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## SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE SHINES

In the 1960s folk anthems foretold societal changes coming to the United States on many levels. Although few knew it at the time, the title *The Times They Are A-Changing* definitely could be applied to what was happening in the Rio Grande Valley and Hidalgo County in the mid 1980s. Change was a foot and some community leaders knew it had to be, or as the song said, "you better start swimming' or you will sink like a stone."

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## Executive Summary

# STUDENTS TEACH LESSONS

What a year, right? We blink twice and it's 2010. Is it just me or where in the heck did 2009 go? The world spins faster and faster. Our businesses keep us running 100 mph. We take a vacation or two if we're lucky. The race continues.

But what's the big hurry? Where are we heading at such a fast pace? It's almost like if we are not in high gear, we're slacking. Can we still get the job done and keep our sanity too?

As the year is coming to an end and we've been setting goals, making budgets and setting our sights on what we hope will be a prosperous year for our businesses, we also are forced to do something we haven't done in about 12 months: slow down. I know it's difficult to do, but the holidays make us take a break. Sure, we enjoy the festivities with family and friends and plenty of great food, but 11 months of the year we are so fixated and programmed to be on the go 24:7. Adrenaline and pressures of deadlines, solving a problem before it escalates, getting a product or job out to the customer so that everybody is happy - all these things we deal with on a daily basis. And it's all got to happen NOW!

Is this you? Me too. Guilty as charged. So maybe the

holidays (even though can be stressful in its own right) make us give our minds and bodies rest. What is rest, right? Trust me. We all need to turn off the engines and just idle, even if it's for just a few days.

This holiday time is also think time - a time to reset our minds and calmly take a look at our personal and career goals for 2010. I recently attended Career Day at Ruben Hinojosa Elementary School in Mission and realized the rat race we all face can actually have a purpose. These bright and curious 4th graders had great questions. One question in particular put me in my place. "Do you stay up late with your job, like 10 or 11 at night?" asked a curious student. I answered, "That's when I sometimes start my homework."

We can all relate, right? After "regular work", we often work so late from home it feels like tomorrow is just a continuation of today. But when I shared Career Day with these children who are coincidentally working on publishing their own book, I realized something very important. My job, my experience, my career allowed me to interact with tomorrow's leaders. I was truly encouraged by these students' sense of reality. They know about work. They see it from their parents. They know about teamwork and hopefully I gave them something to ponder as I



*Mrs. Partida & 4th grade writing class at Ruben Hinojosa Elementary in Mission, Texas.*

know they left me with a smile on my face. On this sunny and cool Friday morning, these children impressed me. I am grateful for having that opportunity to bring me back to a simple reality. We all have a purpose. Learning from each other and helping each other succeed is why we're here.

If you're 9 years old and writing your 1st book or 41 years old and racing to meet end-of-year deadlines, we all have challenges and hills to climb. Let's not forget, these hills are probably not mountains and taking a break to enjoy family during the holidays is a necessity. The race will continue.

Todd Breland

General Manager

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### Philosophy

We are a pro-business publication committed to reporting business news concerning the Rio Grande Valley's business community. We will strive to create a forum in which business leaders can exchange ideas and information; to providing in-depth perspectives on business trends affecting the community's economy. Our goal is to serve the interests of economic development in the Rio Grande Valley.

Our editorial philosophy is to cover local business news and to bring you relevant state, national, and international news that affects our region. Look for links on our Web Site at [www.valleybusinessreport.com](http://www.valleybusinessreport.com) to business news and stories pertaining to the RGV from across the country, plus local everyday events and business news. Our print publication will present stories of interest about local business people, businesses, and issues of interest pertaining to our area.

### Letters to the Editor

Valley Business Report welcomes letters to the editor. Letters should be e-mailed to [editorial@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:editorial@valleybusinessreport.com) with the subject line: Letter to the Editor. Letters endorsing or opposing political candidates will not be accepted. Please keep letters to 300 words or less and should include your full name and city of residence.

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VBR Media, L.L.C.

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## Business News

# PHARR ANTICIPATES PAPPADÉAUX ARRIVAL

By Adolfo Pesquera

In a year when economic indicators stubbornly moved in the wrong direction, city leaders in Pharr enjoyed a little forward progress when Houston-based Pappas Restaurants broke ground over the summer to build a new Pappadeaux Seafood Kitchen.

Squeezed by national events beyond local control, the prospect of cooking up the retail sector Cajun style brings a nice ray of sunshine. But that has not been the only sun beam for Pharr citizens to bask under.

"We have a chamber of commerce and city commissioners that are all on the same page," said Marty Moore, an owner in D&M Cleaners, one of the downtown's longest-lived businesses. "There's a lot of enthusiasm."

Moore noted that Pharr once had poor leadership. Plagued by political in-fighting, the community had a tendency to underachieve when tackling economic development. "That's over," he said emphatically.

If Pappas Restaurants believes in Pharr, Moore observed, it is an indicator that corporate America has growing confidence in a town where locals have long referred to themselves as the Hub of the Rio Grande Valley. With its two major traffic arteries, the local business community's focus toward generating income off that flow is getting results.

U.S. Highway 281 intersects with U.S. Highway 83 just north of Pharr's downtown. And the U.S. 281 connection to the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge completes the city's traffic axis.

"This town is in growth mode," Moore added, "and we say that with confidence." Pointing to his own business, Moore boasted sales at the end of the second quarter were up 7 percent from last year.

Like many businesses in the old downtown district, Moore wants to make a good impression. He admits that the city tends to blend into its neighbors and visitors may not know where one boundary begins.

"Your first impression depends on what part of town you are coming through," he said. "I think there's some strides made in improving that."

For his part, Moore wants to show his pride. He is getting ready to repaint the building. "Our colors are red, white and blue - white background, blue logo and a red border," he said.

The coming of Pappadeaux - a restaurant known for its high service standards - has been the talk of the town, but it almost did not happen.

"The Pappadeaux project was a done deal," said Luis Bazan, president and chief executive officer of the Pharr Chamber of Commerce. "But due to some minor setbacks, it got put on hold and the dialogue with Pappas Restaurants had to get started again."

Pappadeaux will bring jobs, but it is also a confidence builder to Pharr boosters because Pappas Restaurants is showing

expansion interest in Pharr beyond the one restaurant, said Raul Garza, executive director of the Pharr Economic Development Corp.

Pappas Restaurants is intent on opening two more restaurants in the same business district, Garza said. No schedule or restaurant type has been decided upon, but Pappas has in its corporate portfolio the Pappasito's Cantina, Pappas Bar-B-Q and Pappas Bros. Steakhouse chains.

"They're committed," Garza said.

Meanwhile, Pappas is taking applications for management positions for the Pappadeaux. The site going in next to El Centro Mall is scheduled to open August of 2010.

The Pappadeaux project is but the latest in a series of big company moves that affirm Pharr as the city of firsts, chamber president Bazan said.

"We were the first city in the Valley to be chosen by Lowe's, by Home Depot, by Furniture Row and Ashley Furniture Homestore," Bazan said.

He credits the lure of the two-freeway intersection and Pharr's centralized position in the Valley. It's location also draws in a lot of national hotel chains and allowed Pharr for a time the self-proclamation of RV Capital of the RGV.

Those reminders of success help boost spirits, but Pharr residents know the down side, too. Sales tax revenues, according to the Texas Comptroller's latest figures, are just over \$9.5 million year-to-date, an 8.28 percent drop from 2008.

And year-to-date crossings through August at the city-owned International Bridge fell by 242,319 vehicles from last year. Despite the diminishing traffic, revenues from tolls through August totaled \$8.35 million. That was a gain of \$728,846 over 11 months.

The Pappadeaux will be a neighbor, coincidentally, another Houston-owned development. El Centro Mall, an aged mall owned by Levcor Inc., is due for a facelift. Long deliberated plans to renovate the mall are picking up speed, Garza related.

"They want to put themselves in a good position to compete with other retail development in the Valley," Garza said.

That reference to retail boom lets in Edinburg and McAllen may sound like a 'keeping up with the Joneses' mentality, but in the cut-throat world of retail it's also a necessity.

With residents used to shopping in neighboring towns, Pharr's retail sector has grown slowly. But the landlocked city still has room to build. And city leaders have hopes that investors will take another look at some of its diamonds in the rough.

The McAllen side of Nolana Loop, Garza noted, is developing nicely. But that traffic continues into the Pharr said, which for the most part is raw acreage. Another site is the area north of the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge.

Capote International Business Park, first developed by

Phil Dyer's family three years ago, is shaking off the doldrums suffered by the recession.

"The first three quarters of the year were soft," Dyer said, noting a lack of inquiries for new leases.

However, the 20-acre retail section of the business park just broke ground on a Tejas Money Exchange, Dyer said. And the Stripes Convenience Store, with its truck and tractor-trailer accommodations, is going strong.

As for the 380,000 square feet Dyer manages on the warehouse, distribution and manufacturing side, he sees reason to be optimistic about 2010. Existing tenants started to see their traffic trend up this fall. And inquiries from new tenants started picking up.

"Normally, when a company comes by to visit, then they come back for a second look - that's a good sign," he said. "If 2010 continues like the end of 2009, I see some strengthening."

*Adolfo Pesquera is a freelance writer living in San Antonio. A former news report with the San Antonio Express News and Brownsville Herald, he has been covering business, government, and crime in South Texas for 25 years. Contact info: (210) 629-2937, or email to ajpesq54@gmail.com*

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## Education

# SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE TRANSFORMING THE VALLEY

By Kevin Knoch

In the 1960s folk anthems foretold societal changes coming to the United States on many levels. Although few knew it at the time, the title *The Times They Are A-Changing* definitely could be applied to what was happening in the Rio Grande Valley and Hidalgo County in the mid 1980s. Change was a foot and some community leaders knew it had to be, or as the song said, “you better start swimming? or you will sink like a stone.”

The area was starting to transform from an agriculture dominated region by diversifying its economy. Many avenues were being explored, one sector manufacturing, drew interest. A ramp-up of Mexico’s Maquiladora program started in 1964, was beginning to attract out of state companies to Matamoros and Reynosa. Local leadership saw the development as a chance to expand economic opportunity for their communities.

The agricultural RGV, could point back to innovations that moved the area along by leaps and bounds in the early 20th Century. The arrival of railroads in 1904 con-

**“Your old road is rapidly aging’  
Please get out of the new one  
If can’t lend your hand...  
For the times they are changing.”**

**- Bob Dylan, 1963**

nected the region to the rest of United States. The development of water pumps circa 1910 enabled the creation of an irrigation system. Political unrest in Mexico sent a labor force into the area. By the 1920’s the Rio Grande Valley was establishing itself as a growing and shipping region for citrus and vegetables.

But competition from growing areas with lower labor costs started to erode the agriculture base. The handwriting was on the wall. What would the region need most to diversify its economy? Once the question was framed the apparent answer was; education. A better educated populace and a better trained workforce to meet the demands of a changing market place.

The concept of a community college began to coalesce in some leaders minds as the vehicle to address education and training needs. Meeting the challenge via the community college route would take the convincing

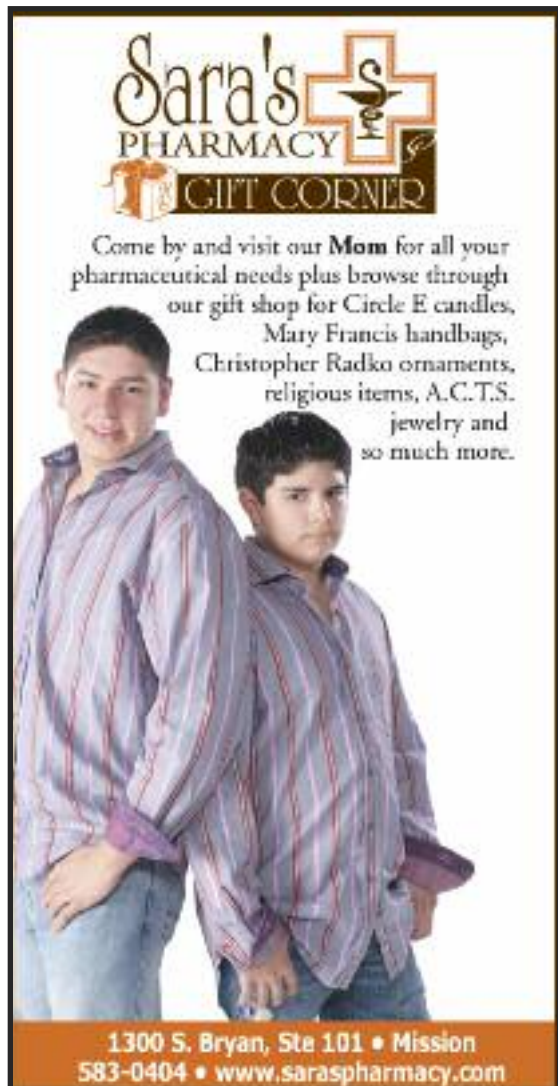
of a number of the region’s power brokers. The seeds of South Texas College (STC) were within this movement.

Longtime University of Texas/Pan American (UT/PA) President Miguel Nevarez has watched the development of STC from concept and start-up to its position today. Nevarez headed UT/PA from 1981 until 2004. He related in the late 1980s and early 1990s UT/PA was offering a lot of remedial courses.

“Our motivation was we were having too many students who needed remedial work. We were offering a lot of remedial Math, English, and Writing courses. We wanted to develop our graduate program, more masters and bachelor programs. More professional programs like engineering and the health sciences. Too much of our resources were going to the remedial side of the house. We looked at universities around Texas and the country that had substantial offerings in bachelors, masters, and doctorates. We found out almost all of them had a pipeline relationship with a community college.”

Nevarez stated succinctly, “There was a need for economic development in our area and we had a workforce that was under educated.”

He related during the mid 1980s a major political player came on board, with the push for diversifying the local economy. McAllen Mayor Othal E. Brand (Mayor 1977-1997) was a pillar in the agriculture industry, as a leading grower and shipper. Brand set the stage for



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Governor Ann Richards (Governor 1991-1994) signed legislation on June 2, 1993, that created the college. The doors opened in the fall of that year with 1,058 students. (courtesy)



**STC president Dr. Shirley Reed and Dr. Miguel Nevarez, former President of University of Texas/Pan American.** (photo by K. Knoch)

change by supporting the creation of the McAllen Economic Development Corporation. Brand was part of a legislative study group in 1990 that recommended the creation of STC.

Brand, who turned 90 in August, said of the development of STC, “We worked on it for several years. There was a need. Typical of this area we finally filled our need.” Brand added there were a lot of people who were in favor of the creation of the college.

Similar to establishing the “Agricultural Valley Economy” where innovations could be pointed to, events marked the transition to a diversified economy. The creation of the McAllen Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) in January of 1988 was one of those. The MEDC was the spearhead for diversification and they heard on a regular basis what would be needed to accomplish the transition.

Mike Allen served as the MEDC’s first president leaving the post in 2007 for health reasons. Today, he is the Chairman of South Texas College’s Board of Trustees;



**McAllen attorney Gary Gurwitz has served on STC’s board of trustees since its inception.** (courtesy)

he has served as a trustee since 2003. Allen came to the position from a unique background, having been a Catholic Priest and member of the Oblate Order in the 1960s and 1970s. He had been involved with farm workers and the dilemma of finding full time work for employees who were undereducated, came from low paying, and often seasonal employment.

It was quickly apparent to the MEDC, that workforce training was going to be a key factor in recruiting companies. Allen related at first they were looking for a quick fix, trying to implement technical training courses. “We couldn’t continue to recruit companies without specific types of training.”

Allen identified his co-conspirators as Keith Patridge (Present President of MEDC), Librado Hinojosa of H&H Meats in Mercedes, and his brother Ruben Hinojosa (future Congressman). “We were trying to strategize how we could get the technical courses here. We thought about it further, and decided, ‘Let’s go for the whole enchilada, let’s go for a community college and get it funded.’”

“The real effort was mounting support for the college across Starr and Hidalgo Counties.” Allen added the pro college group did some unique things to build momentum for the project, when pleading their case to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. “We



**Mike Allen, the first president of McAllen Economic Development Corporation and president of the South Texas College Board of Trustees.** (courtesy)

had manufacturers make the presentations. That way I think it connected the tremendous need for the college.”

The effort came to fruition when Governor Ann Richards (Governor 1991-1994) signed legislation on

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June 2, 1993, that created the college. The doors opened in the fall of that year with 1,058 students. You would be hard pressed to find anyone from the conceptual days through the early years of the college who would have envisioned what the community college has become today. Now known as South Texas College (STC), in 16 years it has expanded into five campuses serving over 27,000 students.

McAllen attorney Gary Gurwitz has served on STC's board of trustees since its inception. Asked about the school's prodigious growth during its 16 years of existence, "I don't know if there was a single turning point, the market was clearly there for the student body. There was clearly a need for what we provided."

Gurwitz did distinguish one move by the trustees that had a profound effect on the future of the college. "I think if there was a single point, it would be the hiring of Shirley Reed (STC President Dr. Shirley Reed hired June of 1994) as our president. She had all of the qualifications we needed for someone to take over an institution that was starting out with a clean slate. She had the vision to take it to each level....knew how to find out what the community and the students needed....I would say hiring Shirley Reed was the turning point for the college...the right person at the right time."

Gurwitz, the last of the original trustees, related one of the satisfying aspects of his association with the college, "is you don't have to wait to see the results of your efforts. Everything you do you see immediate results, you see the consequences of your actions. The students who graduate go immediately into the marketplace and have good paying jobs and contribute to the community."

Is STC still connected to the needs of manufacturers and the market place? Workforce Solutions Chief Executive Officer Bonnie Gonzalez certainly thinks so. Gonzalez has a unique perspective, being intimately involved in employment issues and worked at the college during its start-up years of from 1993-1995.

"I feel STC represents the will of the community wanting to improve economic opportunity." Gonzalez

related a recent survey of over 500 local business owners revealed that, "Technical training, adult basic education and skill development is critical for the continued growth of the Rio Grande Valley."

Keith Patridge, president of the MEDC has been involved with the college since the conceptual stage and continues to work closely with STC. Asked what role STC plays with the workforce today Patridge



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replied.

“It has an integral role in the development and the success we have had in Hidalgo County. Not just industrial but all of the sectors. Right now we have 27,000 people that are improving their skill level, improving their educational attainment that would not have been possible if we didn’t have STC. But more importantly, they have become a true partner in our economic development efforts.”

Patridge explained STC has taken a leadership role in the concept of advanced manufacturing. “Advance manufacturing means we are focused on the next generation manufacturing processes and how things will be built in the future. Like many developing areas of the world you can repeat what other areas are doing or you can leap frog to what is going to happen in the future.”

STC President Shirley Reed stresses every student is in workforce training.

“Frequently, people talk to us about workforce training, as though it is independent and separate from academic. The truth of the matter is everybody has to have a job and earn a living. We don’t put a distinction between technical careers and academic programs. For example we have a tremendous program in teacher preparation. People don’t make the connection that frankly that is workforce and professional development. Those students will become a critical part of our workforce for South Texas.”

Reed continued, “The point I’d like to make, everybody going to college has to be prepared to earn a living when they complete their education. I’d say maybe half of our students are on a path to earn a baccalaureate degree. We have vast numbers that transfer to other colleges and finish their four year degree.”

The college president related when she first arrived in the RGV, she saw that the area was trying to transform itself from an agricultural economy. “I saw the need immediately. We were all in harmony that we had to create an educated population and a skilled workforce for good paying jobs.”

There was one area that Reed differed with others when it came to growth and the college’s future. “I told our board of trustees we would have 20,000 students by 2010...It looks like we will have 30,000 by next fall.” Many never saw the number of students coming that STC serves today.

“One of the challenges of this region is families and students did not see going to college as their next step. We have implemented programs that emphasize going to college is the next step.” Reed believes beliefs and lives are changing for the better. In Hidalgo and Starr Counties the times have been changing. Changing, as Reed states, “to a college going culture.”



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## Entrepreneur

# AMERICA'S BATS ARE LEADING THE LEAGUE

By Kevin Knoch

They are few and far between, people who live their dream. Jamie Barrera's aspiration has always been about baseball. Since a young boy, Barrera has envisioned himself in the major leagues of professional baseball. Well, he has made it, but not quite the way the original daydream was scripted when playing baseball on the fields of Roma, Texas, as a youngster.



Barrera, 35, is a small businessman with a shop and four employees. He also has a network of distributors and commissioned salesmen across the world promoting his product in Mexico, Central America, Venezuela, the Caribbean, Europe, China, Korea, Japan, Canada, and the United States. It is Barrera's desire that his creation will soon be in every Major League dugout.

We are talking about baseball bats, wooden baseball bats, that are manufactured by Barrera at his Roma shop. The facility serves as headquarters for America's Bats, a name the owner hopes will become known worldwide in the world of baseball world. The young entrepreneur's company has come a long way in the four years since he started his enterprise, but in Barrera's mind it all goes back to the dream.

"It was the dream of playing in the major leagues,



*Jaime Barrera, with Ricardo Arredondo who works as America's Bat operations director in Mexico. (courtesy)*

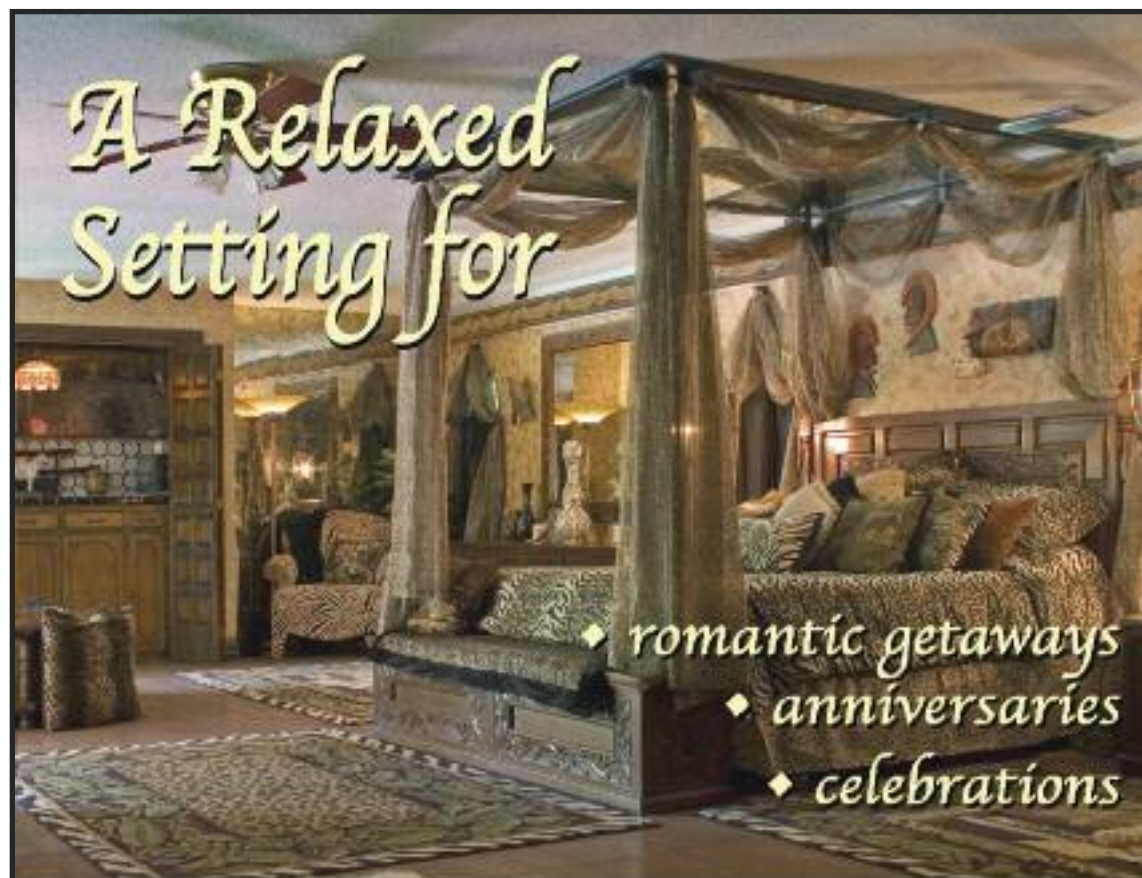
that led to this project. We were baseball players when we were growing up. We always had the dream of getting to the majors, but we didn't get there. So I thought I would get into the Major Leagues some other way and this was our ticket in there," Barrera declared, explaining how his youthful vision had materialized as an adult.

Think you're born with the knack of manufacturing bats? Wrong. Barrera attended the college of trial and error when it came to forming a bat out of a piece of wood. "I learned myself. No one taught me how to make a bat. Now that we have all of the machinery, I had to learn to run it and program the computers."

He related the wood comes pre-selected and rounded, usually about three inches in diameter. The lathe is already programmed to form the wood, then the manual work begins. Sanding, painting, engraving, and applying labels is done by hand. The majority of the wood used is Maple from Canada and Ash from the northern United States.

When he first started, Barrera related he subbed-out the wood forming work and finished the bats by hand in Roma. It took him over a year to purchase the machinery needed for the process. During the first two years he was on the road promoting his bats. Mexico was the key, although aluminum bats had been accepted in amateur circles, wooden bats started to make a come back.

Barrera pointed out wooden bats are cheaper than their metal counterparts. One myth about aluminum clubs is they last forever. "Not anymore." He related



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**Ramiro Pena reserve infielder for the 2009 World Champion New York Yankees and on the right it's "Felipe" El Clipper Montemayor, an immortal of baseball in Mexico. (courtesy)**

while coaching a team in Mexico during 2000, all of his aluminum bats had to be replaced several times during the summer season. The price difference is considerable, the wooden version can be as much as 75 percent less than the metal bats.

The manufacturer enumerated the prices for his product. Little League bats 12 and under run \$35, compared to over \$100 for some metal models. Older players in the 13 to 15 year old range the bats run \$65. High school up to professional models range up to \$75 for the Maple bats with Ash going for \$55. Quite a difference compared to top of the line metal bats running over \$200.

Barrera estimated a team will buy a half dozen to a dozen for a season. "We have a pretty quick turn around time on orders," Barrera explained his shop can produce as many as 500 bats in three days. During 2008, America's Bats produced 3,200 bats. This year they have doubled their output to 6,400.

Don't think it's the off season in Roma, because the year and baseball is winding down. "November and December are strong months, because teams start ordering for next year," Barrera added bats are given as Christmas gifts and Winter Leagues are also placing orders late in the year. "Most of the Major Leagues start ordering in early Dec., when the Major League Winter meetings are going on." This year's winter meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana, is a can't miss for America's Bats.

Not only is the Winter Meeting important exposure, Barrera has been working to get his brand out in baseball circles around the world. He has made inroads with Venezuelan Baseball Federation, and Caribbean leagues. America's Bats' is becoming a recognized brand in Latin America, the home of a healthy percentage of today's professional players.

Not only has he aimed for brand recognition to the south. Barrera is promoting his product in Europe through distributors and salesmen. Proving that baseball

is more and more becoming a world game, he just returned from a sales trip to Hong Kong, China in October. The game is well known in Japan and Korea, but China could be a real boom market for the equipment manufacturer.

The key to his long term future, was being approved as a designated manufacture by Major League Baseball. Barrera stated he wasn't quite ready for the 2008, season. His application was approved on the first try in 2009, making America's Bats one of 29 manufacturers eligible to sell to Major League teams.

"It is hard to get in there. A big window of opportunity opened for us. We sent them some bats We met with the commissioner (Bud Selig) and others. We were the first Hispanics to have a bat approved." He related insurance was one of his big hurdles. "No one wants insure someone without a track record. Its not an easy task."

Once approved, the real sales work begins. "They don't give you names and phone numbers of the players, coaches, managers or general managers. You have to start doing all of your sales work yourself," Barrera pointed out.

How well have sales gone, pitching to the most discriminating of wooden bat users; major leaguers?

"Right now we have about 25 major leaguers using our bats," Barrera revealed. Asked if many of recommendations came by word of mouth. "Some of the pitchers who play in the Major Leagues are close friends of ours and they have opened some doors."

Others were in a sense were cold calls, going to clubhouses during spring training and leaving bats, hoping players would use them. "Luckily some of the players used and them and got back to us. That is how some of the word of mouth started." Barrera continued, once a ball player wants to use his bat, the clubhouse manager orders them and the team pays for the bats.

"Two of the players are New York Yankees. Francisco Cervelli and Ramiro Pena. Cervelli just missed the playoff roster for the World Series. The rest of the players are spread around the American and National Leagues." Barrera thinks he can double the number of America's Bats users for the 2010 campaign. Much of his projection is based on the number Venezuelan players using his bats at the lower professional levels.

There is no off-season for Barrera and his salesmen. The shop in Roma keeps going year round. He doesn't mind he is living his major league dream.

An advertisement for a spa. It features a woman on the left and a man on the right, both wearing white bathrobes and sitting on a white surface. The woman is holding a glass. In the center, the text reads "PRIVATE WOMEN'S &amp; MEN'S SPA". Below this, it says "DAY SPA &amp; SALON de SANCHEZ". At the bottom, it states "Gift certificates are available in any amount." and provides the address "1308 N. 15th Street McAllen 956-682-1306" and the website "www.desanchez.com". There are decorative elements like holly leaves and berries at the bottom right.

## Industry

# CITRUS INDUSTRY IS INTEGRAL PART OF VALLEY

by Kevin Knoch

In many people's minds, outside of the Valley, it is still what the Rio Grande Valley is known, citrus. Especially grapefruit and its distinctive varieties and to a lesser extent oranges. Much of the once bountiful acreage was decimated by two tree killer freezes in the 1980s. In the last two decades urbanization has eaten away at the number of groves as land became more valuable for subdivisions. The citrus industry remains an integral part of the our area's economy.

Ray Prewett, serves as executive director of Texas Citrus Mutual, a trade association representing RGV citrus interests for over 50 years. He related the Florida Statistical Service released their official crop estimate on October 9, 2009, the first national estimate for the 2009-2010 growing season, including Texas numbers.

"They show a slight decrease in the amount of grapefruit that is projected for this year compared to last year," Prewett stated the USDA prediction translates into, "10.6 million cartons of grapefruit and 2.9 million cartons of oranges." The Texas Citrus industry uses cartons in their number count,

USDA uses the term boxes. Two cartons to a box, USDA estimates are often half those of the Texas predictions. The numbers represent the Texas commercial crop, located in Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy County's. Cartons of grapefruit and oranges weigh approximately 40 pounds.

The Valley's citrus acreage now numbers 27,000, with 70 percent of the trees producing grapefruit, the remaining trees yielding oranges. The number has been relatively stable in the last several years. "We have had some new plantings the last few years," Prewett added. "The most notable drops came after the freezes, when growers decided not start over and replant trees killed by the cold." Prewett estimated at the start of the decade 35,000 acres were devoted to citrus production in the three county area.

The slow down in the housing market has taken some of the pressure off of grove loss. The new plantings are a welcome development, for those who remember the devastation of the December freezes in 1983 and 1989. The true extent of the damage didn't reveal itself until months later, when the once lush trees, turned to brown leafless shrubs soon to be bulldozed and cleared from the groves.

Prewett stated the new plantings have been all around the valley, but most have been in Willacy County. "Willacy County hasn't had much acreage in a long time, there has been a significant increase in plantings there."

Although he cautions, it is early in the season, Prewett pointed out prices are good for growers. "Prices started out strong. That is normal they are always higher in the beginning of the season when there is not much fruit out there in the market. A little stronger than normal this year, at this early point of the season."

He continued, "Florida's production is predicted to decline. As far as grapefruit is concerned, Florida is our main competition. We are not a huge factor in the over all supply, its more what happens in Florida. What we do here does matters of course. Prices have been really pretty good for the last few years." Adding he is talking about the fresh fruit market, versus the juice market that is a separate pricing category.

The executive director related much of the Florida citrus production goes to the juice market. "Florida is much more orientated toward juice. Probably 95 percent of their oranges go to the juice. Our crop probably 65 percent of grapefruit and oranges go to the fresh market, we have a smaller percentage going to juice. Grapefruit juice prices have been very low the last couple of years. We certainly see some light at the end of the tunnel, grapefruit juice prices are projected to be considerably better by a significant margin. If you have 35 percent of your crop going to juice, ... we are certainly encouraged by a higher prices."



Rio Queen Citrus President Mike Martin. (courtesy)

Prewett pointed out a recent USDA decision could impact the market. "Last Thursday (October 22, 2009) the USDA published a rule that changed the requirements on Florida fruit being shipped to Texas and other citrus producing states, because of citrus canker." The last three years Florida has not been able to ship to Texas, Arizona, and California. Prewett doesn't think the Florida fruit will arrive in volumes to lower prices in Texas, because of the transportation advantage the Valley has to Texas metro markets. Just the same the industry is concerned about the possibility of young citrus plants, identified as canker hosts making there way to the state and bringing the disease to the Texas groves.

The fear of a canker infection is real, there is always another threat to the citrus crop lurking every season; weather. "We have gone a long time without a major freeze," declared Prewett. "One could happen anytime you just never know. There really isn't a whole lot growers can do. So you can't spend a lot of time worrying about it." Even the snow event of Christmas of 2004 did little damage. Snow actually served as insulation for the trees. "We had some growers northwest of Mission who did suffer some damage."

Weather from Hurricane Dolly, (July 23, 2008) especially wind, did scar fruit last season. Recent rains in the valley have been beneficial for the quality of this year's product. This year's crop has the potential to be a high quality fruit.

Mike Martin's family has been in the citrus business in the Rio Grande Valley for over 40 years, starting with his grandfather's business Warehouse Farms. Martin is President at Rio Queen Citrus in Mission, he stated weather wise the last two months have been great for the crop. "This year we have a very clean crop, very few issues with insects and diseases. The fruit is beautiful, it is a little smaller than usual. The rain and a break in the heat has helped tremendously. Sugars are high in the fruit."

Martin added prices started out good for large fruit, about what is expected for the opening of season.



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# Smart Shopping

## COUTURE REVOLUTION

By Alisa Mendez

When you walk into Couture Revolution, resale-clothing store is not the first thing you imagine it to be. You may be fooled because all the clothing is of great quality, popular name brands, and looks brand new. However, Couture Revolution is not your typical clothing boutique. It is McAllen's newest secondhand store featuring clothing, shoes and accessories for men and women.

Owners Diane Bartow and Paul Mountain moved from Austin to the Rio Grande Valley to start their business that opened in September.

"My daughter and I have shopped at resale stores together for years, so I have always believed in the concept of shopping resale," Bartow said. "And in this economy, every cent saved is worth it to many people."

Not only can customers walk away with great savings on typically expensive clothing, but they can also walk out the door with extra cash in their pocket. Couture Revolution pays cash for the items you bring in or store credit to shop for merchandise.

"All you have to do is raid your closet, grab the pieces you don't want anymore and come by and see us," Mountain said.

Bartow and Mountain took a leap of faith and came into a community they didn't know and started their business.

"My daughter and grandchildren were already living in the Valley and I wanted to be closer to them. Plus, we knew from our research that the McAllen area was a thriving market and we wanted to be part of that," said Bartow on choosing a location for the store.

Business has been steadily doing well, said Bartow and Mountain. "We have already developed some regular customers who love to come in week after week to see our merchandise," Bartow said. "We get items every day and our customers indulge themselves by buying name brands at really affordable prices." Some of the brands at Couture Revolution include: Ann Taylor, Marciano, The Limited, Ed Hardy, Guess and Coach.

The owners are looking at opening a second store, possibly in the Harlingen area. Plus, they plan on incorporating children's clothing.

Located at 7001 N. 10th St., adjacent to James Avery at the Trenton View Plaza in North McAllen's vibrant commercial district, Couture Revolution welcomes smart shoppers who know the value of shopping resale.

For more information, visit [www.thecouturerevolution.com](http://www.thecouturerevolution.com).



*Diane Bartow and Paul Mountain, owners of Couture Revolution .*

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## Business Evolution

# CROCKETT FARMS—THE APPEAL OF FRESH FRUIT IS JUST THE BEGINNING

By Eileen Mattei

When Crockett Farms began shipping gift packages of their grapefruit from Harlingen in the early 1960s, few citrus growers shipped their own fruit. By 1993, dozens of small orchards had crowded into the industry. Nevertheless, that year Terrie Crockett, along with her husband Allan, bought the family company from her mother-in-law.

“We’re smaller now than we were in the early years because mail order competition is so much greater,” Terrie Crockett explained. Yet over the last 15 years, Crockett Farms has expanded, acquiring other local gift fruit shipper companies as those family chose to retire from the industry.

“We bought the small shippers to increase our volume. You are buying customers already interested in your product,” she said. “We continue to ship under those names for brand recognition. Customers want the brand they are comfortable with. They enjoy the tradition.” Crockett Farms now handles six different brands of the



Terrie Crockett, owner of Crockett Farms.

Valley’s 13 fruit shipping labels.

But what continues to sell Valley citrus and to maintain the valuable customers base is the “yum yum factor,” according to Crockett. A box of beautiful, huge, fragrant Ruby Red grapefruit from Crockett Farms is a gift that says tropical Texas and is a gift to be brag about and share.

Crockett, who has a B.S. in Agricultural Economics from Texas A&M, felt a family business would give her flexible hours—outside the holiday gift shipping crush—to take care of their two sons. She and her husband wanted to sustain and build on the family’s reputation by applying best practices. (The couple owns two other businesses, Hilco and Gulf Coast Contracting.)

“It’s a good business,” Crockett said. Changes in technology have helped make it less labor intensive on the administrative side. She came into the logistics-heavy operation when it used index cards to track customers and when orders were manually-typed on multi-paged, color-coded order forms. Technology has changed all that by easing order processing and tracking. Now 40 percent of the orders for Crockett Farms and its other brands arrive via the website and emails while 30 percent are faxed or mailed. Still 30 percent come in through telephone orders. “It’s because they have a question, bless their hearts, and they want to know a human is here looking at the fruit,” she said. Many older clients also shy away from online credit card transactions. Crockett assumes internet orders will increase.

All the orders are triggered by the catalogs Crockett

Farms mails out in September. Each includes order forms with pre-printed lists of last year’s recipients and the gift pack they were sent. The full color catalogs, which used to be tri-folds, are now industry standard, with photography courtesy of one teenage Crockett son. Another son has become the in-house webmaster, completely rebuilding and upgrading the company’s interactive website. Customers can log in and see their order history.

Corporate gifts are a significant element in the business, with some gift lists running to 1,000 names. A citrus package conveys sends a healthy, colorful, unisex, non-denominational seasonal greeting.

While order processing has changed, the packing hasn’t. Grapefruits and oranges are hand-picked and hand-packed in sturdy gift fruit boxes. The object is to keep the quality high, as close to just-from-the-tree perfect as possible. That’s not an easy task when dealing with a tender fruit, Crockett said.

Shipping costs have skyrocketed with freight expenditures growing out of proportion to other expenses. Yet this year, Crockett Farms has decided not to pass on those increases, given the state of the economy...and the free shipping offered by some mail order food companies. Next year, it will be a different story.

With their gift packs shipping to 49 states, excluding only Hawaii, Crockett Farms has established a foothold in Europe. They acquired a mail order company based in Germany which ships to Austria and Switzerland. Crockett Farms takes the orders and bulk ships the fruit to their German operation. There the Texas citrus is sorted, packed and reshipped.

Staying competitive in the mail order market—now a huge industry—required Crockett Farms to become more of a one-stop shop. They added nuts and smoked meats to the menu of citrus options before branching out to jellies, pears, cheeses, candies, pastries. The catalog now offers choices that include a Breakfast Buffet, Seasonal Harvest, a fruit of the month club, and fresh tomatoes and peaches in season. “They need to think we are providing a variety of products to meet their gift giving needs,” Crockett said. “You don’t have to go to peach grower. You are trying to give your customer more choices, more opportunities to buy from you.”

Crockett Farms has grown from a traditional seasonal (November to February) business to close to year-round shipments spanning eight months. For the gift fruit shipper, the Christmas season promises to be as bright as a Ruby Red grapefruit. For more information [www.crockettfarms.com](http://www.crockettfarms.com) or call 956 412-1747.

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## History & Heritage

# LAND & CITRUS DEVELOPMENT PART OF VALLEY'S HISTORY

by Kevin Knoch

It is an era that ended over 65 year ago. If you look hard enough you can still see some of its marks. The most noticeable are the commercial citrus groves that can be found throughout the Rio Grande Valley. If you take a cruise on Business 83 through the cities and towns from Harlingen west to Mission, you can still see operating packing sheds near the railroad tracks. If you have a guide well versed in local history, you will hear a lot about what is closed and what was here and there.

But that would hardly scratch the surface and would not do justice to the exciting times in the Rio Grande Valley experienced during the first 40 years of the 20th Century. Close your eyes, forget all of the commercial development along Expressway 83. Downtown was centered near the railroad tracks. Instead of big box stores and retail centers lining the expressway, think brush. Think about the few and far between thick unspoiled patches of brush you know about. Then imagine brush for as far as the eye can see.



*One of the best known figures in the Valley's land development business, John H. Shary. (courtesy)*

If you were able to go back in time one weekend during the winter months of the mid-1920's at train depots in Brownsville, Harlingen, and Mission. You would see cars lined up to meet the train. A train caring passengers who were anxiously anticipating visiting the Rio Grande Valley, their eagerness fueled by land agents on board boasting of mild winter weather and fertile irrigated soil. Pushing easy terms to purchase your slice of the Rio Grande Valley, the purpose behind the excursion south.

It was the heady days of land developers promoting the Rio Grande Valley in the mid-western United States, as a paradise, where your investment in land would be quickly recovered through a cash bearing citrus crop. One of the best known figures in the Valley's land development business, was a native of Nebraska John H. Shary. When he first came to the region in 1912, he was already an experienced and well known land developer along the South Texas Gulf Coast.

Shary displayed initiative early in life, parlaying his experience as a bottle washer at a drugstore, into passing Nebraska's pharmaceutical exam at age 18. He displayed his acumen for business by soon owning a pharmacy and buying another. He attended college briefly, but received a Master's Degree in people during a 10 year stint as a lumber salesman for California companies. He traveled the central United States extensively, during this period.

Shary's first exposure to land development came in a joint venture south of San Antonio. Along with

his partners they turned a healthy profit on 30,000 acres, in a relatively short period of time. Shary had been turned down by friends as investors. The success hooked him, being a developer was his passion for the rest of his life.

Shary soon partnered with George H. Paul in 1904, together they started developing large land tracts and ranches in the Corpus Christi area. Shary was involved in clearing 250,000 acres, that eventually grew cotton. The developers soon ran out of land in the Corpus Christi area around 1911 and parted ways. Today the cities of Taft, Sinton, Gregory, Robstown, Driscoll, Odem, Tynan and Portland occupy areas promoted and developed by Shary and Paul.

Shary visited a sparsely populated, densely brush covered RGV in 1912, but came back impressed with two attributes; the soil and grapefruit. A local fruit grown on small patches in backyards. Citrus was first introduced to the area on Macedonio Vela's Laguna Seca Ranch in the 1870's, north of Edinburg, oranges and later grapefruit adopted to the region. Shary was taken with the fruit and the valley.

In short order he purchased and sold 10,000 acres that Pharr now occupies. Next was 7,000 acres where McAllen now sits. Soon he was eyeing a tract west of McAllen, that would become Sharyland. In 1913 Shary bought the 16,000 acre tract soon named Sharyland. Four years later he purchased 17,000 acres west of the Sharyland tract, the home of present day Mission.

Land companies populated the valley, with the exception of Brownsville, most cities had their start in the first two decades of the 20th century in much the same way. A seasoned land promoter Shary knew irrigation would be the key to his land sales purchasing and expanding systems as he went. Grapefruit was never far from his mind. He developed 360 acres as a commercial grove when he bought Sharyland tract in 1913.

The land promotion continued into the 1920s. Shary was a firm believer in advertising and the spread of positive news articles about the region. Trains laden with potential land buyers visiting the valley reached their zenith between 1925 to 1929.

In the early 1920s his fascination with fruit, lead him to start shipping the now graded fruit to commercial markets up north. There was no shortage of supply, groves where popping up everywhere. Shary organized the growers into a commercial shipping business. Establishing co-ops, packing sheds and juice plants.

During the 1922-23 season 39,000 boxes of

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grapefruit and oranges were shipped from Texas. The 1944-45 season saw the number to rise to 24 million boxes shipped. The value of the '44 -45 crop was placed at \$37 million, plus the valley produced five million cases of juice.

Early on promoters catered to families to relocate to the valley. Later with the proven citrus crop, absentee ownership was acceptable. Shary continued to develop property, but many tracts were cleared planted and maintained by his work crews.

All of the land promotion was aimed at the Anglo population in the Mid-West. Much of the advertising either ignored or demeaned the Mexican and Mexican American population of the RGV. Almost all of the labor needed to work the groves came from this population.

Shary was noted for his fair treatment employees. Paying for their health care costs. He asked only loyalty, and he received it. Three years after his death in 1945 a roster of the Shary organization showed 34 employees with over 20 years of service, many with Hispanic surnames.

Much of Shary's land holdings were sold off after his death. Today little citrus property is left, 700 to 800 acres of orchards is owned by the family located near the Shary Mansion on Shary Road in Mission. John Shary and his wife are buried in a



small chapel across the street.

*American Press, Scenes of Texas Citrus A Proud Heritage produced and available from Texas Citrus Mutual. We would also want to thank Janette Garcia of the Special Collections at the UT/PA Library. For more information on John Shary the Valley Business Report recommends both of the above books.*

*The Valley Business Report based the above article on the book, The Legacy of John H. Shary Promotion and Land Development by S. Zulema Silva-Bewley available from the University of Texas Pan*

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## Opinion

# MCALLEN IS ON THE REBOUND AND GROWTH CONTINUES

*By Keith Patridge,  
President/CEO McAllen Economic  
Development Corporation*

As 2009 comes to a close and we approach the new year, it is time to focus on the positive attention that the McAllen MSA recently received. During mid-November, Business Week ranked the McAllen MSA as an area that has weathered the storm -we have survived the dismal downturn of 2009 and we are positioned to rebound and continue to grow in 2010 (please visit <http://blog.medc.org> to see the full report). Myself and my team at the McAllen Economic Development Corporation have felt the impacts from the slow global economy, but the recent news rankings continue to remind us of how special and unique our greater community is and this news will push us to work harder. These rankings and the positive news indicate that people know about McAllen and the area continues to be on the radar for large manufacturing

companies, as well as retailers. However, the MEDC and our local partners must continue working together, creating new and innovative strategies focused on bringing new jobs and continued growth. People that do not live and work in McAllen have recognized the strength of our market, which means we must embody that sentiment and discuss the good things that are happening with our friends and family, our winter visitors, our business clients and the people we all meet in casual conversation.

Largely because of our focus on advanced manufacturing, many companies during the past six months have committed to move additional divisions to McAllen. Global companies such as ALPS Automotive, Fujitsu-Ten and Panasonic all have decided in 2009 to relocate major divisions to McAllen. HCP Packaging, a Taiwanese company, just announced a new 60,000-square foot facility in Reynosa with plans to hire 130 employees. Steelcase, an office furniture designer and manufacturer that is headquartered in Michigan, also committed to opening a Reynosa facility in early 2010. Many companies are making plans to hire new employees and transfer some from other plants, which translates to new homeowners, more children in our schools and additional shoppers in our stores. Also bridge traffic over the Hidalgo/McAllen-Reynosa International Bridge has increased and we are less than one month away from the grand opening of the long-awaited Anzalduas International Bridge.

The MEDC is spreading the word about McAllen by utilizing a variety of platforms. We just kicked-off a series of You Tube videos called McAllenEDC@. This series takes people

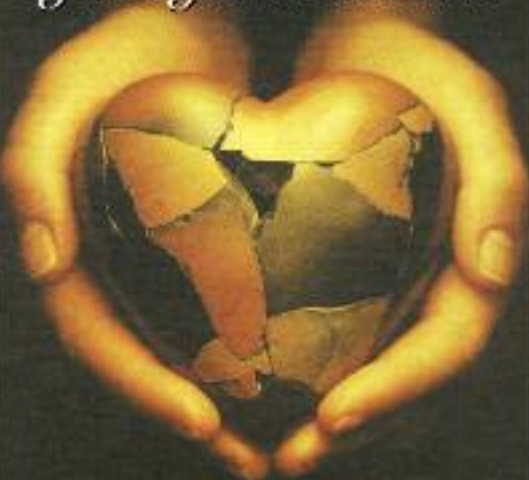


*McAllen EDC president, Keith Patridge*

to various events and places that showcase the positive and creative ventures happening in our area. So far, we have posted videos from the Rio South Texas Small Business Summit, Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge and the South Texas Motorcycle Museum. The most popular video to date, however, features Pepper, the mascot dog of the McAllen Foreign Trade Zone. Please visit You Tube and suggest other places or events for the McAllenEDC@ series.

As 2010 approaches, I believe we can look forward to continued growth and new opportunities. But we need your help. If you know of any companies or people that might want to learn more about doing business in our NAFTA metro, have them call us at 956.682.2875 or email us at [info@medc.org](mailto:info@medc.org). Invite them to experience what we have to offer

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## Opinion

# YEAR-END TAX PLANNING FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

By *Quentin Anderson*

The economic slowdown has made 2009 one of the most challenging years in recent memory for many small businesses. Many employers are struggling to boost profits, retain customers and develop new products in a sluggish market. The Tax Code can provide some relief. Some year-end tax planning strategies may be able to reduce your tax burden as 2009 draws to a close.

**Income shifting.** Businesses, like individuals, can benefit from the classic strategy of shifting taxable income and accelerating or deferring deductions between 2009 and 2010 by controlling the receipt of income and payment of expenses. Businesses expecting to be in the same or lower tax bracket in 2010 should consider deferring income until next year and accelerating deductible expenses in 2009. Alternatively, if a substantial increase in income is anticipated in 2010 (propelling the business into a higher tax bracket), income should be accelerated in 2009 and deductions deferred until next year.

**Net operating losses (NOLs).** Due to recent tax law changes to jumpstart the economy, Congress has made year-end loss shifting as lucrative in many instances as income shifting has been in the past. Many small businesses experienced net losses in 2008 and may be preparing themselves for the same bottom line in 2009. The tax law's use of NOL carrybacks, however, can provide a silver lining that allows those losses to be carried back to profitable years and generate an instant tax refund. Congress earlier this year allowed 2008 NOLs from eligible small businesses (those with gross receipts of \$15 million or less) to be carried back up to five years to 2003, rather than the usual two years. Now, under the Worker, Homeownership and Business Assistance Act of 2009, signed into law on November 6, Congress extended modified NOL relief to all businesses and to either 2008 or 2009 NOLs, at the election of the taxpayer. Many businesses that anticipate 2009 tax year losses should be taking steps before year end to accelerate deductions to

maximize the size of their 2009 NOLs for a larger carryback refund.

**Accounting methods.** The accounting method used by a business determines when income must be recognized and expenses are deductible for tax purposes. Cash based businesses can shift income to next year by delaying billing notices for services or products so that payment is not received until 2010. Accrual based businesses can defer income by delaying the shipment of products or provision of services until the 2010 tax year.

**Code Sec. 179 expensing.** For 2009, a business can immediately deduct up to \$250,000 for qualifying equipment purchases, including computers and software. The property must be used more than 50 percent for business. It can be used or new property but in all cases must be your business's first use of that property. To take the deduction for 2009, qualified equipment must be placed in use by December 31, 2009.

**Bonus depreciation.** A related, and also temporary tax break, is 50 percent first-year bonus depreciation of the adjusted basis of qualifying property. The property must be (1) eligible for the modified accelerated cost recovery system (MACRS) with a depreciation period of 20 years or less; (2) water utility property; (3) computer software (off-the-shelf); or (4) qualified leasehold property. Only new property qualifies. In addition, it must be "placed in service" before January 1, 2010.

**New tax laws from Congress.** Part of year-end tax planning for this year should be focused on remaining flexible and being ready to capitalize on any new opportunity -or pitfall--that may come your way because of last minute tax law changes. Congress is now considering several changes, including extension of bonus depreciation and enhanced Code Sec. 179 expensing. If any of these provisions pass, or if other, similar proposals move quickly on Capitol Hill, taking prompt action before year end could reward you with significant tax benefits.



*Quentin Anderson, CPA, PFS is a partner with Long Chilton, LLP and heads up the Harlingen office located at 402 E. Tyler Ave. He can be reached at (956) 423-3765 or email at [nderson@longchilton.com](mailto:nderson@longchilton.com).*

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# Event Spotlight

## HARLINGEN HIGHLIGHTS CITIZENS

By Kevin Knoch

The Harlingen Chamber of Commerce held their 88th consecutive annual meeting and awards luncheon Thursday November 5, 2009 in Harlingen. The annual meeting tradition started in 1921, the awards program was added just over a decade ago. Texas humorist, columnist and radio personality, Tumbleweed Smith was the featured speaker for the gathering, that drew nearly 400 attendees held at the Casa De Amistad.

The chamber recognized four citizens for their contributions in designated categories. Awards were given Ambassador of the Year, Directors Award, Heritage Award and Special Lifetime Achievement Award. Pamela Leverett, was named the Ambassador of the Year. Ambassadors are prominent at chamber events, recognizable by their red sport coats, welcoming attendees to ribbon cuttings, and other chamber sponsored events.

Former Harlingen Chamber of Commerce President Ruthie Ewers received the nod for the Directors Award. State Senator Eddie Lucio was the recipient of the Heritage Award, noting the Senator's legislative accom-



*Texas State Senator Eddie Lucio shakes hands with 103 year old Clyde Fincher. (K. Knoch)*

plishments. The Lifetime Achievement Award appropriately went to former teacher, mortgage banker, Clyde Fincher who's life has spanned over a century.

Leverett, a Harlingen native and graduate of Raymondville High School in the late 70s, was graduated by the University of Pan American with a degree in Business Administration in 1984. It was noted Leverett's business career started at nine years old helping out in a family business. Presently she is employed by Harlingen's VTX Communications, a wireless, broadband internet service provider, in sales and marketing.

The effervescent Ewers was described in remarks announcing her award by Chamber Executive Director Crisanne Zamponi, "She gives the ultimate gift of generosity through her selfless donation of time, talent and resources. And she does it for the right reasons: to make a difference in the lives of those who live in this community, and to help make Harlingen the best it can be."

The Oklahoma native, relocated to Harlingen from Dallas in 1999, since her arrival Ewers has become a force in the community. The donation of time is underscored by the fact she currently serves on 11 boards of various organizations. Besides the chamber, Ewers serves on the director panels of the Salvation Army, Monica's House, Loaves and Fishes, to name a few. Devoted to the chamber, Ewers has been a member of the board of directors for eight years, including a year long stint as chairman.

Brownsville born Senator Lucio was singled out by the Harlingen community group for legislation passed during the most recent session that, will lead to long term

benefit for the city. Zamponi stated in the address announcing Lucio's award

"Senate Bill 98 authorizes the University of Texas System to develop the Regional Academic Health Center (RACH) in Harlingen into a four year medical school... This one piece of legislation has the potential to map the future of Harlingen in a way no other has before."

Fincher's story started 103 years ago in 1906, near Nocona, Texas, a graduate of Texas Tech in 1930, he came to the Rio Grande Valley as a teacher, recruited by the San Benito School District. Several years later he entered the banking business, where he worked for 40 years. Fincher moved into a third career, real estate management, a business he still administers. Fincher is a former Chairman of the Harlingen Chamber of Commerce and a past President of the Rio Grande Valley Partnership.

Tumbleweed Smith entertained with some of his favorite recordings of conversations and stories from his long running radio program, syndicated on 45 stations. Based in Big Springs, Texas he has had a daily show on



*Former Harlingen Chamber of Commerce President Ruthie Ewers relocated to Harlingen from Oklahoma 10 years ago. (K. Knoch)*

the air for 40 years. Smith ended his remarks with a tribute to the Rio Grande Valley.

"It is the Gladys Porter Zoo, the lighthouse at Port Isabel, it is visitors from the Canadian snow fields, it is hands gently shaping a tortilla, it is the warm winter weather, ... it is the night skies filled with sparkling stars, it is the palm trees lining highways, and oleanders bordering boulevards, and shrimp boats bobbing in the Gulf, tropical plants and exotic wildlife. ... Where people are happy; it is the Rio Grande Valley."

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## Business Highlight

# IT'S PRIME TIME FOR VALLEY'S PRIME VENTURES

By Adolfo Pesquera

In the course of running businesses in adult day care and home health services for the elderly, Andy Sanchez has come to rely on Prime Ventures for much of his business advice.

With 1,000 employees Valley-wide and two adult centers in Harlingen and Mission, Sanchez' Nurses That Care company just keeps growing. And his real estate brokerage grows with it.

"I've found them to be extremely helpful in some of my land acquisitions," Sanchez said. "They have high ethical standards and I have always taken their recommendations very seriously."

Beyond the usual services of assisting in site search, land acquisition negotiations and closing, Prime Venture's agents refer Sanchez to attorneys, accountants and marketing professionals.

Michael Masso, the company founder, said it is his goal to do whatever it takes to put in place a team of experts that will help insure the client's success.

"Our philosophy is you take care of the client, with what he needs," Masso said. "A lot of companies were spoiled when times were good. They're not making it now. You've got to be creative - put yourself in the investor's shoes."

In a down economy, Masso insists his company is bucking the trend. Income from commissions is near 40 percent above 2008, he said.

With a heavy emphasis on commercial real estate, one way Masso has managed to push profits is by knowing what will work. When national banks choked credit, Masso could rely on community banks to lend to his clients. And in a time when banks are nervous about entrepreneurs with untried ideas, Masso advised clients on the confidence that franchising inspires.

"The first half of the year really was slow," Masso said.

Franchising - once the markets came out of total shock - helped grease the wheels.

"Right now, banks want something with a history. They know there's a proven record. Those business models seem to be easier to swallow."

It might seem odd for a real estate broker to counsel clients on business models, but Masso has the background to look at both sides of a commercial deal. His parents founded the Boot Jack western wear chain.

Masso took over the original store in McAllen as a young man, then opened a second. He sold them to his younger brother to go into other ventures, but the extended family now successfully runs seven locations through a series of licensing agreements.

When Masso left the Boot Jack chain, he bought a Christian book store and dedicated time to studying theology.



**Michael Masso, founder of Prime Ventures.**  
(Adolfo Pesquera)

However, he also had an interest in real estate.

It was through family and friends that Masso grew into the land business.

"They were always asking, 'Hey, help me find a good investment deal.'" Masso said.

He got his broker's license through SPI Coastal Properties, then struck out on his own. There was more to real estate, Masso decided, than the selling of beach front.

He expanded Valley-wide from his base in McAllen.

Virgilio Garza wanted to take a respected family business, Arturo's Restaurant in Progresso, and create a fast-food version at a more heavily trafficked location.

"It was a complicated deal," Garza said. "They got me in touch with all the shopping centers. We looked at quite a few places. They helped me from the Letter of Intent through the final signing."

Prime Venture's interest didn't stop with the final signing and commission. Masso shared his network of professionals with Garza to help with the turn-key construction project and the marketing. Arturo's Express, located in Edinburg, was set to launch the end of November.

"My experience from working with other brokers is there is a lot of pressure to sign so they can get paid," Garza said. "With Prime Ventures, it was quite the contrary. They wanted me to take my time and read everything. It was very personalized, very patient service."

With six agents and two administrative people, Masso has worked to position his company able to respond to the needs of any client. In addition to his Rio Grande Valley-based customers, he has developed a strong network of relations among Mexican nationals.

They rely on him for commercial investments, and also in locating homes for their families.

Two years ago, when Kenny Alford broke ground on

Villas del Tesoro, an upscale town home community near La Plaza Mall in McAllen, he was disappointed with his first broker and switched to Prime Ventures.

"They've had the project for six months now," Alford said. "I'm very pleased with their work. The whole staff is involved. The attention that they've been giving the project is impressive. And they're well-connected in Mexico."

Prime Ventures has sold 11 of the 41 lots in the current phase and has several under contract, Alford said.

The experience has encouraged Alford to consider Prime Ventures as his exclusive agency on future projects.

Masso, 43, loves what he is doing, but he does not see his company on some exponential growth curve. A hands-on manager, he hopes to keep the company fairly small for the foreseeable future. He has six agents, two administrative staffers and he is the only broker.

"A year from now, I can't see myself adding more than three or four more agents, just because of the amount of time it takes to attend to each one's needs," Masso said. "In most agencies, the broker is the number one competitor of the agent. I don't compete with the agents. All I do is help them close the deals."

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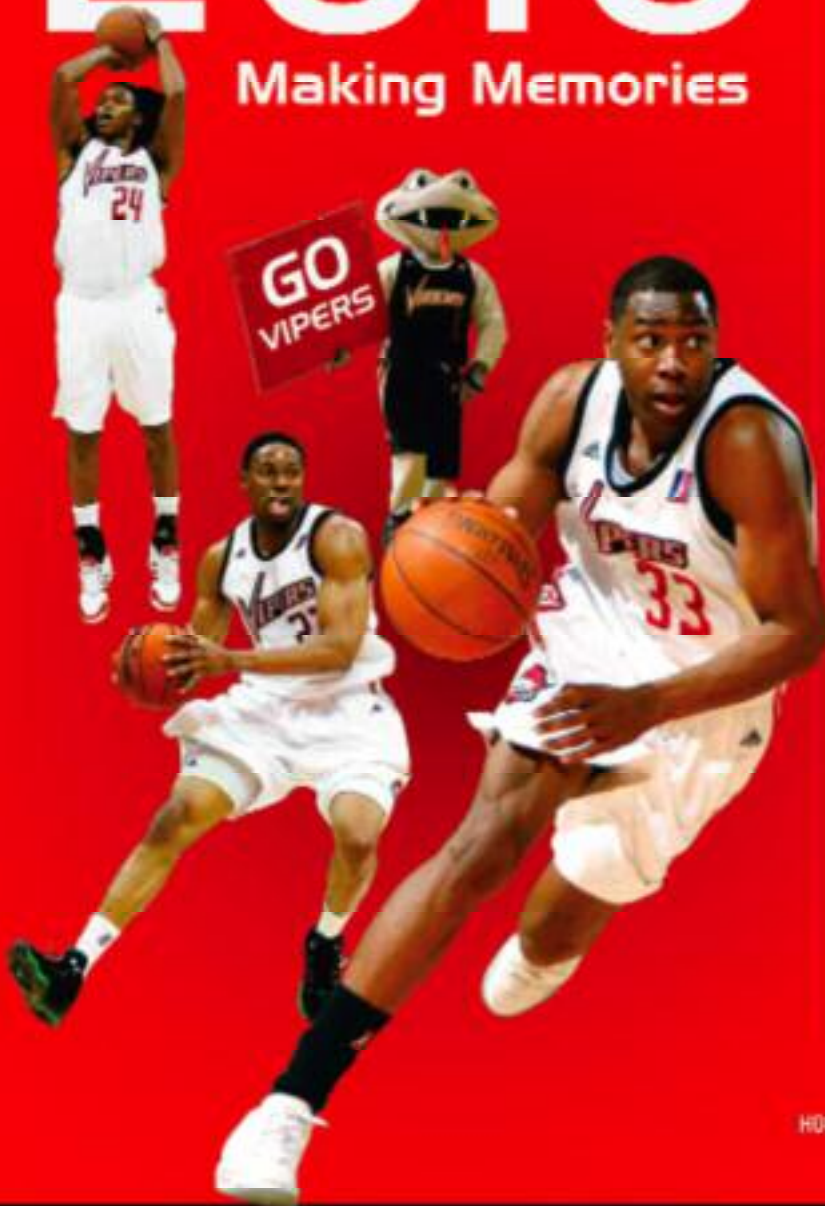
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## NOVEMBER

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					ALB 7 7:30P	ALB 8 7:30P

## DECEMBER

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1	2	TUL 4 7:30P	TUL 5 7:30P
6	7	ALB 9 7:30P		ALB 10 7:30P		ALB 11 7:30P
13	14	15	16	17	TUL 18 7:30P	TUL 19 7:30P
20	RNO 21 7:30P	22	23	24	25	ALB 26 7:30P
27	28	29	AUS 30 7:30P	31		

## JANUARY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
CA 1 7:30P	ALB 2 7:30P	3	BAK 4 7:30P	5	6	LA 7 7:30P
LA 10 7:30P	11	12	ALB 13 7:30P	ALB 14 7:30P	15	16
DAK 17 7:30P	18	DAK 19 7:30P	20	21	SAF 22 7:30P	SAF 23 7:30P
24	25	26	27	SAF 28 7:30P	SAF 29 7:30P	30
LA 31 7:30P						

## FEBRUARY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	ALB 2 7:30P	ALB 3 7:30P	4	ALB 5 7:30P
7	8	PTW 9 7:30P	SFO 10 7:30P	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	MNE 20 7:30P
MNE 21 7:30P	22	23	24	25	SFO 26 7:30P	27
BAK 28 7:30P						

## MARCH

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	BAK 5 7:30P
7	8	ALB 9 7:30P	ALB 10 7:30P	11	12	TUL 13 7:30P
TUL 14 7:30P	15	16	17	18	RNO 19 7:30P	RNO 20 7:30P
21	22	23	24	25	LA 26 7:30P	LA 27 7:30P
28	29	UTA 30 7:30P	IVA 31 7:30P			

## APRIL

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	DAK 2 7:30P
						DAK 3 7:30P

### Team Legend

ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB
ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB
ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB
ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB	ALB

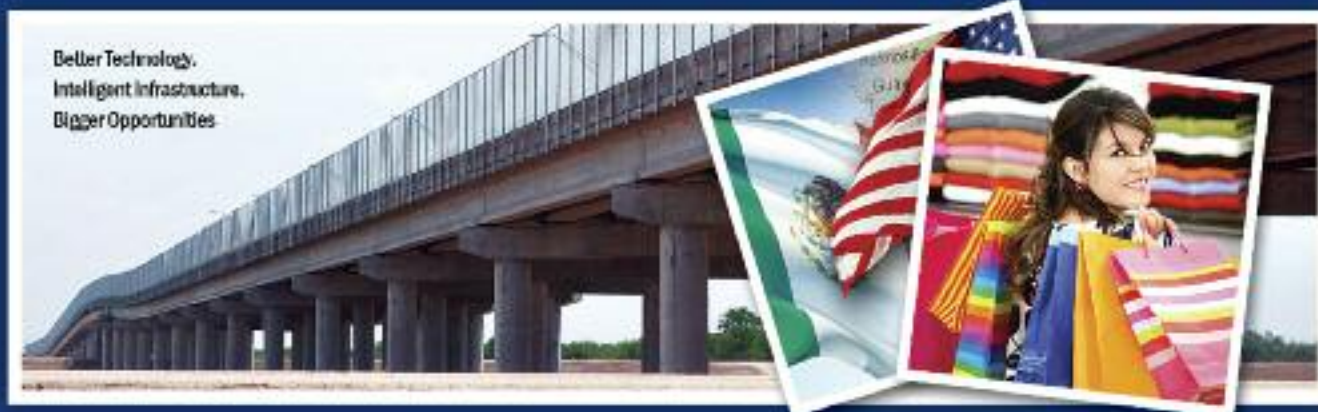


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