

Time Travel through Dallas History

Old City Park

Dallas, Texas, 1901.

Today's noon meal is *fleishig* (with meat) for Jewish homemaker Leah Blum. Chicken simmers on the wood-burning stove, along with Brussels sprouts and carrots. Kosher tradition prohibits dairy products with meat, so she mixes her biscuits with water, not milk.

Any moment, her regular dining guest, Charles Ingram, will arrive from his livery stable across the street. But already, Leah thinks ahead to the afternoon's chores--washing clothes on the rub board and hanging them to dry on the line behind her Victorian home.

Dallas, Texas, 1861.

Today, widow Jackson dishes up a meatless dinner at the farmstead of Mrs. Elizabeth Kennedy. Over a wood fire in the open hearth, she has cooked beans and cornbread, yellow squash, and tomatoes with basil. She even baked a cobbler in the cast-iron Dutch oven, using peaches from the nearby garden.

Wearing a white apron over her pink calico dress, widow Jackson carries the food the few steps from the log kitchen to the white clapboard farm house. That's where Mrs. Kennedy and her cousin, the blacksmith Erastus Rausch, take their meals. The widow eats alone in the kitchen, unless visitors drop by.

Noon is a busy time in Dallas of 1901 and in Dallas of 1861...although both scenes actually take place in Dallas of 2004.

Time is warped, and history comes alive at North Texas' premier living history village, Old City Park.

In 1876 the city of Dallas acquired this site for its first park. A natural spring here became the city's first water supply. The park sported Dallas' first horticulture center and, until the 1890s, its first zoo.

Fast forward to the 1960s. A group of history-minded women founded the Dallas County Heritage Society. They convinced the city to move an 1862 mansion, known as Millermore, to the park, restored the home, opened it to the public, and gradually added more buildings to replicate a historical village.

Old City Park now comprises some three dozen restored buildings on 13 wooded acres near downtown. Most are period structures relocated from their original North Texas sites. A few are replicas based on existing examples. The homes, businesses, church, and school line simulated shady city streets and a country lane.

Visitors ramble on self-guided tours through rooms filled with period artifacts from the Society's collection of 25,000 pieces, dating from 1840 to 1910. (Two homes, Millermore and the 1885 Sullivan House, are open for guided tours only.)

Six years ago, the village shifted its interpretive mission from static displays to living history. Now, visitors also can observe and interact with first-person interpreters who daily reenact two telltale years in Dallas history.

Six fulltime reenactors portray fictional Dallasites of 1861 and 1901. (Plans call for a fulltime cast of 20 in coming years. Several other part-time costumed interpreters appear periodically, especially during the park's half dozen annual events, including the Old-Fashioned Fourth celebration, July 4, 2004.)

Though fictional, the personal stories of the fulltime and part-time composite characters are intertwined and based on documented history. Their daily activities show, in flesh and sweat, how people once lived. Their lives in 1861 and 1901 are fixed in time--every year is the same year.

Back on the Farm

Four fulltime reenactors maintain the subsistence farmstead of 1861, the opening year of the Civil War.

Farmstead characters include: the owner, Mrs. Elizabeth Kennedy (portrayed by Lillie Griffin); her cousin, blacksmith Erastus Rausch (Kelly Kring); a cook, the widow Jackson (Virginia Jackson); and a potter, Mrs. Wright (Breanna Wright).

Mrs. Kennedy's husband is away in the war, so Erastus helps with chores and operates the village blacksmith shop. The Kennedys' slaves ran away, so widow Jackson cooks and tends the garden. The potter, Mrs. Wright, makes stoneware for the farmstead.

The dogtrot farmhouse is constructed of logs covered with white clapboards. There's a cellar house, outhouse, and small sheds for period stock--Rambouillet sheep, a Durham cow, a donkey, and Dominique chickens. A year-round garden supplies food eaten at the daily noon meal. (An 1895 church moved from Pilot Grove, near Sherman, is interpreted in both 1861 and 1901. Complete with its original pine pews, it's also available for wedding rentals.)

If not knitting a shawl, Mrs. Kennedy may be hanging herbs to dry on the covered front porch. If not cooking on the open hearth, widow Jackson may be feeding scraps to the chickens out back. If not tending the crops, Erastus Rausch surely is pounding iron into nails, kitchen tools, and wagon parts for use around the farm.

In a converted barn a short walk away, Mrs. Wright uses a manual kick-wheel to throw pots, dishes, mugs, and bowls for the farm. She uses a Southern-style groundhog kiln--so-named because it is cut into a hill, for insulation. (Stoneware and ironwork made by Mrs. Wright and Erastus Rausch also are available in the museum store, housed in an 1870s farmhouse.)

Old City Park's first-person interpreters stay steadfastly in character...at least when visitors are near. Their unscripted dialog illuminates history in a personal way.

As I approach the 1861 farmhouse, I notice a scarecrow guarding the garden. I also overhear the banter between Mrs. Kennedy, Erastus Rausch, and widow Jackson, who are busy hoeing.

"It's fortunate our weather lets us grow something all year long," says Mrs. Kennedy.

"Yep, but it's too bad the cold keeps us from growing lemons. You know how Mr. Nix loves lemons," Erastus adds. "The Union blockade down on the Gulf makes it hard to get lemons up here." (Periodically played by Old City Park curator Hal Simon, James Edward Nix is Mrs. Kennedy's unmarried cousin. He drops by for visits, sometimes with his sister Deborah Nix, periodically played by park facilities director Deborah Lister.)

"It sure does get cold in the farmhouse during the winter," replies Mrs. Kennedy, "since the fireplace is all the heat we've got. Keepin' the doors all shut up gives me cabin fever. But sewing or reading or hearing Erastus play his dulcimer helps take my mind off the dreariness."

"We'll it's not cold now," interjects widow Jackson, "so I better get back to the kitchen. I've got some canning to do. I may even try to pickle eggs today. The chickens have been very productive lately."

Life in the City

On the other side of Old City Park--and 40 years in the future--two fulltime interpreters depict urban Dallas of 1901, a time of economic growth and social change fueled by the arrival of the railroad.

Here, Leah Blum (portrayed by Dianna Hart) is a Jewish homemaker who fled Galveston with her family after the Great Storm of 1900. She maintains s kosher household, even though the spacious Queen Anne-style home was built by non-Jews (the house was actually built in Plano in 1900 by D.C. George as a wedding gift for his wife).

The lavender-colored home features bay windows, a turret, and jig-saw trim under the eaves. Several features--including electric light fixtures, linoleum, and a cast iron cook stove--show the relative comfort afforded a middle-class family at the turn of the 20th century.

Mrs. Blum prepares lunch for Mrs. Bonfield (xxxxxx), whose husband runs a freight and livery service across Elm Street from her house. Every day, Mrs. Bonfield pulls her wagonette from the carriage house and hitches up a matched pair of Mammoth Jack Stock donkeys, named Nip and Tuck. The wagonette hauls people and freight to homes and businesses in town. (He carries visitors for buggy rides daily.)

And what a town it is! Dallas of 1901 boasts a bank, dentist office, print shop, lawyer's office, and the newly-opened Choctaw Jack Saloon. There's also a railroad depot, bandstand, hotel, doctor's office, Chautauqua pavilion, and school. (Only the Blum house and the livery currently have fulltime reenactors.)

Mrs. Blum's husband, Mordecai (not yet interpreted), helps run the Blum Brothers General Store, along with his brother, Simon Blum (portrayed periodically by curator Simon).

Mrs. Blum sweeps the wraparound front porch, as I stroll up her red brick walkway. She introduces herself and welcomes me in.

"Are you Jewish?" she asks, noticing my full beard. "You know, Dallas now has more than 42,000 people, and 6,000 of them are Jewish. More are moving to my neighborhood every year."

She shows me a few items saved from the Galveston flood--a menorah candelabrum, a basin for ritual washing before prayer, and a seder plate for the Passover observance.

In the family room, she brags about her fine sewing machine, and points out the holy books that her husband and two sons study. Then she leads me to the parlor, the "best" room in the house. That's where the family and guests enjoy the latest in entertainment technology--a foot-pedaled player piano and a hand-cranked music box.

Mrs. Blum shows me the small covered back porch where her wash tub and wringer stand ready. As we pass into the adjacent kitchen, she reaches toward the right-hand doorpost to touch a *mezuzah*. In keeping with Jewish tradition, the small case contains a handwritten Biblical scripture. She touches the *mezuzah*, then kisses her fingers. "Every time I do this," she turns and says, "it reminds me of the eternal presence of God in my life."

At the end of the day, after visitors are gone, I check back with Leah Blum of 1901 and find Dianna Hart of 2004. I hardly recognize her. She has traded her character's head scarf, long dress, and leather shoes for her own modern jeans and soft-soled sneakers. But she readily admits that sometimes, after leaving the gates of Old City Park, she misses the simple lifestyle of 1901.

Old City Park curator Hal Simon hopes that visitors--like staff interpreters--also get caught up the excitement of living history. "We want people not only to learn about history, but to see, touch, hear, and even smell what life was like in Dallas more than a century ago."

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RESOURCES

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