

Fredericksburg-area residents are working to preserve the area's one-room rural schoolhouses.

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Day Trips

By **Gerald E. McLeod, Fri., Sept. 28, 2001**

Lower Grape Creek School (Photo By Gerald E. McLeod)

While rural schoolhouses that were once a central part of communities could disappear from the Texas landscape, the folks in Gillespie County are doing something to preserve the remaining old schools in their county from being lost. If their proposition on the Nov. 6 statewide ballot passes, then hundreds of one-room monuments to education around the state might also be saved.



When German settlers began to populate the Hill Country in 1845, one of their main concerns, right after Indian attacks and crop conditions, was the education of their children. Having the school on your property was a great honor as well as convenience. At Crabapple Community south of Enchanted Rock State Park, Crockett Riley and Mathias Schmidt both wanted to donate land for the school. Schmidt won the footrace and the honor.

In the days before paved roads and school buses, Gillespie County had 44 rural schoolhouses. In 1949, the Gilmer-Aikin Law established minimum educational standards for schools. Declining enrollment and expensive mandates rang the death bell for rural schools. The small schools were consolidated into school systems in bigger towns.

Of the 35 rural school buildings left standing in the county, 12 are publicly owned. Most of the buildings reverted back to the original landowner for use as barns, houses, and in a few cases, turned into bed and breakfast inns. The buildings still owned by the school district are used as community centers.

In November, voters will decide the fate of legislation to help protect the old schools. Proposition 13, a change to the education code, will allow school districts to donate the buildings for historical preservation instead of forcing them to sell the properties as surplus.

"Nobody has done an inventory of old schoolhouses around the state," Gillespie County resident Ronni Pue says. If Proposition 13 doesn't pass, then many of the buildings will be auctioned off. There is no way a small community club can afford to bid against money coming from Houston or San Antonio, she says.

On September 29, from 9am to 4pm, the Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools will sponsor an open house and school reunion at the 12 schoolhouses. "We want everybody to see what they're voting for," Pue says.

Participating schools are:

Albert (Williams Creek) School is on RR 1623 south of Stonewall. Lyndon Johnson attended school here in 1920 and 1921. The school still has a lot of the original furnishings, including the hand-painted stage curtain. The school was consolidated with the Stonewall Schools in 1950.

Cave Creek School was organized in 1870 and closed in 1950. There were 20 teachers in the school's 68-year history with a peak enrollment of 82 students in 1917. A precinct polling place since 1889, the building is still used by the Community Club and 4-H Club.

Cherry Springs School, north of Fredericksburg off U.S. 87, was organized by German immigrants in 1885. Before it was consolidated with Fredericksburg in 1961, nearly 400 students and 42 teachers passed through the doors.

Crabapple School north of Fredericksburg on RR 965 was founded in the 1840s and consolidated with the Fredericksburg ISD in 1957. It also served as a post office and church.

Lower South Grape Creek School, on U.S. 290 about six miles west of Stonewall, looks like a church with a steeple-like bell tower. Much of the school furnishings remain at the building maintained by a community club.

Luckenbach School opened in 1855 and closed in 1964. It is a fine stone building near the Luckenbach store.

Meusebach Creek School south of Fredericksburg on U.S. 87, was organized around the 1880s and closed in 1954. Classes were taught in German until a state law required English. In 1869, five children of freed slaves attended the school, making it one of the first integrated schools in the South.

Nebgen School originated in 1881, but the current structure was built in 1936 and closed in 1949. A community club took care of the building until 1990, and the building was all but abandoned.

Pecan Creek School started as a private school in Bernhard Frederick's house in 1899 off U.S. 87 south of Fredericksburg. Much of the original furnishings, including the stage curtain with local advertisements, still exist at the school.

Rheingold School has gone through several buildings since the first log cabin in 1873. English was used for lessons, but discipline was done in German. It was consolidated with Fredericksburg in 1949.

Willow City School is one of the larger buildings remaining. Made of locally quarried limestone blocks, the two-story building was constructed in 1890. At the beginning of the scenic Willow City Loop, the school is on RR 1323 about three miles east of TX 16.

Wrede School is on TX 16 near the Lady Bird Johnson Park south of Fredericksburg. Established in 1896, the building has fallen into disrepair since the school was combined with Fredericksburg around 1960.

Maps and directions to each of the schools will be available the day of the Open House. A good place to start a tour is at the Lower South Grape Creek School. A barbecue will be held at the Willow City School in the evening. "You'll have to drive about 150 miles to see all of the schools, but it would be worth it," Pue says. For more information, call her at 830/990-0155 or visit their Web site at www.savetexasruralschools.org.

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