

THE PORTAL TO TEXAS HISTORY

Embark on a Voyage of Discovery

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east-west road parallel to the Rio Grande that was laid out by the U.S. Army during the Mexican War in 1846.

With the inevitable development of modern mechanized farming in the lower Rio Grande valley after World War II, El Capote was slowly abandoned, and the houses were torn down as new lands fell under the plow. All that is left of the former community today is a small cemetery that is still maintained by descendants of original El Capote families and one standing, though rapidly deteriorating brick house, located outside the area of the archaeological survey. Informants indicate that besides brick, the older houses at El Capote were of adobe or jacal (wooden posts with mud plaster) construction, while homes built after 1920 were board and batten (cut lumber). Of the 15 or so El Capote house sites that may have or are known to have existed in the survey area, only scatters of pottery, glass, metal, and brick fragments remain.

Before fieldwork began, the archaeologists knew the potential for important prehistoric sites was low and, because of the widespread extent of agricultural disturbances, they did not expect to encounter any intact historical remains. They were correct in the first assessment, but the latter assumption turned out to be incorrect.

When the survey began, all of the land within the one-half-mile survey corridor on either side of the bridge was under cultivation, except for one two-acre tract that had never been cleared and was overgrown with dense vegetation. During the survey of this small plot, the archaeological team discovered the remains of a partially subterranean, adobe-walled structure. It was recognized as a brick kiln and was recorded as an archaeological site (it is known as the Guajardo-Vela site, or 41HG156, according to the state's site numbering system). A large depression and the many piles of bricks observed were thought to be related to the brick kiln, but, as with most archaeological surveys, time did not permit a detailed study of all of the surface features and scattered artifacts. Local informants revealed that this was the loca-



Page 20: Plan and profile drawings and wide angle view of the Guajardo-Vela kiln. Archaeologist Wayne Klement is drawing a measured sketch of the north wall. Photo by Robert Steinbomer. This page, left: View of the north wall of the kiln, showing the animal burrow undercutting the base of the wall and the adobe brick construction. Photo by Karl Kibler.

tion of a brick plant that was owned and operated by Pedro Guajardo, an El Capote businessman who lived from 1875-1952 (these dates were verified by his grave marker in the El Capote cemetery). After the survey was finished, the archaeologists concluded that more archival and archaeological work was needed to better define the history of the brick factory and determine how much of it remains intact.

Archaeologists from Prewitt and Associates returned to the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge in 1993 to conduct the next phase of work. This study involved more archival and oral history research relating to the community of El Capote, additional survey to locate historic sites, and archaeological test excavations to evaluate the research potential of selected sites. Additional work at the brick kiln site also was done at this time and included detailed recording of the archaeological remains and more historic archival and informant research.

Additional former residents of El Capote were interviewed, and it was learned that the brick factory, or ladrillera, had been used by Pedro Guajardo to produce bricks that were sold to locals along the old Military Road prior to 1922. Informants thought that Guajardo might have built the kiln in the 20th century, but several houses built at El Capote in the 1880s were constructed of bricks that are identical to some of those made at the Guajardo-Vela site, including the extant Cantu house located just outside the survey area. It is likely that the kiln was constructed, probably by some of Guajardo's relatives, in the 1880s if not somewhat earlier. Pedro Guajardo would have been 25 years old in 1900, and he could have taken over the kiln by that time. The kiln apparently was not used by

Guajardo after 1922, and the adobe walls (the kiln probably never had a roof) began to deteriorate. Guajardo, who was a descendant of one of the original El Capote families, built a small store at El Capote in 1923, and became a merchant.

Another informant, Edward C. Vela, provided additional information on the site. Apparently his father, Eduardo G. Vela, bought 350 acres at El Capote in the early 1940s. Edward Vela thought that his father constructed the kiln at the site in 1946, but it seems more likely that the kiln was simply repaired at this time because most informants recognized the site as Guajardo's brick factory. Some of the Mexican braceros (temporary laborers) that Eduardo Vela hired as farm hands had made bricks in Mexico. Between 1946 and 1948, Eduardo had the Mexican brickmakers produce bricks that he used to build two houses (one in Pharr and one in Hidalgo). The kiln was only used a few times, and there were never more than five or six men working there. Mesquite wood was used to fire the bricks. When Eduardo abandoned the kiln, a stockpile of good bricks was left behind, but they disappeared over the years.

Additional historical research involving Hidalgo County records failed to produce evidence of the kiln's existence. It is not surprising that the business never showed up in the Hidalgo County tax records, however, because the kiln was only used as a small-scale commercial venture before 1922, and the bricks made in the 1940s were not sold.

The archaeological investigations at the Guajardo-Vela kiln also produced a wealth of informative data, mainly because the archaeological team had the foresight to bring in an expert rather than attempt to interpret the site on their own. Austin architect Robert Steinbomer, who has stud-

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