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Friends for the Preservation of
Historic Landa Park by
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Photo: The Baetge House
Caption: The Baetge House at
Conservation Plaza
Courtesy of The New Braunfels
Conservation Society

The Reassembled Baetge House Is The Crown Jewel of Conservation Plaza

In the early 1960s, Interstate Highway 35 and the creation of Canyon Lake brought a wave of growth in our area. This growth brought changes. As a long-remembered refrain states; "down with the old, up with the new". This is exactly what happened. Many old buildings, including the Landa mansion across from the main plaza were eliminated. When the downtown icon, the Landa mansion, was torn down it brought an awakening and an awareness to the entire community of the importance of preservation.

A short time later Ferdinand Lindheimer's grand-daughter, Mrs. Sida Simon Martin, proposed that the Lindheimer home on Comal Avenue be given to an organization, if formed, to restore and preserve it. This proposal was the perfect additional inspiration. The New Braunfels Conservation Society was official June 4, 1964 and the Lindheimer property was its first acquisition.

Numerous buildings were offered to the Conservation Society, but each needed to be moved from its site. Included in the group was a two-story house built in 1852 by Carl Baetge 26 miles upstream from New Braunfels on "Demi-john Bend" on the Guadalupe River. In 1963 Canyon Dam was constructed 18 miles upstream from the Baetge House, creating a 10-mile lake behind it. The Corps of Engineers' survey revealed that the house was in the flood plain and needed to be removed.

In 1964 National Guard General Willard Hill thought he could salvage the materials in the house for fence posts and firewood. The demolition began with removal of the roof. As the work progressed General Hill realized the house was a historic relic and needed to be preserved. Fortunately, the New Braunfels Conservation Society had just been formed. Bill Dillen was its first president. Without hesitation he accepted the Baetge House for the Conservation Society. The difficulty was that there was no place to relocate the historic two-story house; consequently, it remained in its original location for 8 years until 1972. At that time Bill and Nan Dillen gave 3.5 acres to the Conservation Society on Church Hill Drive. On that site Conservation Plaza was formed with donated structures. This was the plan for the Baetge House as well.

After 8 years of exposure to the elements due to no roof, the floor deteriorated and the mud bricks in the fachwerk(framework) walls of the Baetge House desintegrated. The Cedar timbers endured. Due to the house height and remote location, the only way to move it was to disassemble it, relocate it, and reassemble it. Before this was done Bill Dillen persuaded a student, Lee Rahe, to sketch the timber set-up of each wall. Accompanying him were Danny Kingsolver and Wayne Froelich.

Initially the disassembled pieces were stored on John Karbach's ranch in his goat shed. The Karbach ranch was located on Highway 306, 5 miles from Gruene. The ranch is now River Oaks subdivision.

In 1975 local historian and teacher Barron Schlameus began the reassemble of the Baetge House. Barron moved to New Braunfels in 1964 to teach history at New Braunfels Jr. High. The

Conservation Society had just been formed. Barron soon joined and helped with restoration of the Lindheimer home. He frequently heard about the Baetge House from Bill Dillen and later from Edward Dedeke who followed as president of the organization. After hearing so much about it, Barron made a point to visit the Baetge House while it was on its initial site at Demi-john Bend. He was quite impressed and agreed it needed to be saved.

In 1973 Barron Schlameus became president of the Conservation Society. He began the reassembly of the Baetge House at Conservation Plaza two years later. Initially contractor Ed Nolte was hired to help along with his young employee, Ron Schmidt who became intrigued with fachwerk construction and eventually began his own company, Texas Heritage Construction that now does all construction for Conservation Society. (Schmidt's Texas Heritage Construction also restored the historic Gazebo in Landa Park.)

As the Baetge House project continued Barron was assisted by students from New Braunfels High School Building Trades class-Roger Brinkkoeter, Tracy Kensing, Dick Langford, Davis Vestal, and Ricky Zoeller. In addition Barron found the sketches made by Lee Rahe plus the Roman numerals chiseled into each cedar timber during the initial construction to be exceptional guides for reassembling the house structure.

Once again, the reassembled Baetge House has its 6 rooms downstairs and 3 bedrooms upstairs. The fachwerk house made with adobe (sundried) bricks has two interior fireplaces. The original floor, destroyed by exposure, is replaced by the floor from the 1905 Oppenheimer Bank building in San Antonio with floor boards 13 inches wide and 2 inches thick that extend the full length of the room. The front doors are original including the hand-forged iron hinges. The railings and balusters on the upstairs balcony are original cedar.

Professional contractors put on the siding and otherwise finished the house exterior. The outdoor special projects were completed by Barron Schlameus with stones purchased from Edward Dedeke for a ramp in the rear of the house in addition to planting areas and a walkway in front of the house.

The Tour of Homes September, 1981 was the initial showing of the reassembled, restored and decorated Baetge House in Conservation Plaza. Nan and Bill Dillen spent weeks decorating the interior furnished with former Baetge possessions or items from Germany, New Braunfels, or Texas. It was and remains a delightful and meaningful sight to see.

During the Tour of Homes Roland Baetge, the family historian, and his sisters served as host and hostesses to their ancestral home. Barron Schlameus, was seated in the front parlor, and also welcomed guests to the Baetge House while playing a beautiful zither given to him by Walter Faust. The zither now has a permanent and special place at Conservation Plaza- that's a tale for another day.

Barron Schlameus spent over 5 years guiding the reassembly of the restored Baetge house. He retired from teaching in 1987 and retired from the Naval Reserve in 1985 with the rank of full Commander.

And what is the story about the original owners of the Baetge House? We'll introduce you to that most interesting family and their history in our next column.

Our thanks to Director of Conservation Society Martha Rehler and historian Barron Schlameus for their assistance with information for this column.

the Conservation Society.

This column is based on the book New Braunfels' Historic Landa Park, Its Springs and Its People by Rosemarie Leissner Gregory and Arlene Krueger Seales. For more information visit www.friendsforlandapark.org and Facebook. To obtain a book, call Jo Heideman @ 830.625.3186.