Treviño family descendants continued to reside and to work in the fort until 1989. Today, the descendants of Maria Herrera, the fort's last resident, own the portion known as the *casa larga*.

In 1936, the structure came to the attention of the Historic American Buildings Survey, better known as HABS. A team of architects was dispatched to San Ygnacio to record in drawings and in photographs every detail of the fort—from plans and elevations



to decorative carvings and wrought iron hardware. Stored at the Library of Congress, this information will prove invaluable in future restoration efforts.

By 1964, the fort was designated as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. In 1998, however, public recognition of the fort reached its zenith when it was named a National Historic Landmark—the highest designation for historic properties in the U.S. The document justifying the designation referred to the building as “a superb example of Hispanic architecture in the American southwest.” It also highlighted its uniqueness as a rare survivor of the 1953 construction of Falcon Reservoir that inundated Spanish colonial ranches on both sides of the Rio Grande. On December 12, 1998, the citizens of San Ygnacio celebrated the designation of their fort as a national landmark with the presentation of a commemorative bronze plaque by the National Park Service.

Enter Michael Tracy, an iconoclastic artist with a decided passion for the borderlands. The Ohio native came to Texas in the 1960s to attend St. Edward’s University. After traveling extensively in Europe and establishing a succession of studios in Austin, Galveston, and Corpus Christi, Tracy moved to San Ygnacio in 1978 to be at the threshold of his beloved

Mexico, a land that inspires the imagery of his paintings, sculpture, and architectural installations.

In San Ygnacio, Tracy found a townsite sitting alongside a great river of history that satisfied his architectural eye, his thirst for historical ambiance, and his admiration for craftsmanship, rich texture, and color. After years of painstaking deed record searches to secure title, Tracy was able to officially settle in San Ygnacio in 1984 with the purchase of the abandoned Zaragoza-Domínguez house and store dating to 1900.

Over the next five years, Tracy turned these historic buildings and an adjacent 1960s ranch style house into a block-long compound comprised of a residence, studio, and exhibit space set amidst courtyards of wildflowers and lush arcades of colorful vines. When work was completed in 1989, the Zaragoza-Domínguez house and store stood out as one of the finest rehabilitations in the border region, if not the state.

Faithful to original details, Tracy recovered the porches, uncovered the water well, and refused to introduce air conditioning to keep the full volume of interior spaces. Since bathrooms were not original to the structures, a small pavilion was built in the courtyard to house modern conveniences. The exterior walls were kept “as is” to contrast the patches of



(previous page) interior courtyard of the Jesus Trevino Fort (left) mesquite doorway to *cuarto viejo* (below) stuccoed walls of the *casa larga*

smooth white plaster with the rough-cut sandstone. At the base of the walls, historic sidewalks composed of enormous blocks of sandstone dragged from the riverbanks were carefully repaired. As a unit, this ensemble of buildings presents itself as a warm and inviting oasis that offers a welcome refuge from the harsh climate of the borderlands. By 1990, Tracy made the compound the headquarters of the River Pierce Foundation, which is dedicated to the preservation of the natural and cultural environment of the border.

With his fixation on Mexican culture, the border, and the Rio Grande, it was only logical that Tracy became an avid admirer of the fort in San Ygnacio. Early attempts to purchase the structure failed until 1998, when Dr. R. G. Sánchez sold the River Pierce Foundation his portion of the property that included the entire front wing with the *cuarto viejo*, parapeted entrance, and 1871 addition.

This purchase energized Tracy and the board to begin plans to showcase the fort as the centerpiece of San Ygnacio and as a beacon of borderlands heritage. The River Pierce Foundation purchased the general store, a 1930's warehouse-type space on the plaza, to be renovated as a visitors center. With Tracy at the helm and the culture and ecology of the border as a subject matter, the visitors center will not lack for innovation or for material to interpret. From native flora and fauna, to the ranching traditions of the Mexican *vaquero*, to the lost colonial towns of Falcon Reservoir, the center will provide much-needed context for a visit to San Ygnacio. A well-designed stroll through the streets of this community will culminate with a visit to the fort.

Before visitors arrive, however, the fort must be renovated to stop water leaks, reinforce wooden members, and repair stonework. Following the same philosophy as in the Zaragoza-Domínguez structures, the fort will not be made to look new. Like an old acquaintance, it will greet visitors as they are transported back nearly 200 years to a time when the Rio



Grande was not a border but a source of life. One can be certain that this kind of stimulating visit to the Jesús Treviño Fort and other heritage sites of our border region will, in the words of the 1919 article, “well repay [visitors] for the effort involved in seeking this out-of-the-way land.”

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