

**History of the High Island Sanctuaries**  
**Houston Audubon Society**  
prepared by Sara M. Bettencourt  
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## **A History of the High Island Sanctuaries**

**Sara Bettencourt**

There's the old song "When it's springtime in the Rockies, I'll be coming back to you." Bessie Cornelius once said that it might more aptly be named "When It's Springtime in High Island." I suppose many of you are doing what I am doing -- loading up the car with binoculars, scope, flighty children (give 'em wings!), the Galveston tide tables, a few bologna sandwiches, and 7 brands of bird books (you experts can skip this step) in preparation for the annual trek to the High Island sanctuaries. We do this in celebration of a miracle. And although spring migration is, now, somewhat of an endangered miracle, it is a phenomenon that has been occurring for, well, I don't know. Centuries? Millennia? Perhaps, as we get our gear to go, we might occasionally wonder what it was like in centuries past. Did our sanctuary woods look much the same in 1896 as 1996? To what uses was the land put? Who were the people who worked and lived and called the High Island land "home"? Winnie Burkett, Vice President of Sanctuaries, posed these questions some three years ago at a meeting I happened to attend. Somehow, writing the history of the High Island Sanctuaries fell to me, and will be published herein as a serial. Much of what follows, and is to come in subsequent newsletters, assuming the editor doesn't act rationally and scratch my byline, reads rather formally. Sorry 'bout that, but if you'll hang through the end, I'll try my hand at a few anecdotes.

First we'll start with a general introduction to the subject. You all know this, but indulge me. High Island, known to the locals as "the hill," is a forested salt dome rising approximately 38 feet above sea level and located on the upper Texas Coast between Bolivar and Sabine Pass. An astounding variety and concentration of birds can be observed here for three reasons. Its elevation protects plant life from salt water thereby allowing plants more typical of Texas hardwood forests to flourish. It is also in an area where freshwater, salt water, forest, and prairie meet, which increases the diversity and concentration of avifauna. (Whew! Did I use that word correctly?) And, most important, the High Island region is in the direct path of the annual trans-Gulf migration of birds moving north after a winter in the warm climates of South and Central America. Seeking shelter and food after the Gulf crossing, birds restore themselves in Houston Audubon Society's sanctuaries, whose dense oak mottes stand out as the only substantial feature above the surrounding marshlands for more than 10 miles in any direction. (Yep. I plagiarized that last sentence from a Houston Audubon brochure.)

The first settler of record on the land which now contains the Houston Audubon Society Sanctuaries was Martin Dunman. (Many of you will recall that a street in High Island bears his name.) Born in Louisiana in 1807 and after the death of his parents, Dunman emigrated to Texas in 1829 with six siblings and his uncle, James Taylor White. He married Elizabeth McLaughlin, his first cousin once removed, in 1829 and resided first in the White Settlement in Liberty County (now Chambers County), about 20 miles east of Wallisville. By the outbreak of the War for Texas Independence, Dunman was living on Bolivar Peninsula at "the High Islands" as the area was then known. Although he occasionally assisted the independence cause by selling beeves to the troops, it appears that Dunman was primarily a "Tory", as were others living east of the San Jacinto River. Many area settlers had roots in Louisiana, often driving their cattle to markets there (albeit illegally, compliments of the benign neglect of Mexican officials), and thus held no animosity toward Mexican rule, it being not only similar to Spanish rule of Louisiana but also rather accommodating. Others were labelled "tories" simply because they had no strong political opinions one way or the other regarding the revolution and preferred to be left alone.

In 1881 Dunman's widow, Elizabeth, applied to The State of Texas for a Land Certificate for Widows of Texas Veterans and attempted to document her late husband's military service in the Texas Army. This application was denied, and while no reason is given, perhaps it was because Martin Dunman was arrested twice in 1836: once for refusing to donate beef for the Texians and another for assisting in the

escape of two Mexican officers. For the first offense, Dunman and six others were about to be placed in double irons aboard a Texas vessel in Galveston Bay when David Burnet, President of the Republic of Texas, ordered their release. In the latter instance, Dunman escaped into Louisiana, being nine days pursued by a Texas officer. Not everyone in the Dunman family was a Tory, however. William Barret Travis' immortal letter from the Alamo pleading for reinforcements was carried to Liberty County by Joseph Dunman. (There were three Joseph Dunmans at the time: Martin's brother, uncle, and first cousin. Which Joseph Dunman was Travis' courier is not known.) Regardless of Martin's sentiments, he received a headright of one league and one labor of land from the Republic of Texas in 1838 -- based not on his military service, but by a Texas law that allowed grants to all who had been "resident citizens of Texas at the time of the Declaration of Independence in March 1836." Dunman qualified. Dunman used part of his headright to obtain a patent for the Bolivar Peninsula land upon which he was already living. This land grant of 15.5 labors (over 2,500 acres), described in the granting document as being situated *in Galveston County, between the Gulf of Mexico and East Bay Bayou at what is called the High Islands*, was approved by Anson Jones, President of the Republic of Texas, on August 18, 1845.

Dunman also acquired additional land on Bolivar Peninsula, west of High Island, when his brother, Joseph, died in 1842 leaving no heirs save Martin and other siblings. On his properties Martin raised cattle, sheep, goats, and hogs and operated a corn mill. Dunman fits right in with the colorful history of the Peninsula which has been frequented by the pirate Jean Lafitte and, it is rumored, in more recent times by Bonnie and Clyde. Dunman was part owner of the sloop *Reindeer*, notorious for its involvement in smuggling activities at "the Rolling Over Place," a 600-yard strip of land on the Peninsula between the Gulf of Mexico and East Bay. To avoid paying customs duties in Galveston, smugglers pushed barrels of cargo across this narrow strip from Gulf to Bay side. Located just west of High Island, "Rollover Pass" and the channel which has now been dug to connect the two waters commemorate the site.

The Akokisa and Atakapa Indians lived in the area thousands of years before Dunman settled the land, and a few Indian middens have been discovered on Bolivar Peninsula. Many legends have been associated with High Island and it was Martin and Elizabeth Dunman, some say, who were the first to make a written record of the old stories. One tells of a gravely ill Indian maiden being led by a mysterious "snow white doe" to High Island and, upon arriving, was restored to health. The Indians thereafter revered the hill as a sacred place.

Martin Dunman died at age 46 in 1852 (what caused his somewhat early demise is not known), leaving behind his wife and 7 1/2 children (one was about two months shy of birth). Let's focus on Martin's wife, Elizabeth, for a moment. As previously noted, in 1881 Elizabeth applied for a land grant designated for widows of Texas veterans. The application asserts that "the affiant [Elizabeth] is unmarried and has always been unmarried since the death of her said husband." Oho, ho, ho. Not so. After Martin's death, the widow Elizabeth Dunman married John Hampshire, a long-time resident of Smith Point and later Bolivar Peninsula. To make matters as confusing for you as possible, let me explain that Elizabeth's grandmother (Nancy White) married, as her fourth husband, Jacob Hampshire -- with Jacob being John Hampshire's father. So when Elizabeth wed John Hampshire, she was marrying her Uncle-John-by-marriage. (Clear as mud? Know the song "I'm My Own Grandpa?") It is said that when John Hampshire died in 1871 or 1872, "she, Elizabeth, did not attend the funeral, took all his legal papers with her, and left their home." But, really. These are irregularities upon which we shall not further dwell.

Back to first husband, Martin. I'm supposed to be ending this article about now, but I must tell you about Mr. Jim Meredith, one of his employees, and his generous neighbors in Chambers County. Emboldened with only the barest of clues, I began a search for the location of Martin Dunman's tombstone. Living in the city, I forget that people are essentially, and generally, friendly. I must have made five or six calls -- an Anahuac grocer here, a Smith Point farmer there -- and not one assumed I was selling aluminum

siding. Most responses went like this: *I think I've heard something about that. You ought to call old widow Snow. She knows everything. Got her number right here. You let me know when you find that tombstone, hear?* Finally I was given the name of Jim Meredith, the owner of the Barrow Ranch in Chambers County. (That makes sense, I think, since three of Martin's siblings married Barrows.) I called Mr. Meredith. What a marvelous fellow. After explaining the project and requesting permission to visit his property to photograph the tombstone, Mr. Meredith enthusiastically replied, *You are as welcome as the flowers in spring. But you aren't going to dig him up, are you?*

The next week, at the appointed hour, I arrive at the ranch. *I don't know about your Martin Dunman*, Meredith said, *but there are a bunch of old graves a-ways out there under that oak*, pointing some distance across the prairie. Hmm. I am wearing a skirt (casual) and city shoes. Didn't plan too well for this excursion, but I'm game. I head off in the direction of the lone oak, nodding *g'day* to the cows. Under the tree, there are, indeed, several gravesites. But these are only field stones with no inscriptions. Could one of these be Martin's? How am I to know? By the foot of the tree I see part of a rock protruding. I begin excavations with a nearby stick, yet make but little headway. Due to what must have been obvious ineptitude, I was soon assisted by Bernardo, ranch hand, bless him, who came bearing trowel, rag, whisk broom, bucket of water, and an impish grin which seemed to say *Don't know what you're doing, looks goofy to me, you in that dress in the middle of a cow pasture, but maybe these will help?* And sure enough, under about 2 inches of dirt and a good slathering of cow patty -- there it was. Martin Dunman's tombstone. Broken in two pieces, but completely legible: ***Sacred to the memory of MARTIN DUNMAN Who departed this life May 22, 1852, Age 46 years.*** And all the while I confounded the cows and kind Bernardo with my embarrassed chortle: *No. Really, Mr. Meredith. I am not digging him up!* [Photo of tombstone about here]

Martin Dunman has gone to the great beyond. But who, you ask, inherited the land that would later become the High Island sanctuaries? A cliff hanger. Stay tuned.

## A History of the High Island Sanctuaries

Sara M. Bettencourt

In our first foray, we followed the life of Martin Dunman, the original owner of what is now Houston Audubon Society Sanctuary land, until his death in 1852. In 1854 Dunman's estate was settled and his assets, of which the High Island land was only part, were divided 9 ways: his wife received half, and the remaining half was allotted in equal shares to his eight children. The land which now contains the **Smith Oaks Sanctuary** (the Boy Scout Woods history will be discussed in a later article) was inherited by Dunman's 8th and youngest child, Emily. Emily's share of the High Island land was approximately 160 acres, valued (in 1854) at \$240.00. She also inherited 2 Stock Horses, 4 Mares, a splash of cash, 329.5 acres at the Rolling Over Place, 184 Cattle, and "part of a Horse" -- all told -- a \$1,877.63 value.

Emily Ella Dunman (she preferred the name Emma) was born July 8, 1852 -- about 7 weeks after her father's death. In 1867, at the advanced age of 14, she married Walter Berwick Shaw, born at Point Bolivar in 1844. Walter was a rebel. That is, he had served as a Private in Co. K, 21st Texas Cavalry (also known as the 1st Texas Lancers), Confederate States Army. Emma received a Confederate Widow's Pension from the State of Texas in 1910. Her application states that Walter joined his cavalry regiment at Refugio or Goliad in 1862, saw duty in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Missouri, served honorably all through the war, never deserted, and was discharged on the Little Brazos in 1865. However, the records in Washington, D.C. show that Walter served in this unit for only 5 months in 1862. Regardless, he indeed defended the Confederacy for at least some length of time, and his widow indeed received a pension -- eight dollars per month -- the same awarded to all qualifying Texas Confederate widows.

In 1914 the Texas Legislature approved an increase in Confederate pensions but Emma encountered no small trouble in obtaining hers. She dashed off several letters to the Commissioner of Pensions, one to wit: *"sir i sente an application for an increace of pension sined by Dr Gober and the the [duplicate sic] onerd [i.e., honored?] Judge Willson of Beaumont as to my kneed of the pension which was sente in September but i havent hird eney thing from it my first aplication was was [duplicate sic] maid out in Galveston and began on Dec the 1 and the no is 19643 will you pleas attende to it for me and oblige"* We must hope that Emma's persistence was obliged. [Photo of Emily Dunman Shaw about here. List as Photo Credit: From the collection of Faye Dunman Turner, Livingston, TX]

Walter Berwick Shaw, his grandchildren report, was a man of extraordinary imagination. A mystic of magical chimera. Around the turn of the century, when the grandchildren were small, they would gather around Grandpa and listen with fascination. *One day, Walter would say, you will know all that you don't know you don't know. There will be carts that can go a hundred miles an hour. People will fly way out to the stars. And one day, we will capture the voice of Christ -- because it's still out there.* (That got me thinking. What does happen to sound waves after my ear can no longer detect them? Are they still "out there" somewhere?) [Photo of Walter B. Shaw about here. List as Photo Credit: From the collection of Patricia A. Tomek, Blue Ridge, TX]

Walter died in 1903 at age 59 in Papalote, TX (that's in Bee County) and is buried in the Protestant Cemetery there. Thereafter, Emma lived with a daughter in Beaumont until her death from Bright's Disease the day after Christmas 1919 at age 67. Emma is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Beaumont. (Hmmm. Bright's Disease. A kidney ailment. There was a fellow, 'bout that time, name of George Smith, who claimed his Mineral Springs water would cure that particular malady and just about everything else that ails. Guess where old George discovered his famous waters? Upon his High Island land -- the same land that had been Emma's inheritance -- the same that is today the Smith Oaks Sanctuary. Wonder if Emma ever tried that cure, or made the connection? Ahh. But I'm jumping ahead of myself. I cannot, now, tell you more about George Smith because he isn't next.)

Emma and Walter Shaw had eight children and resided in Patton Beach (now Crystal Beach) on Bolivar Peninsula, in Brazoria and Bee Counties, and in Beaumont -- but it has not been ascertained if they ever lived upon Emma's land at High Island...because, you see, the Shaws owned this land for only a few years. It was in 1874, just seven years after they married, that Emma and Walter Shaw sold Emma's High Island property for \$1,000 to John and Mary Ann Brown. This property remained with the Brown descendants for a period of over 110 years until a section was purchased by the Houston Audubon Society.

What is known about the Browns? Born around 1810 in Pittsburgh, PA, John Brown married Mary Ann

McGill who was born about 1819 (don't know exact birth years; data from a variety of sources conflict). They resided in Louisiana and several areas of Texas -- West Columbia, Brazoria, Bastrop, Galveston, High Island. A carpenter, blacksmith, and farmer, Brown also operated a grocery store located at 30th and Avenue M in Galveston in the early 1880s. According to the family story, John loved oak trees and not having much to do in his golden years, planted oak trees not only on his property but all over High Island. It is said that any oak trees at High Island planted in a line were planted by John Brown. Perhaps you have noticed the large tree in the Smith Oaks Sanctuary with the honorary plaque announcing it as the "John Brown Oak." In 1988, through the efforts of Bessie Cornelius of Beaumont, this tree was dedicated by the East Texas Nature Club and voted a member of the *Live Oak Society of the Louisiana Garden Club Federation, Inc.*, thereby certifying that it is over 100 years old. It was measured at the time as being 17' 4" in diameter and having a canopy of 144 feet. It is thought that any tree whose girth is greater than 17 feet is at least one hundred years old. [Photo of the "John Brown Oak" about here. List as Photo Credit: From the collection of Bessie Cornelius, Beaumont, TX] If John Brown indeed planted the oak trees, it is likely he did not plant his name sake as it is larger than the others. It is altogether fitting, however, that this oak honor John Brown's conservation efforts.

John Brown died August 18, 1886 about age 78 in Galveston, the same day that a hurricane hit the Texas coast, inflicting some damage to Galveston and Bolivar Peninsula. (The cause of Brown's death was listed as "old age and senile debility" and was, therefore, unrelated to the hurricane.) The Galveston Daily News for the 20th and 21st reported that in Galveston's east end, the water was *waist deep* and *the streets running from bay to gulf...were like rivers*. Some of you Texas history buffs will know that this storm made not Galveston, but another Texas town, famous. This hurricane destroyed forever the small coastal port of Indianola. The storm surge carried away or left uninhabitable every single building in that town. Indianola, then a fairly prominent Texas port, had been hit eleven years earlier, destroying 3/4 of the town. Today, Indianola exists in a few foundation fragments and remembrance only.

Lest you check the Galveston records to corroborate John Brown's death date given above, let me admit to some confusion in the records. The date recorded in the Brown family Bible is as listed above, and it's the one I'm going with. The Galveston city death records and the newspaper Mortuary Report, however, list his date of death as September 27, 1886 -- over a month later. As evidence goes, family Bible entries -- usually recorded at the time of the event, and by someone who ought to know -- are pretty reliable. On the other hand, city officials in the 1800s did not attend to administrative details with the same insistence as today. In addition, it is hard to imagine that John's widow, in the midst of a personal crisis, would put as her first priority battling a hurricane and wading through waist deep water simply to inform the officials that a one John Brown had gone to his reward. Perhaps it took her a month to get around to it. Yet it is intriguing that the death records list not only his death date but also his burial date as September 27, 1886. Should we believe that John was buried over a month after his death? Perhaps they had to wait for the flood waters to recede. The records show that he was interred in the "Old City" Cemetery in Galveston (located at 40th between Broadway and Avenue K). But, unfortunately, the cemetery office records were destroyed in the 1900 storm (which did make Galveston famous). And no one has yet compiled a tombstone-by-tombstone enumeration of this cemetery. One is, therefore, tempted to quip "just where does *John Brown's body lie amolderin' in the grave?*"

John's wife, Mary Ann, died in Galveston in 1890 around age 71. She, also, was buried in the "Old City" Cemetery -- perhaps, however, in a different plot from her husband. The records are ambiguous. Maybe someday their head stones will be rediscovered. (Although several have asked about the "marked" graves at Smith Oaks, no land owners are buried on Sanctuary property. These graves have been determined to be the last resting places of beloved family pets.)

The Browns had a cadre of six children, but the time has come to close this current correspondence. The next chapter will convey with which child this conundrum continues. [Hint: her name begins with "C."] *Ciao!*

## A History of the High Island Sanctuaries

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Where were we. In prior articles, we chronicled the adventures of the first land owner, Martin Dunman. Then we learned that Martin's daughter, Emily, inherited the land that would later become Smith Oaks Sanctuary. Still later, Emily and husband Walter Shaw sold the property to John and Mary Ann Brown, whose lives were covered in the last issue in May. What happened next?

You might say that the Browns "flipped" the property, since they purchased it from the Shaws in 1874 for \$1,000 then sold it in 1879 for \$300 -- except we need to tell old John that the purpose of flipping is to turn a profit. But who cares since it's all in the family. The Browns sold their High Island land (over 160 acres) to their 6th and youngest child, Charlotte Elizabeth, born in 1858. Or more accurately, to their new son-in-law and his wife. Charlotte married George Evan Smith in 1878, born in Wisconsin in 1856. George's parents, George Sr. and Mary Smith, had immigrated to the U.S. from Devonshire, England some time prior to 1856. By 1860 the Smiths Sr. had moved to Ozan, Arkansas where George Sr. earned a living as a music teacher and musician. Alas, perhaps the finer arts were not as lucrative as hoped. Shortly after the Civil War, the Smiths moved to Galveston where George Sr. opened a saloon and grocery at the head of Kuhn's Wharf.

(Kuhn's Wharf, located at 18<sup>th</sup> Street, was in operation as early as 1838. During the three months in 1862 when Union troops physically occupied the city, Kuhn's Wharf served as their base of operations. Just after the Civil War when the Smiths arrived, Galveston was a bustling metropolis – and full of strange sights. Ninety-five percent of all trade goods entering or leaving Texas came through Galveston. By the late 1870s, Galveston was the largest city in Texas and its port the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest in the world for cotton exports. Gary Cartwright in his book Galveston describes some of the town's constant revelry: A long-haired, wild-eyed drummer who called himself the King of Pain sold patent medicine from his wagon. Trained monkeys and bears performed on almost every street corner. Another man ate glass for tips. And parades were legion – Mardi Gras parades, circus parades – and my personal favorite – the annual "Parade of Butchers." This event featured the town's butchers who donned masks and marched in formation from saloon to saloon. Surely they must have included a stop at George Smith's establishment at the head of Kuhn's Wharf. But I digress.)

The George Smiths Sr. never owned our High Island sanctuary land, but if you'll permit yet another digression, perhaps I can establish a "birding" link to the senior Smiths. George Sr. split his time between the saloon establishment in Galveston and his 160-acre ranch on Oyster Bayou near East Bay in Chambers County. George Sr. received a preemption/homestead grant from the State of Texas in 1876 for this acreage, which means that he must have occupied the property at least as early as 1873. When the Hurricane of 1875 struck, George Sr.'s son, fifteen-year-old Willie Joe, and a companion were caught in a boat. The companion drowned but Willie Joe, through great exertion, retrieved the body of his friend and placed it in the boat which had been blown some 3 miles from the Smith Ranch. George Sr. lost his cattle, crops, and dwelling in the storm. In the aftermath of the hurricane, George Sr.'s Galveston saloon served as the collection point for relief supplies to be distributed to the farmers and ranchers in the East Bay area.

By 1877 George Sr. had put his son, Willie Joe, and another fellow by the name of Fred L. Sargent, in charge of the ranch. One afternoon in late March 1877, Willie Joe returned to the farmhouse after a hunting trip. He and Sargent began a bit of pranking, pretending that each other was an intruder. Sargent seized a gun standing inside the farm house door and -- not knowing it was loaded -- pointed it at Willie Joe and fired. The bullet struck Willie Joe in the head. A horrified Sargent watched as Willie Joe fell from his horse. He died 15 hours later at age 16.

At the time of this terrible accident, George Sr. and the rest of the family were in Galveston. A neighbor, living some 7 miles away on Double Bayou, arrived the next day to assist. This neighbor, James Jackson, was the wealthiest man in Chambers County and served the County through the years as Sheriff, Judge, and Chief Justice. It just so happens that James Jackson kept a diary, and recorded the following:

March 28, 1877: *Cool and a little cloudy broke land in loar field J. S. Jackson [James Jackson's brother] came from Mr Smiths where he had been with the Dr to see Jo Smith who was shot acidental last evening by his companion pranking with guns I go over this morning*

March 29, 1877: *Foggy & warm I went after Jo Smith this morning and met the Dr on the way and he told*

*me Jo was dead, went on and brot him home & made his coffen & box. J. S. [Jackson] went to Smiths Point to send word to Galveston about Jo [FYI: Smith's Point was named for an unrelated Smith family.]*

*March 30, 1877: Warm & cloudy wind SE and blowing hard – Burried Jo Smith this evening none of his people having come and it being impossable to keep him any longer*

It must have been sad, indeed, for the Smith family not to receive the news immediately nor be able to travel quickly enough for Willie Joe's burial. It is thought that Willie Joe Smith must have been buried in the well-marked Jackson Family Burial Ground which is easily accessible today. But no tombstone, should there ever have been one, survives. (The diary also reveals that on many an occasion, George Sr. gave music lessons to James Jackson's daughters. Indeed, until his death at age 65 in 1885, George Sr. continued to list on official documents his occupation as "musician/farmer." It pleases me that his first affinity remained until the last, and that his friend and neighbor, Jackson, returned the gift in a moment of particular disaster.)

Shortly after Willie Joe's death, George Sr. sold his 160 acres to James Jackson and this property became part of Jackson's extensive JHK Ranch which eventually contained some 26,000 acres. When George Sr. owned the land, he planted a large square of salt cedars around his house and barn as wind breaks. In the Jackson family, the Smith section became known as "Salt Cedars" and was a favorite family hunting ground. The Jackson children often ran trap lines here and camped in the remains of George Sr.'s barn.

Out of curiosity and not expecting to discover anything connected to birding, I decided to try to locate the present location of what the Jacksons called "Salt Cedars," that is, the old George Smith homestead. A wonderful thing came my way and here's the marvel of it. Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1963 by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service from part of James Jackson's JHK Ranch. (The Refuge property was expanded in 1982 when the adjacent Ralph J. Barrow Ranch was added. The Refuge now contains over 30,000 acres.) If you look at a current map of ANWR, available at the entrance, you will notice that the main road leading into the refuge is named "Salt Cedar Road." This road is so named because a short ways up on the left (that is, to the east of the road) you will see that an area of "salt cedars" is drawn on this map. These salt cedars, planted in a square, are a prime migratory birding spot and -- along with other stands of salt cedar along the coast -- are often a vagrant trap for such species as Prairie, Cape May, and Black-Throated Blue Warblers.

And now you know the rest of the story. Yes, indeed. The salt cedars that George E. Smith Sr. planted around his home site (also the location of Willie Joe's accident) and the salt cedars at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge are one and the same. These trees are now over 120 years old. [Photo of salt cedars about here.]

But my editors remind me that this is supposed to be a history of the High Island sanctuaries. (*All right already.*) George E. Smith Sr. had another son by the name of George E. Smith, Jr. It was George Smith Jr. who married Charlotte Brown in 1878 and who purchased in 1879, from Charlotte's parents, the property that would later become our sanctuary. And, of course, it is from George and Charlotte that "Smith Oaks Sanctuary" derives its name.

George Jr. first clerked at his father's saloon and later operated a "grocery, dry goods, and beer" establishment in Galveston located at the southwest corner of Avenue M at 28th. Yet he also spent much time at his High Island property, upon which he began improvements in 1879 consisting of houses, fencing, live oak trees, hedges, and ditches. The Smith home at Smith Oaks -- many of you remember it well -- stood for over 100 years until 1985. [Photo of house about here] At its dismantling, a house-within-a-house was discovered, complete with two roofs. It is possible that the Browns built the first frame home, with the Smiths adding on around it. Perhaps continuing John Brown's tradition, or initiating it himself, George planted "live oak hedges" along his property lines. George owned cattle and raised peaches, pears, oranges, strawberries, sorghum, corn, cabbage, sugar cane, cotton, and tobacco which, due to the dampness and humidity, did not always cure to advantage. George operated a sugar mill and cotton gin on the land and owned several commercial boats. His schooner *Etta* made weekly trips to Galveston. Charlotte much admired flowers, trees, and ornamental plants, and many of the introduced species which still survive at the Sanctuary are descendants of her cultivars. [Photo of George E. and Charlotte Smith about here.]

Prior to the turn of the century, the Smith property in High Island was managed and cultivated by George's nephew, W. K. Middlesworth. It is thought that George and Charlotte Smith kept their primary residence in Galveston until 1899, when they sold their Galveston holdings and moved permanently to High Island. If this is true, the timing was impeccable. The 1900 storm destroyed Galveston, leaving in its wake a great deal more real



estate for sale than interested buyers. The Smiths sold just in time.

The 1900 storm was not the first bizarre weather event the Smiths experienced. The worst blizzard ever known to hit southeast Texas fell on February 14, 1895. The “St. Valentine’s Day Blizzard” blanketed Chambers County in 12” of snow; 14.4” fell in Galveston and Beaumont reported a staggering 20”. The snowfall at the Smith property in High Island was not recorded, but surely our sanctuaries must have been buried in a foot or more. Imagine that the next time you’re pulling weeds during a High Island Work Day in July!

There is more to say about the Smiths than can be covered in one article. Therefore, the “George and Charlotte Chapter” will continue in the next issue. See you in October!

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Twice upon a time, there was a family named Smith living in High Island.... This article continues the tale of George and Charlotte Smith for whom "Smith Oaks Sanctuary" is named.

George Smith is perhaps best remembered for his mineral waters enterprise and was quite famous for it in his time. George dug several mineral wells on his High Island property, reporting that he had "21 distinct waters." The deepest well was about 32 feet which also produced gas in 1882, but having no market, George considered it an inconvenience at best. As Smith's grandson, Vernon Kahla, explained, *when he got about twenty feet down, he lit his pipe and got blowed out of the well.* (Melanie Wiggins, *They Made Their Own Law* [Houston: Rice Univ. Press, 1990], p. 66.) In 1894 George received a trademark from the U.S. Department of the Interior for "Mineral Water and Other Named Beverages" and marketed his waters under the name of *High Island Mineral Springs*. The trademark consisted of a monogram of the letters "G E S" with the words "High Island" appearing on the letter "S" – as you see it here. [My first preference is that you use the large advertisement, reduced of course – see end of paragraph.] In his application, George stated that the trademark *is used by me in commerce between the United States and foreign nations or Indian tribes and particularly with the Kingdom of Spain through its West Indies possessions, and with the Cherokee tribe of Indians in the Indian Territory.* While it is certain that George bottled and marketed his waters along the Texas Gulf Coast, it is not known if commerce commenced in these other more exotic locales. His advertising claimed that the mineral water would "cure Brights disease, liver and kidney troubles, Catarrh -- the cause of Consumption, Asthma, Hay Fever, restore hair on bald heads, and remove all dandruff from the Scalp and all Pimples and Blotches from the face." In addition, George marketed soda water, ginger ale, and sassafras beer made from the spring water. [Copy of large advertisement about here. Possibly include copies of 2 small ads on separate page entitled "Concentrated Water" and "Restores."]

George was also known to favor a nip of whiskey now and again. As Vernon Kahla reports, *Grandpa Smith had one bad fault. Know what it was? He liked to drink whiskey too much, but he was a good old man. Grandpa had liquor [at his grocery store in Galveston] and Grandma moved him to High Island to get him away from the liquor. Then he put in a liquor store there. My grandma would bring him a drink, and she'd say, "Now, George, that's the only one you're gonna get." Well, it was. He'd keep fillin' it up. Use the same cup. Grandpa would go over to Galveston and sell [his mineral waters] on the beach for fifty cents a bottle, and everybody thought he was makin' a lot of money, but he was doin' that to get away from Grandma.* (Wiggins, p. 203.)

At this time, High Island was attempting to become the premier health spa and summer resort in Texas. In 1896 the Gulf and Interstate Railroad was constructed from Beaumont, through High Island, down the 27-mile length of Bolivar Peninsula, then across the channel to Galveston by barge. In fact, it was George Smith, along with a real estate promoter, who organized the first excursion over the Gulf and Interstate in 1896, featuring a trip from Galveston to the "new" townsite of Winnie located 17 miles north of High Island, with a stop at the High Island Mineral Springs on the return. The *Galveston Daily News* for August 3, 1896 reported that the 200 passengers eagerly awaited arrival in High Island *where Mr. George Smith had promised to have something good to eat. Well, he had it. Such barbecued meat, such home made bread, such old fashioned catsup, such sour pickles, such water. Everybody was hungry and the manner in which that Texas steer disappeared would do credit to Coxey's army. The people drank the water from Mr. Smith's numerous springs and...[the organizers were] so much pleased with the first outing over the new road that others will no doubt follow soon.* [Photo of Office and Depot of High Island Mineral Springs Water about here.]

Hoping that the railroad would increase tourism to the beach, Capt. C. T. Cade built the three-story forty-room Sea View Hotel in High Island in 1897. One of the prime attractions of the Hotel was its mineral springs spa. George Smith held the contract to provide the mineral water for the Hotel's two bath houses so that guests could "take the waters." In addition, it advertised elegant dining and ballroom dancing, spacious accommodations, an observation deck, and a horse-drawn trolley on rails to carry guests from the Hotel to the beach. Guests sported fashionable woolen bathing costumes and at the proper time of day, ladies went sea bathing in wooden cabins pulled into the surf by mules. Formal balls, held on Saturday nights, were attended by hundreds of guests. Children were allowed in the hotel, but not in the ball room. Special nannies cared for them while the festivities were in full swing. Because the hotel was the tallest structure on the highest point of land for miles around, the U. S. Engineering

Surveys used the Sea View Hotel as a landmark and it appeared on navigational charts as early as 1900.

It's going to take us yet one more article to conclude the "George and Charlotte Smith Chapter" of the Smith Oaks history. Look for it soon.

## **History of the High Island Sanctuaries** *by Sara M. Bettencourt*

In our last article, we were discussing High Island's attempt to become the premier health spa and summer resort in Texas – and specifically, George Smith's involvement in that endeavor. Smith (for whom Smith Oaks Sanctuary is named) organized the first excursion over the Gulf and Interstate Railroad, built in 1896 to run the length of Bolivar Peninsula. In addition, he held the contract to provide the mineral springs water for the spas at the Sea View Hotel, constructed in 1897.

Although there were years of some success for both the railroad and the Hotel, Mother Nature did not always cooperate. When the railroad was first constructed, the Galveston Daily News (Nov. 27, 1895) reported that *for twenty miles the whitecaps of the Gulf can be seen on one side, and the placid waters of Galveston Bay on the other....It will be a perfectly safe route, for the track will be on the ridge [of Bolivar Peninsula], which has never yet been known to be under water.* "Yet" was an important word. On September 8, 1900, the train was making its usual run from Beaumont to Galveston. When it arrived at Port Bolivar, however, the bay was too rough to cross on the barge. The train attempted to return to Beaumont but waves were soon crashing over the track and it was forced to stop in Patton (now Crystal Beach). Passengers scrambled out to seek what shelter they could before the infamous 1900 storm tossed railroad ties about like match sticks. The railroad was rebuilt in 1903 and those who had been on the train during the storm were given free passes on the first trip. When the train finally made it to Galveston on September 24, 1903 – it was billed as the “train which ran only 3 years behind schedule.” The railroad was purchased by the Santa Fe Railroad in 1908, but operated only a few years until the 1915 hurricane, the worst in Bolivar's recorded history, obliterated the track. It was reconstructed yet again but the stretch between High Island and Port Bolivar proved so unprofitable that it was abandoned in 1934.

These hurricanes treated the rest of Bolivar Peninsula no more kindly. The 1900 storm killed 41 Peninsula residents, dead cattle lay everywhere, and more than 300 bodies washed ashore. At High Island, the Sea View Hotel and many houses, including George Smith's (at the Sanctuary), were spared – but most structures on the Peninsula were badly damaged. If the 1900 storm caused great destruction on the Peninsula, the 1915 storm was even worse. At least 38 people were killed including at least 9 at High Island. George Smith, along with the County Commissioner and 3 others, brought relief supplies from Galveston and reported to the Galveston Daily News (August 23, 1915) that the Peninsula was *a water-covered waste swept bare of houses, fences and barns, destitute of all live stock and crops.* To reach High Island, the relief party “rowed” across the prairie to the High Island depot where several hundred people were marooned. The water reached the crest of the High Island “hill.” Unheard of. The town was inundated at least six feet deeper than had ever been recalled. The newspaper estimated losses on the peninsula at 2,000 head of cattle, 1,500 sheep, 500 hogs, 900 horses, and all crops and equipment. Most buildings were swept away without a trace, thanks in part to the railroad track which served as a battering ram, demolishing everything in its path.

One of the oft-told tales of the 1915 storm concerns a boy scout troop. Despite storm warnings, nine boys and a leader from Boy Scout Troop #2 in Beaumont set out on a hike, confident that the weather would improve before they reached the beach. They intended to camp at Rollover Pass. Instead, they made it as far as High Island where they “camped out” in the Sea View Hotel. All survived and, as it turns out, the name of one of those nine little boys has a familiar ring to it – Stuart Wier. Many of you will remember Dr. Wier and his wife, Frances – both of whom were among the first to bird the High Island land in the 1950s and 60s during trips sponsored by the East Texas Nature Club.

Although the Sea View Hotel survived both storms, its clientele began to dwindle, and ownership changed hands many times. During World War II, the Coast Guard took over the hotel to house its “horse guard” which patrolled the beaches searching for German U-boats. A bit later, in March 1947, the abandoned Hotel caught fire. There was no fire department, and although oil field workers and townsfolk tried to fight the flames with buckets of water, the Hotel burned to the ground in 45 minutes. High Island had lost its famous landmark. The Beaumont Enterprise for March 15, 1947 quoted an old timer who summarized the mourners' affection: *She took an era with her. Those were the good old days. But at least she went out in a blaze of glory.* [Photo of Sea View Hotel about here.]

High Island was indeed to gain great fame, but not as a health resort. An event occurring near Beaumont in

January 1901 was to change the character of High Island forever. In that month, Capt. A. F. Lucas struck what was then the largest oil gusher in history -- Spindletop. Spewing seventy-five thousand barrels of oil a day, Spindletop roared from the ground for nine days before it could be capped. The similarities of the Spindletop salt dome and that of High Island caused an immediate frenzy. Speculators thronged to High Island to grab land on the hill. Property values instantly doubled and within months, every inch of High Island had been sold or leased. Lucas announced that George Smith's land had the best prospects for oil (George now feeling better about his earlier encounter with gas – you will recall that George got “*blowed out of the well*” when he was digging and stopped to light his pipe). Lucas promptly leased several Smith tracts and eventually drilled nine wells near Smith's mineral springs. But these initial efforts and others in High Island were less than spectacular. (Photo of Downtown High Island, oil boom days of 1930s, about here.)

Drilling continued at High Island throughout the years with marginal success until 1931. In that year, the Depression was on, and a particular young man with a master's degree in geology could find work only as a survey crew chain puller for the Yount-Lee Oil Co. He was convinced that the High Island salt dome was mushroom shaped and to get at the oil, wells should be drilled not on the top of the dome where all prior efforts had concentrated, but on the perimeter below the hill in the surrounding marshes. He was so persistent in voicing his opinions that a foreman had to throw him off the derrick into a mud pit to shut him up. It didn't work. Undeterred, the youngster drove to Beaumont and, still clad in his muddy clothes, interrupted a black-tie party to continue the discussion with Mr. Yount himself. Mr. Yount, incredulous but impressed with the boy's tenacity, finally relented and gave the 21-year old permission to give it a go in the marsh. And there it was. Millions of barrels of oil gushed from the High Island fields over the next 60 years. The young man's name? Michel T. Halbouty. (Photo of High Island Oil Field 1939 about here.)

It should be noted that while several wells were dug on land which is now Smith Oaks Sanctuary, no reservoirs of significance were discovered here. George Smith didn't live long enough to see the largest of the High Island oil fields brought in as he died in 1927 at age 70. His widow, Charlotte, continued to live on the 11.25 acres designated as the “Smith homestead tract” until her death at age 85 in 1944. (The homestead tract was only part of the Smith's total holdings in High Island, but it is this 11.25 acres which concerns us most, since this was Houston Audubon Society's original “Smith Oaks” purchase. The Sanctuary now includes adjacent land, but the “homestead tract” serves as the nucleus of all that we now refer to as “Smith Oaks.”)

George and Charlotte are buried in the High Island Cemetery where their grave sites can be easily visited. The Smiths had at least 5 children, one dying at birth in Galveston in 1892. The four children reaching adulthood were Edna Grace, George W., Sarah R., and Clara E. Shall the sanctuary saga continue with any of these children? Or with all? I'll tell all in the next article.

## History of the High Island Sanctuaries by Sara M. Bettencourt

In the last article, we noted that George and Charlotte Smith had four children living to adulthood...and we were wondering who inherited the property that would later become “Smith Oaks Sanctuary.” Well, things get a little confusing but I am confident that we can figure it out.

George Smith died in 1927 and left everything to his wife, Charlotte. Clear enough. It surely would have been Charlotte’s intent to have her four children inherit equally, but sadly, one of the four preceded her in death. In 1928 their third child, Sarah Regina (who had married William Stump), stepped on a rusty wire in the barnyard and contracted lockjaw (tetanus). Friends and relatives suggested all kinds of cures, and somebody even said (sorry ‘bout this) that a concoction of cockroach soup would be best. Determined to save her, the family tried everything, but unfortunately even the creature soup didn’t work. Sarah died at age 46, leaving no children to inherit what would likely have been her share. When mother, Charlotte, died in 1944, the remaining three children inherited severally. Therefore for a while, these three – George William, Clara Elizabeth, and Edna Grace – each held an undivided 1/3 interest in the land that later became our sanctuary.

Son George W. Smith was the only child to live on the sanctuary property as an adult. When not attending to his rental properties and gas station in other parts of High Island, George W. tended the old Smith homestead raising chickens, selling eggs, and planting fruit trees. The next time you spot a loquat tree on the property, you can be sure that he planted it. George never married, had no heirs except his sisters, and died at age 71 in 1952. Although the property remained in the Smith family for another 40 years, George W. Smith was the last in a long line of owners actually to reside on the homestead. [Photo of George W. Smith about here.]

Daughter Clara E. married first Barney Kahla and second a Mr. Oliver. Clara died at age 64 less than one month before her brother, George W., in the summer of 1952. Therefore, at their deaths, all of the original Smith holdings, including what we know as the Sanctuary, was inherited by Clara’s children (together receiving an undivided ½) and the sole surviving sister, Edna Grace (receiving the other ½).

Although Edna Grace did not reside on her parent’s property after childhood, she held a special fondness for her ancestral home. After her brother and sister died, she learned that Clara’s children were thinking of putting in a rest home on the 11.25 acres constituting the “Smith homestead.” That was not to Edna’s liking, so she made a deal with Clara’s children: *I’ll trade you. You give me the old Smith land and you can have more of the rental properties in town.* The homestead had been her grandparent’s and parent’s home and it was her wish to protect, preserve, and keep it in one family rather than divide it into smaller parcels or sell. This transaction occurred in 1955 and in that year, Edna became sole owner of what we now call “Smith Oaks Sanctuary.”

Born Edna Grace Smith in 1879, she held the position of Post Mistress of the High Island post office (its 4<sup>th</sup>) from 1901-1904 and again from 1918-1921. In those days, Post Masters were appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the Senate – and the records show that Edna’s appointments were no different. High Island’s first post office was established in 1897 just a few years before Edna’s term. It is interesting to note, however, that the records in the National Archives in Washington D. C. show that High Island tried to get a post office much earlier – way back in 1869. The original application lists several possibilities for the official name of the post office: *Highland City*, *Highland Station*, and the best of the bunch – *Isle Haute* (“high island” in French). It is not clear what action was taken, if any, on this 1869 application, yet when the next one was filed, in 1897, we again see two marvelous names proposed: *Isle Haute* and *Belle Isle*. And darn if both aren’t scratched out, with the words “High Island” scribbled above. The scribble became official. “High Island Post Office” it is. Edna’s descendants say that when she was Post Mistress, the office was located at the Smith house on the sanctuary property – and the “official” record neither confirms nor denies. Therefore, let’s say it’s so. The National Archives do not have any site reports for Edna’s tenure, although the site reports for other years show that the post office was located at the railroad station in High Island.

In 1904 Edna Grace Smith married John Samuel Hughes, known as Sam or “Buss.” (Perhaps it has been puzzling to you, as it was to me, to hear various Auduboners talk about “Smith Oaks Sanctuary” and the “Hughes heirs” in the same breath. Now I get it.) Sam was born in Rollover (now Gilchrist) on Bolivar Peninsula in 1872. Early in their marriage, Sam and Edna resided there and in High Island, where Sam had a grocery store. When the hurricane of 1915 devastated the peninsula, it also destroyed Sam’s grocery. Sam’s niece, Inez Hughes Swearingen,

who was 7 years old at the time, recalls that her daddy (Henry Hughes – Sam’s brother) *got his wagon and went down to help. Most of the groceries in the store had been spread ‘round and one of our big jobs during the cleanup was to collect the food and try to get it allocated within the family before it spoiled.* She remembers getting sick and tired of pork and beans, which seemed to have been appointed to her family in greater than sufficient quantities.

After the hurricane, Sam and Edna moved to Stowell but returned again to High Island in 1917 where Sam opened another grocery, gasoline station, and later a hardware store. Another relative, Kate (Hudnell) Hughes, during a family interview in 1987 at age 93, said *I can see Sam walking now. He just walked loose, hung loose as they called it. He married the Smith girl and they lived at High Island back in a lot of trees.* Regardless of how he walked, Sam exacted certain standards of his children – all girls. He did not allow his daughters to wear shorts or smoke cigarettes. Lucille, one of the children, often told the story that *when Daddy came to visit, he would drive into the driveway revving his motor. Then he would stay in the car a while, revving it some more. This was the signal for us to put on our skirts and put out our cigarettes. Though he’d never admit it, he was giving us time. Even my girlfriend, Doots, always brought along an extra skirt, in case Daddy happened to stop by.* Sam’s wife, Edna, continued her mother’s tradition of keeping the old Smith homestead in “blooming plenty” and planted pansies, rose bushes, pear, satsuma, fig, grapefruit, and persimmon trees on the sanctuary land.

Edna and Sam Hughes had five daughters, their first dying young. The children reaching adulthood were Sadie Eunice, Bernice Edna, Eveline Ivy, and Lucille Margaret. Sam died in 1949 at age 76 and Edna followed in 1956 at age 77. Both are buried in the High Island Cemetery. [Photo of Hughes gravesite about here.] Because the old Smith homestead had been her ancestors’ home, it remained Edna’s lifelong wish to protect the land and have it remain in the family. She asked that her daughters do the same.

Stay tuned for the conclusion of the “Smith Oaks Sanctuary” history, coming in April to a *Naturalist* near you.

## History of the High Island Sanctuaries

by Sara M. Bettencourt

*This seventh article in a series concludes the history of "Smith Oaks Sanctuary"*

Around the turn of the century, High Island attempted to become famous as the premier health resort in Texas, with only marginal success. In the 1930s during the oil boom, High Island's bid for fame indeed succeeded, at least on a regional basis. But the world is a rather large place and it takes a rather large event to bring global recognition. Our High Island has it. And we shall hope will always have it.

Every year, High Island hosts a miracle. Spring migration. Today, High Island is internationally acclaimed as one of the premier birding hot spots **in the world**. When you and I load up the car this month with field guides and bins to witness this miracle, we will be among some 6,000 from over 15 countries to join the celebration.

Yet for years no one in the birding world knew High Island existed. Because of its isolation, High Island was virtually unknown to birders and ignored in ornithological studies until the 1970s. In the late 1950s and early '60s bird watchers, very few in number and primarily from Beaumont's East Texas Nature Club, began to discover the area. The Smith/Hughes property became a favorite destination.

You will recall from the last article that Edna (Smith) Hughes died in 1956. The 11.25 acre Smith homestead was inherited by her four daughters, each holding a 25% undivided interest. These daughters were Sadie (who married Troy L. Stanley), Bernice (who married William H. Bolin), Eveline (who married first Robert J. Flickinger and second Amiel R. Tuttle), and Lucille (who married Paul H. Guidry). [Photo of Hugheses about here.]

Having families of their own, the four Hughes daughters did not reside on the property but were generous in opening their land to birders who revered it as much as they. Bessie Cornelius of Beaumont, among the first to bird High Island in 1958, says that *even during the height of migration our little group would be the only ones around. One day the warblers, orioles, and tanagers began falling out like little stars – and there were a lot of birders to see it -- all 15 or 20 of us!* Bill Graber started the first Christmas Bird Count on Bolivar Peninsula (which included High Island) in 1962. About 13 people participated that first year, compared with about 50 for the 1996 Bolivar Peninsula CBC. Dr. Frank Novy from Michigan, a retired physician, banded birds at Smith Oaks in the "early" days. Former Houston Audubon Society President Ted Eubanks began birding at High Island in 1970. He recalls that *the old red barn stood right there in the middle of the big oak trees and this is where we would all sit. We would sit on the steps there and watch birds and just kind of socialize. Smith Woods really was the center of socializing for High Island.*

Some time after the death of Edna Hughes, the homestead was rented to Wes and Kathleen Brannan. Kathleen had been a school teacher and had taught every child of the four Hughes daughters. The Brannans first lived in the old Smith house, later moved a mobile home onto the property, and lived there for over 20 years. Before the arrival of the Brannans, the neighborhood children had shot most of the squirrels in Smith Oaks. Bessie Cornelius and a friend trapped squirrels in Bessie's yard in Beaumont and reintroduced them on the property. Wes Brannan then made sure the children didn't continue target practice in the woods. The Brannans became, in effect, the "High Island Birding" information hotline. People would call them to ask what could be seen and what the weather was like. Bessie remembers *when it rained, the Brannans would always let us stand under the porch and, oh, what activity we would observe in the surrounding greenery when the rain was light and fluffy. I think the rain stirs up the insects as I remember one time we were in my car parked under a very large oak in the pasture next to Smith Woods and the warblers were dropping into that tree by the hundreds and were in just a frenzy of activity, darting and dodging one another and snatching bugs like mad. All of the time the rain was pouring down. It was a sight I will never forget. I cannot emphasize enough the influence Mr. and Mrs. Brannan had in keeping the property for a sanctuary.* Such excellent caretakers of the property were they, and such generous hosts to visiting birders, that the area was often then called "Brannan's Woods."

Naturalists soon recognized the importance of the High Island habitat and efforts began to establish a sanctuary. In 1970 a triad consisting of Bessie Cornelius, the East Texas Nature Club in Beaumont, and Ned Fritz, then President of the Texas Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, initiated discussions with the four Hughes daughters to donate or sell the homestead. The daughters remembered their mother's wish to protect the land, and this encouraged some of the daughters to sell to an organization which would make of the old Smith homestead a protected sanctuary. But they also remembered their mother's hope that the land would stay in the family, which



argued against selling. Time and again, the four daughters would say *We are so pleased that you love and respect this land as much as our mother did and we do. And although one or two of us might be willing to sell, all four of us are not. We feel it is important for us to agree, so we cannot sell.*

Although no agreement was reached at that time, discussions continued with the daughters throughout the years until their deaths. Bernice died in 1982, Sadie in 1984, Lucille in 1989, and Eveline in 1990. But the family owed taxes on the land and they had to devise a way to save their land. Elsie Devers, one of the owners, wrote *I spent some time bird watching when the Brannans lived on the property and I happened into a fallout one morning that brought back memories of my childhood. I was so involved in birdwatching that my husband was talking about divorce, my children had no clean clothes to wear, we were all losing weight and choking on dust balls. So when the family was discussing having to divide or sell the old Smith homestead, I became very disturbed that the land might be lost to the birds so I asked that they let me open a sanctuary to see if it could help pay the taxes.* Elsie did just that and "Smith Oaks Bird Sanctuary" was officially opened as a family enterprise in 1985, charging \$2.00 per person admission. The logo Elsie chose for the sanctuary was the same trademark that her great grandpa George Smith had designed for his famous mineral waters. Elsie managed the family Sanctuary with enthusiasm, care, and great pride.

By 1988 the 11.25 acres constituting the old Smith homestead was owned by about 15 heirs – each holding a small undivided percentage interest. If no agreement to sell could be reached while negotiating with only four daughters, negotiating with an extended family was an even greater challenge. How shall I put this? The heirs were all cousins, and, as large families go, not everyone was exceedingly fond of everybody else nor Houston Audubon's efforts to purchase the land. And it was not only the family, but the High Island towns people who wondered if bird watchers weren't a little too odd. Elsie remembers with a laugh that *the home folks were a little leery. One day someone came to my door and whispered "I don't want to upset you but there are people in a car across the street looking at your house with spy glasses."* I just smiled and explained that they were harmless birdwatchers looking at birds in my trees. After a time, birdwatchers became just another sign of spring.

Taxes continued to be a troublesome concern to the family. The County conducted a re-evaluation of taxes and insurance soared. Some cousins felt that perhaps there was no longer a choice but to sell. In 1988 Houston Audubon purchased from a few of the Hughes heirs a 40% undivided interest, thereby joining with the family in the preservation and operation of the Sanctuary. The purchase was completed in 1993 when the Houston Audubon Society acquired the remaining 60% interest in the Smith homestead. Upon her family's final sale, Hughes granddaughter Elsie Devers summarized the history of the Smith Oaks gem:

*The Indians revered the land, Martin Dunman surveyed, Emily Dunman inherited, John and Mary Ann Brown homesteaded and planted trees, Charlotte and George Smith expanded and planted, George W. Smith introduced more plants, Edna G. Hughes protected and preserved, her four daughters fulfilled a promise to their mother, shared, and established a Sanctuary. The property has probably always been a Sanctuary for birds and with the help of the Houston Audubon Society will always remain so.*

As this article concludes the history of Smith Oaks Sanctuary, I wish all in Houston Audubon to know of the many people who granted interviews, let me rummage through their files, copy their photos, ask too many questions, have access to their libraries and their land, and poke around in the lives of their ancestors. First and foremost, I salute **Elsie Devers** and **Bessie Cornelius**. Without their enthusiastic assistance and reams of documents generously shared, no such history would exist. Just as important are the kindnesses of others near and far. I thank them all: Ted Eubanks; Sandi Hoover; Gretchen Mueller; Winnie Burkett; Bob Behrstock; Bill Graber; Jim Meredith, owner of the Barrow Ranch, Chambers County; Benny Hughes of Beaumont; Kevin Ladd, Director, Wallisville Heritage Park; Casey Greene and Ann Peebler of the Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston; Faye Dunman Turner of Livingston, Dunman descendant; Roland Jary of Fort Worth, Dunman descendant; Doris Johnson of Livingston and daughter Patricia Tomek of Blue Ridge, Shaw descendants; Charles Bibbings of Springfield, VA, National Archives researcher; and Doug Weiskopf, Will Howard, Anne Douglass, Ellen Hanlon, Carol Johnson, Vanessa Miller, and Nina Oliver of the Texas Room, Houston Public Library. I tip my hat to *They Made Their Own Law*, a history of Bolivar Peninsula, and its author, Melanie Wiggins, as this book was a valuable

resource.

## History of the High Island Sanctuaries

by Sara M. Bettencourt

*This is the first of two articles on the history of Louis Smith Boy Scout Woods Bird Sanctuary*

Since we have recently concluded the history of Smith Oaks Sanctuary, we now turn our attention to High Island's very first sanctuary. In 1981 the Houston Audubon Society began its initial High Island acquisition – the Louis Smith property. Commonly called "Boy Scout Woods" because of its historical use as a scout campground, this tract contained 4.5 acres of woodland and ponds and has long been a favorite birding destination.

Who has owned the property down through the years? What tales of adventure might be revealed about these High Island pioneers? To what purposes has the land been put over the last 150 years? I wish I knew. Title companies have long bemoaned the fact that the High Island area land records are exceedingly difficult to examine. They are among the most confused, disputed, and contradictory in all of Texas. Experts were recruited to assist in our sanctuary research but the land records for this part of Galveston County refuse to untangle themselves clearly enough for us to make more than a guess. Here's what we know.

The first settler of record on the land which now contains Scout Woods was Martin Dunman who received a land grant of 15.5 labors (over 2,500 acres) at "the High Islands" from the Republic of Texas on August 18, 1845. (For more on Martin Dunman, see the April 1996 issue of *The Naturalist*.) When Dunman died at age 46 in 1852, his estate (settled in 1854) was divided nine ways: his wife received half and the other half was allotted in equal shares to his eight children, each child receiving approximately 160 acres. Quoting the estate records, *The Commissioners have divided the Lands allotted to each party by imaginary lines, which will enable the parties at any time to have the same run off.... The Commissioners deemed it wholly unnecessary to incur the expense, time and trouble of having the lines run off by Surveyor at this time as by the imaginary lines established the interest of all parties is clear, definite and well defined.* That's where all the trouble started – no initial survey on the ground. In the years since, there has been tremendous "expense, time and trouble" in an attempt to sort out property lines which have been anything but "clear, definite and well defined." Thus, although the Commissioners proceeded to describe the allocations, it cannot be said with certainty which allotment contained what is today our sanctuary. The most likely candidates are the property awarded to daughter Mrs. Sarah Reeves, son Daniel, and widow Elizabeth Dunman.

Of the subsequent deed chain, we surmise the following. When oil was struck at Spindletop in 1901, speculators grabbed every bit of land they could on High Island's similar salt dome. During the High Island oil boom days of the 1930s, the largest property owner was the Yount-Lee Oil Company. Therefore, let us assume that whoever owned our sanctuary land sold it sometime after 1901 to Yount-Lee or to a company which became Yount-Lee. (It is known, for example, that Long Island Petroleum Company, which owned a great deal of property of which our sanctuary might have been a part, was sold to Yount-Lee in 1932.) In 1935 the Stanolind Oil and Gas Company, a subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company, paid \$41,803,030.48 for all Yount-Lee assets, making this transaction the third largest that had taken place in the United States to that time. Later, Stanolind Oil and Gas was sold to Pan American which later was sold to Amoco. Now we can navigate in more familiar waters. Between 1945 and 1978, Amoco sold various High Island lots to Louis and Hazel Smith.

Louis J. Smith (not related to the Smiths of Smith Oaks) was born in Milton, LA in 1912 and moved to High Island when he was nine years old. In 1930 he stopped in at a High Island grocery store and there met his future wife, Hazel Nelson. Hazel's brother-in-law owned the store, located on the west side of Highway 124 on the north edge of town. Hazel, born in Dayton, TX in 1914, moved with her sister to High Island in 1930 to run the family business and did so until her marriage to Louis Smith in 1934. Louis passed away just recently, in 1995 at age 83, leaving his wife Hazel, who now lives in Winnie, 3 children, 14 grandchildren and 27 great grandchildren. [Photo of Louis and Hazel Smith about here]

Louis was first an electrician, then roustabout, and ultimately a field supervisor in the High Island oil fields for Stanolind, Pan American, and Amoco. Louis and Hazel lived in a house across from what is now the entrance to the sanctuary and raised their family of three children. The barn on the property was built in the early 1960s. Louis kept cattle on the land until, as Hazel recalls, most died in what is a rare High Island event -- a snowstorm. In an attempt to keep warm, the cows walked into the surf and many drowned. Others that came ashore froze before they could be dried. Louis also enjoyed horse racing, and for a few years owned three or four race-track horses which he

raced in Crosby and other small Texas towns. Hazel hints that Louis had a mischievous streak when she tells this tale: *One time, he wanted to play a trick on our next door neighbor. He went into the woods with a record player that had some recording of a wild animal, a tiger or lion or something. He turned it up real loud and then went back home to wait. Sure enough, there soon came a frantic knocking at the door and there was our neighbor hollering "Wake up! Get out! There's a big lion in the woods!"*

Louis took tremendous pride in his woods, manicuring the property, planting pear and mulberry trees. There is an old hackberry tree on the property on which he carved his initials. Yet Louis left his mark in even more permanent ways. An enthusiastic host, he was delighted to have birders visit his property. Ted Eubanks, long-time friend of the Smiths and former President of the Houston Audubon Society, said *Spring would arrive and Louis would have everyone sign in at his book and Louis would greet people and showing them around. Louis was a wonderful man, just a wonderful man. Loved to have birders around. He had some wonderful stories, used to tell me great tales. For example, they had wooden shutters on their home. At night before bed, they would light citrulline candles inside the house and close every shutter to keep the mosquitoes from carrying them off. Imagine what that was like in the middle of summer.*

The woods were initially more extensive. Thick woodland existed where the hummingbird garden is now. Those trees were cut down for a victory garden in World War II. Several large oaks once existed in the opposite direction from the garden (to the left as you enter) which died when herbicide inadvertently escaped during a heavy rain. Louis also filled in a portion of Purkey's Pond, originally about twice as large. But Louis replanted as well, and around the mid 1970s he and Ted Eubanks planted from twigs the line of large mulberry trees which now runs in front of Purkey's Pond and the viewing stands.

Speaking of, have you ever wondered how "Purkey's Pond" got its name? The truth has never before been revealed. Leon Purkey, a Beaumont resident with more bird feeders than anybody else in town, was recruited by Bessie Cornelius to volunteer during spring migration at the sanctuaries. One year while Leon was working on the pond, Bessie conspiratorily said to him "This pond needs a name! Let's make a sign, you and me, and we'll name it Purkey's Pond, and if anybody asks, well, we'll say we don't know anything about it!" A wooden sign soon appeared and it has been Purkey's Pond ever since. And perhaps you've wondered how the small entrance fee came into being, the fee which, as I understand it, caused no little consternation among those who had heretofore gone birding for free. It went something like this. In 1987 Bessie said "Let's pass the hat." Purkey said "O. K." Bessie said "You've got the hat." Purkey said "Not me!" So Bessie passed Purkey's hat around figuring that if a skirmish ensued, Purkey's hat would catch the worst of it. That first year they raised \$13 and a fair amount of cain. Bessie has a pond, too. In 1994 the Houston Audubon Society dedicated the iris pond to the left as you enter the Scout Woods gate as "Bessie's Pond" in honor of her tireless commitment to the High Island sanctuaries. She has just recently celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and you'll likely see her at her usual place at the Scout Woods information booth this spring. Look for her there and for the history of Scout Woods to conclude in the next issue.

## History of the High Island Sanctuaries

by Sara M. Bettencourt

*This article concludes the history of Louis Smith Boy Scout Woods Bird Sanctuary*

As the previous article described, through the kindness and good graces of Louis and Hazel Smith, birders were afforded the privilege of descending upon the Smiths and their private property every spring. Adjacent to the Smith land was a ten-acre thicket of pecan, oak, mulberry, lantana and honeysuckle owned by Amoco. In 1972 Walter Crawford, a birder and Beaumont business man, approached Amoco with the idea of establishing a bird sanctuary there to be managed by Lamar University in Beaumont. Amoco agreed and gave Lamar University a 20-year lease on this grove, free of charge, "for the purpose of observing and studying birds and wildlife." Also open to the public, the sanctuary was used extensively by Lamar students for field trips, led by Dr. Jed Ramsey, professor of biology. Thus, this land, combined with Louis Smith's tract, was called not only "Scout Woods" and sometimes "Smith Woods" but also "Lamar Woods."

It is said that the pirate, Jean Lafitte, and his entire crew held parties in the big grove of trees at Boy Scout Woods. And somewhere, perhaps among the oaks, he buried gold and jewels. In Bolivar Peninsula lore, it has long been considered dangerous to hunt for Lafitte's treasure. The story goes that in the 1920s somebody made the attempt, ran away terrified, and the next day died. That didn't stop some from trying, however. Hazel Smith remembers that in the 1970s *four men and a woman set up a tent in the woods and stayed there for days. It was strange. I was kind of scared of them. They dug a deep hole. Sure they had found it. But nothing came of it and they went away.*

A unique treasure had already been discovered, however, and the Smiths, Lamar, Amoco, and the growing number of birders and naturalists had no doubt about it. In 1981 Louis and Hazel decided to sell their High Island land and move to Winnie. Louis contacted Ted Eubanks in hopes that a buyer could be located who would preserve their 4.5 acre tract as a bird sanctuary. Ted, along with Paul Nimmons, first approached the Outdoor Nature Club, but the Club was not able to assume the large capital outlay required. Ted and Paul then enlisted the assistance of Ken Burns, President of Houston Audubon, who enthusiastically endorsed the idea. These three plus Fred Collins and Pete Peltier presented a proposal to the Board of Directors for Houston Audubon to purchase the property. The Board took a leap of faith and said yes. It was a leap because never before had the Houston Audubon Society faced such an immense fund raising effort as was now required. Undeterred, its volunteers and others interested in conservation were determined to succeed. Auctions were organized, wine and cheese parties abounded, letters were written, newspapers contacted, raffle tickets, patches and t-shirts sold, and promotional fliers flew. Donations arrived from all over the United States and ranged from single dollar bills to checks in the thousands. This was an effort of over 400 hundred individuals, ornithology groups, and nature clubs focused on a single goal: this hidden treasure is a jewel forever worth protecting.

On October 16, 1982 the "Louis Smith Bird Sanctuary" was dedicated, and Houston Audubon Society's first coastal bird habitat preservation effort had succeeded. It took off from there. In 1982 both Amoco and Lamar University agreed to cancel the lease Lamar held on the 10 acres adjoining the Louis Smith Sanctuary, and Amoco granted Houston Audubon (HAS) a new 20-year lease on the property. As described in the Smith Oaks history, HAS purchased a 40% interest in Smith Oaks in 1988 and the remaining 60% in 1993. In 1992 HAS received several matching grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to fund construction of boardwalks, viewing decks, and other improvements. A donation from an anonymous HAS member provided the funds for the 1992 purchase of additional land surrounding the Sanctuaries for the preservation of wetlands, tree replanting, and parking lot construction. Ted Eubanks donated three of his High Island lots to HAS in 1993. In 1994 HAS was the beneficiary of an extraordinary gift. Amoco donated 155 acres surrounding the Scout Woods and Smith Oaks Sanctuaries, valued at over \$700,000, and followed that up in 1995 with a cash gift to assist in the restoration of the donated land.

The generosity and commitment to habitat preservation continue year after year from corporations, organizations, foundations, and individuals. Beginning in 1981 with a gem of only 4.5 acres, Houston Audubon today oversees a treasure of over 200. Our High Island sanctuaries, the people going before who loved this land, and the miracle that happens there every spring are nature's brilliant gift. Isn't it grand!

In preparing the Louis Smith Boy Scout Woods chapter of our sanctuary history, I am especially grateful to

Hazel (Mrs. Louis J.) Smith for her many kindnesses to me: patiently answering questions, welcoming phone calls and personal visits, and her fascinating stories. Just as important is the generous assistance of so many others. I salute and thank Doug Dearing, Real Estate Services, Amoco Corporation and Ted Eubanks, Bessie Cornelius, Winnie Burkett, Steve Gast, Sandi Hoover, and Gretchen Mueller.