

REMEMBER THE SWIMMING PIGS! INTERPRETING THE DWINDLING
REMAINS OF AQUARENA SPRINGS

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to the people who kept me sane during the many hours of planning, researching, and writing. To my loving family, thank you for your encouraging words and warm embraces. To my deceased ancestors, thank you for praying for me and keeping me motivated. To God, thank you for blessing me with the ability to pursue a higher education.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A SITE WORTHY OF INTERPRETATION

The San Marcos Springs have been the lifeblood for the land encompassing modern Hays County for over ten thousand years and continue to provide the surrounding community with both life sustaining water and recreational opportunities. Initially inhabited by members of various Indigenous cultures, including bands of Paleo-Indians, and the more recent Coahuiltecan, and Tonkawa tribes, each of whom resided in the area during different periods, the springs have seen numerous changes throughout the centuries. From the early colonization efforts of the Spanish friars of the late 18th century to its accession as a place for aquatic research under Southwest Texas State University (Texas State University as of 2003) in 1994, the San Marcos Springs continue to serve as a witness to Texas history.¹

Despite each of these eras being significant in the development of the San Marcos community, they are not sufficiently preserved or interpreted for the public by the University, which is responsible for the management of the springs and surrounding property. While there is some attempt to interpret the Indigenous history of the site, another, more recent era of San Marcos Spring history is severely underrepresented by the University despite its having brought over a million visitors to central Texas during its peak in the mid twentieth century.² More than just the name of a major street in town, Aquarena Springs was both a state and nationally known amusement park that encompassed the lands

¹ Gunnar Brune, "San Marcos Springs," *Handbook of Texas Online*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/san-marcos-springs>; "Name History," History and Traditions, Texas State University, Accessed April 12, 2023.

² "Aquarena Launches Expansion; Expects Record Crowd in 1956," *San Marcos Record*, December 9, 1955.

surrounding Spring Lake from 1950 to 1996. Its influence on Texas tourism, connection with various periods of San Marcos history, and ability to captivate a national audience make it a site worthy of remembrance.

Beginning with the Spring Lake Park Hotel, opened by local entrepreneur A.B. Rogers in April of 1929, the Rogers family would continue developing the land surrounding the springs when son Paul Rogers created Aquarena in 1950, an entertainment staple of Texas of the mid-20th century. Drawn by swimming pigs, Aquamaids, pseudo historical attractions, and famous glass bottom boat tours, among other popular features, families from across Texas and the nation flocked to San Marcos to enjoy the amusement around the springs. The park continued to entertain young and old alike for nearly five decades until it began to encounter financial hardship in the late 1970s.³

Despite the park's popularity, as interstate travel became more accessible and other entertainment competitors opened with excellent marketing campaigns, Aquarena's visitation began to dwindle. In 1985 the park underwent a management change before Southwest Texas State University purchased the land in 1994.⁴ Despite the University's attempt to continue operating the for-profit park, Aquarena's continued financial losses sealed its fate. In 1996 the University announced that the theme park would be permanently closed in favor of undertaking a restoration project aimed at returning the lands to their natural condition and promoting conservation education.⁵

³ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 7 – 8.

⁴ Acquisition of Aquarena, April 22, 1985, Aquarena Springs Records, 80.300, Texas State University Libraries, San Marcos, TX.

⁵ Scott Maier, "Aquarena: Commercial use out; educational use is in," *San Marcos Daily Record*, February 25, 1996.

With help from various federal, state, and local agencies, the University converted Aquarena Springs into the Aquarena Center, which later became the River Systems Institute in 2005, and finally the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment in 2012.⁶ Today, it continues to serve as a place of education, recreation, and research to further preserve the fragile ecosystem around the San Marcos Springs. Although this growing emphasis on river conservation has led to many success stories including the preservation of the threatened Texas wild rice, American eel, and blind salamander, as well as the resurgence of the river's beaver population, its success has come with a cost.

While the University continues to advocate for research, innovation, and leadership in the conservation of the San Marcos River environment, it has neglected the importance of Aquarena Springs on the history and culture of the San Marcos community. In 2012 the school would demolish the park's most iconic features from the landscape, thus symbolically and literally removing the park's history from Spring Lake.⁷ While some Aquarena era structures have survived, a majority of those that remain are hidden behind dense overgrowth and a chain link fence. Quietly resting high above the clear water of Spring Lake, they represent the final pieces of what was once the most well-known theme park in Texas.

Although Aquarena Springs was responsible for environmental damage, misconstrued history, exploitation of animals, and discrimination, it is still an important aspect of local, state, and national history that deserves to be interpreted. Its popularity bolstered the growth of San Marcos, prompted the creation of the Texas Tourist

⁶ Jason Crouch, "Changes in Ownership," *History of Spring Lake*, Texas State University, University Archives, <https://exhibits.library.txstate.edu/univarchives/exhibits/show/aqua/changes-in-ownership>.

⁷ Rachel Sanborn (San Marcos River Foundation), email message to author, February 17, 2023.

Development agency (today the Tourism Division of the Commerce Department), and provided entertainment for people around the nation through its highly publicized performers. This project demonstrates the significance of the amusement park while also providing the University with suggestions on how it can preserve and present the history of Aquarena.

Of course, while it may not be feasible to preserve the remaining unused physical structures of the park, it is through public history that alternative preservation and interpretive methods can be developed. Unlike academic historians who work to enhance a body of historiographical literature, public historians are responsible for putting history to work in the world.⁸ While the National Council on Public History (NCPH) gives this simple definition, it acknowledges that the field continues to evolve and so too do the methods it employs. While there are many ways in which history can be put to work in the world, many of these tactics involve interpretation.⁹

This practice puts history to work by making it digestible for non-academic minds. To interpret history is to provide context and meaning to a topic in a way that engages the audience through provocation of thought and explanation of connections. By doing this, moments of history long removed from public memory can be revived. Although traces of Aquarena Springs are still very much present in the San Marcos community, as time moves on the park's history risks falling further into obscurity because it is not properly interpreted. This thesis hopes to correct this problem by advocating for the preservation of the memory of Aquarena through public displays of interpretation.

⁸ "About the Field: How Do We Define Public History?," About the Field, National Council on Public History, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>.

⁹ Isabel Gonzalez, "Intro to Public History Term Paper," Texas State University, December 5, 2021, 1.

Although the University does not properly appreciate or interpret the history of Aquarena Springs, much of the San Marcos community remains proud of the town's connection to the former theme park. Since 2021 San Marcos has been the "official" mermaid capital of Texas due to the role of Aquamaids in the city's history.¹⁰ Although the adoption of mermaids as the town's symbol is a direct reference to Aquarena Springs which, during its later years included finned performers in the Submarine Theatre, this connection is not universally recognized. It is the lack of interpretation of the park that is causing its memory to fade from the public.

In an informal survey at the Mermaid Capital of Texas Festival in San Marcos, the author found that 58% of participants did not recognize the connection between the town's mermaid identity and Aquarena Springs.¹¹ Considering the festival's goal is to celebrate the history of San Marcos and promote the protection of the river, this number is concerning. Fortunately, it is possible to correct this through the education of San Marcos visitors and citizens on the history of Aquarena Springs. Through literature, oral histories, public historical displays, and advocacy, this project will provide the University with the tools needed to properly and publicly interpret the history of one of Texas' most famous defunct theme parks.

The first chapter provides a detailed overview of the Aquarena Springs era of Spring Lake's history from 1947 to 1996. In addition, this section also highlights the history of the site prior to its development by the Rogers family, which the second chapter discusses further. In this section, the actual pre-Aquarena history of Spring Lake and the

¹⁰ Designating San Marcos as the official Mermaid Capital of Texas for a 10-year period beginning in 2021, Texas S. Res. 9, 87th Leg., *Texas Legislature Online*, (May 24, 2021): SCR 9.

¹¹ Isabel Gonzalez, "Mermaid Capitol of Texas Festival Survey," (San Marcos: Texas State University), 2023.

American frontier are compared to the attempts at public history found in the park during its operational years, that misrepresented frontier culture, exploited animals and natural resources, and utilized racial stereotypes for the purpose of entertainment. After relating the “full picture” of Aquarena’s history, the final chapter discusses ways in which the University could interpret this story utilizing the current infrastructure and educational features at the Meadows Center.

Despite the former national fame of the park, there are few professional sources on Aquarena Springs, thus this project relies heavily on the interpretation of primary sources. These include oral histories, photographs, home videos, and period articles featured in *The San Marcos (Daily) Record*, all of which are utilized to capture the complex history of the park found in the first and second chapters. Although the subject of Aquarena lacks an academic body of literature, interpretation, and public history, I discovered a large collection of resources, some of which are consulted for this project. In piecing these all together for interpretive planning, the final chapter’s suggestions draw inspiration from notable public history institutions and professionals, as well as from site visits to related parks and my personal experience in the field of interpretation.

Ultimately, while it is understood that a researched academic project such as this may have little impact on the public’s knowledge of the park, its purpose is to serve as an advocate for the preservation of the park’s dwindling memory through interpretation to the public. Texas State University is an accredited institution that continues to lead the academic world in research and innovation, and it can further this mission through historic preservation. If done properly, the interpretation of Aquarena Springs can serve as an example to other universities that own significant historic properties or facilities. By

acknowledging the era of Spring Lake that does not fit within the school's professional presentation, Texas State University would demonstrate to the community that it respects the town's quirky past and is working to build a better relationship with its home city for the future.

Aquarena Springs represents a significant piece of San Marcos history that is fading from public memory. As the population of visitors who were able to experience this park during its operating years continues to age, the importance of providing permanent physical interpretation of the site increases. Because these invaluable perspectives are still available for consultation, this is the time to begin the proper preservation and interpretation of Aquarena. By utilizing the history included in this project as well as the proposed interpretative ideas, its memory will continue to live on years after the last witnesses of Paul Roger's creation pass away.

II. A SWIM THROUGH TIME: THE HISTORY OF AQUARENA

The history of Spring Lake did not begin with the creation of Aquarena Springs. Being much older than the introduction of swimming pigs, the history of the site spans millennia and is intertwined with the ever-clear waters that flow out of the earth. Since its formation, the 75 miles of flowing water have continued to provide recreational opportunities and life sustaining hydration to the community for over 13,000 years.¹² Rising from the Edwards Aquifer through the San Marcos Springs, the San Marcos River has inspired travelers for centuries with its consistent 72°F and continual flow of clean, clear water. Today the springs, which now feed a body of water known as Spring Lake, are surrounded by a community of nearly 70,000 people, making it a highly revered site that is central to the identity of San Marcos, Texas, its history, and its development.¹³

With a history rooted in some of the earliest Indigenous North American populations, the lifegiving springs have seen dozens of cultures utilize its waters and accompanying landscape. The extensive resume of these waters is impressive, and includes providing drinking water to mammoths, mastodons, and bison, nourishing Indigenous communities, serving as the location for unsuccessful Franciscan missions and an equally unsuccessful Spanish settlement, providing a place of rest for travelers and cattle drivers, powering mills, and eventually being the site of popular theme park from 1947 – 1996 that was home to shows and attractions that are now distant memories. Although all of these

¹² Jason Crouch, “Prehistory,” *History of Spring Lake*, Texas State University, University Archives, <https://exhibits.library.txstate.edu/univarchives/exhibits/show/aqua/prehistory>.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, “Quick Facts: San Marcos city, Texas,” July 1, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/sanmarcocitytexas>.

impressive feats are no doubt important, it is perhaps the last use that truly fixed the springs and its surrounding community in the public's memory.¹⁴

While no longer home to shows and attractions, the legacy of this entertainment hub is still prominent in the San Marcos community. In fact, it is because of this era of springs history that the town was dubbed the official "Mermaid Capital of Texas" in 2021 by Texas lawmakers, and now proudly displays colorful statues and murals of the mythical aquatic maidens around the community.¹⁵ Of course, true mermaids have never inhabited the waters of the springs however, a population of aquatic women were known to utilize the lake as a place to mystify their audiences. These performers, known as Aquamaids, were accompanied by underwater clowns, schools of freshwater fish, and a famous swimming pig named Ralph, as they headlined the entertainment offered by Aquarena Springs, one of Texas' most famous defunct amusement parks.

Along with the underwater shows of Spring Lake, the park was home to numerous unique features that helped the San Marcos attraction stand out among the competition of its era. These included recreated "historical" sites, exotic gardens, an underwater glass elevator, and even basketball playing chickens, to name a few. Unfortunately, the unique elements of the park were not alluring enough to outlast a new wave of thrill-ride providing competitors and growing ability for Americans to travel out of the state, and in 1996 the park officially closed its doors just two years after being acquired by Southwest Texas State University. Despite the physical park no longer standing due to the University's push to remove nearly all trace of the site beginning in 2012, Aquarena Springs is still perhaps the

¹⁴ Gunnar Brune, "San Marcos Springs," *Handbook of Texas Online*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/san-marcos-springs>.

¹⁵ Designating San Marcos as the official Mermaid Capital of Texas for a 10-year period beginning in 2021, Texas S. Res. 9, 87th Leg., *Texas Legislature Online*, (May 24, 2021): SCR 9.

most significant piece of San Marcos' history due to its continued influence on the town's identity.¹⁶

Aside from the mermaid statues and the efforts of members of the Indigenous community, who educate the public on their ancestors through advocacy and public events such as the annual Sacred Springs Powwow, other aspects of Spring Lake history are not publicly recognized throughout the town. There is little interpretation found in San Marcos that discusses its days under the Spanish crown, Mexico, or the Republic of Texas, despite these eras being significant. The uniqueness of Aquarena, however, is memorialized through public art and events, and although it is disappearing from public memory, the park continues to play a role in the development of the town's identity, decades after being officially closed. It is because of this that Aquarena deserves to be properly interpreted.

Despite the Aquarena Springs era being the most publicly acknowledged period of San Marcos history, people have inhabited the lands surrounding the San Marcos Springs for as long as 13,500 years. The earliest people believed to have inhabited the springs come from the Clovis culture, a group many historians and anthropologists say were the first humans to inhabit the New World.¹⁷ Although not much is known about these Paleo-Indians since they did not keep written records, academics agree that they were hunter-gatherers who created stone tools and hunted megafauna such as mammoths, mastodons,

¹⁶ "Reliving the Magic: Aquarena: Film takes viewers back to heyday of Ralph, mermaids," *San Marcos Daily Record*, August 1, 2012.

¹⁷ Jennifer Raff, "Journey into the Americas," *Scientific American* 324 (5): 26–33, May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3JQHTKa>.

and the early bison ancestors.¹⁸ In central Texas, these nomadic peoples utilized the springs as a source of water and camp grounds, as they followed the migrating herds.¹⁹

The first archaeological excavations of Spring Lake took place in 1979, when Aquarena Springs was still operational, under the direction of Southern Methodist University professor and archaeologist Dr. Joel L. Shiner. During this project, Shiner and his team “conducted intensive and painstaking excavations” of several sites around Spring Lake, which included meticulous underwater projects that uncovered items spanning the Paleoindian and Archaic periods.²⁰ These archaeologists found remains and artifacts that include mammoth and mastodon teeth, bison bones, projectile points, and various tools which produced “abundant evidence” of human occupation. With his findings, Shiner suggested that due to the large availability of food, the inhabitants of the San Marcos Springs were semi-sedentary, a lifestyle not yet abundantly practiced among the New World populations at the time.²¹

Since it would not be until centuries later that Indigenous communities such as the Coahuiltecan and Tonkawa would begin to domesticate staple crops including squash and corn, the predominate culture of the early North and South Americans was mostly nomadic. Because of this, the suggestion that the Clovis peoples around the San Marcos Springs were partially sedentary sparks much interest and debate, however considering the purity of the

¹⁸ “Paleo Indian Culture,” Ocmulgee Mounds, National Park Service, January 10, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/ocmu/learn/historyculture/paleo-indian-culture.htm>.

¹⁹ Joel L. Shiner, “Spring Lake Site,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, April 2, 2009, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/spring-lake-site>.

²⁰ Ronald K Wetherington, “Obituary: Joel L. Shiner, 1919-1988,” *American Antiquity* 54, no. 4 (1989): 688–90.

²¹ David L. Nickels, C. Britt Bousman, and James E. Barrera, *Archaeological Testing at San Marcos Springs (41HY160) for the Texas River [s] Center, Texas, Hays County, Texas*, Archaeological Studies Report: No. 13. Center for Archaeological Studies, (San Marcos: Texas State University, 2010).

water, it is a fair speculation.²² With relatively warm water that consistently flows year-round, the San Marcos Springs provided these communities with a source of vegetation and wildlife that could sustain them for long periods of time. Naturally, it makes sense to suggest that a secure source of both food and water would be enough to entice a traditionally nomadic group of people to become stationary, even if only temporarily.²³

Along with this notion however, Shiner goes further and suggests in a 1983 essay published in anthropological journal *Plains Anthropologist*, that there could, in fact, be another reason for early settlement along the San Marcos Springs.²⁴ This reason, like that of a reliable source of food and water, is one that has spanned the history of Spring Lake and continues to play a role in its usage and development. Shiner argues that the aesthetic nature of the site drew the people of early Indigenous cultures to the springs. While we cannot say for certain whether the peoples of the Clovis culture valued the springs for their sheer beauty, we do know that the San Marcos Springs have been important to various populations for more than just its provision of clean water.

Following the Paleo-Indian peoples, several modern era groups of Native Americans would settle around the San Marcos Springs. Like their Clovis ancestors, these groups utilized the flowing water as a place of settlement and nourishment since the area attracted many species of animals and provided suitable soil for agriculture. To the Tonkawa Indians the San Marcos Springs were known as Canocanayesatetlo, which means “warm water,” though many current residents of San Marcos hardly call 72°F warm. To

²² Colin G. Calloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, “American History Before Columbus,” (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016), 14 – 16.

²³ David L. Nickels, *Archaeological Testing at San Marcos Springs (41HY160) for the Texas River [s] Center, Texas, Hays County, Texas*, “Previous Research and Potential for Buried Sites,” 26.

²⁴ Joel, L. Shiner, “Large Springs and Early American Indians,” *Plains Anthropologist*, (Volume 28, no.99), February 1983.

the Coahuilteicans, they are known as the sacred springs because it is believed this is where their ancestors rose to the current sphere of existence from the underworld.²⁵ While occupying the lands around the springs over 800 years ago, these groups practiced small scale agriculture, a practice proven to be unsuccessful by other Tonkawa bands. In addition to agricultural activities, they also sustained themselves on the abundant wildlife that flourished around the water.²⁶

Upon the arrival of the Spanish to the New World in the late 15th century, the horse would be introduced to the Indigenous populations of the Americas, and soon new groups migrated to central Texas and began to utilize the San Marcos Springs.²⁷ By the 18th century both the Comanche and Lipan tribes, known for their skills on horseback and violence towards migrating Europeans and native Texas tribes, had a known presence in the area after being pushed out of their traditional territories by migrating Europeans.²⁸ While this meant the continuation of the springs serving as a place of community and nourishment for the native peoples of Central Texas, it also meant devastation for the Tonkawa and Coahuiltecan people.

Before the creation of Spring Lake dam in 1849, the San Marcos Springs flowed freely from their underground origins and were said to burst into the air like the manmade fountains of ancient Rome.²⁹ To the original Indigenous peoples, the San Marcos Springs were both a place of beauty and sacrality and continue to serve these communities as a site

²⁵ Maria Rocha, Interview with author, February 18, 2023.

²⁶ Jeffery D. Carlisle, "Tonkawa Indians," *Handbook of Texas Online*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/tonkawa-indians>; Gunnar Brune, "San Marcos Springs," *Handbook of Texas Online*

²⁷ Gunnar Brune, "San Marcos Springs," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

²⁸ "American Indians," Campfire Stories, Bullock Museum, Accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/campfire-stories/american-indians>.

²⁹ Maria Rocha, Interview with author.

of worship and thanksgiving. To the incoming Spaniard and Anglo settlers however, the springs were unlike anything they had seen before. Though they were known well to the Indigenous Texas tribes, the San Marcos Springs were a spectacle to behold when the first Europeans encountered them.

Although initially thought that Alonso de León, who explored Texas in 1689, was the first European to come across the springs, historians now speculate that the first Europeans to have seen the springs were part of the 1709 Espinosa-Olivares-Aguirre Expedition, though they have yet to find any concrete evidence of this.³⁰ Like the Indigenous cultures of central and south Texas, the San Marcos Springs were of religious significance to the Spanish Catholics, though not in the same respect. To the Catholic friars, the bubbling springs themselves were not of religious importance, but rather a noteworthy feature of the site in which they would base a newly relocated mission system.

In 1755 under the direction of commander Pedro de Rábago y Teran, two missions and a presidio from the San Xavier system along the San Gabriel River were relocated to the San Marcos River.³¹ Originally founded in 1747, the lack of supplies, unhealthy conditions, drought, and raids by members of the Lipan Apache caused the system to be moved south to the San Marcos Springs. According to the *Handbook of Texas Online* entry for the San Xavier Missions, during its time at the San Marcos River, the missionaries brought 1,000 Lipan peoples into the community.³² Despite the large population, availability of clean water and sustainable nutrition, the friars wanted to move the system

³⁰ Gunnar Brune, "San Marcos Springs," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

³¹ Donald E. Chipman and Harriett Denise Joseph, "Spanish Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/spanish-texas>

³² Joan E. Supplee, "San Xavier Missions," *Handbook of Texas Online*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/san-xavier-missions>.

into Lipan territory and were granted permission to transfer neophytes (recent converts) to the San Antonio and the failing San Saba mission systems.³³

It would not be until 1808 that another attempt at Spanish communal development would take place in San Marcos. During this year, 82 Spanish colonists would try to create a small Spanish village at the intersection of the Camino Real de los Tejas, a well-established trail that “promoted trade and movement between the colonial territories of Spain and France,” and the San Marcos River. Chartered by Spain to halt incoming U.S. Anglo settlers migrating from the newly obtained lands of the Louisiana-Purchase, San Marcos de Neve relied on cattle ranching and other agricultural ventures to fund the village’s operations.³⁴ Unfortunately, despite being located on lands excellent for agriculture, this second attempt at establishing a permanent Spanish community would once again fail.³⁵

Four years after initially being established, the people of San Marcos de Neve would abandon their short-lived home due to unfriendly relations with the neighboring Tonkawa, Comanche, and Tawakoni tribes, a devastating flood, and a year of crop failure.³⁶ Once again, only the Indigenous peoples of Texas had been able to establish a permanent residence around the sacred springs of the San Marcos River. This domination however would not last due to the ever-encroaching United States and the growing popularity of the

³³ “San Xavier Missions (San Ildefonso, San Xavier, and Candelaria) -- Spanish Colonial Missions of the Southwest Travel Itinerary,” Spanish Missions/Misiones Españolas, National Park Service, April 15, 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/travelspanishmissions/san-xavier-missions-san-ildefonso-san-xavier-and-candelaria.htm>.

³⁴ Steven Edward Gonzales, “History of El Camino Real de los Tejas,” Trail History, El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Association, Accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.elcaminorealdelostejas.org/trail-history/>.

³⁵ Bradley Folsom, “San Marcos de Neve,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, May 24, 2011, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/san-marcos-de-neve>.

³⁶ Christopher E. Horrell, “Drawing Linkages between Global and Local Processes: Archaeological Investigations of Villa San Marcos de Neve, a Spanish Colonial Town on the Frontier,” 1999.

belief in “manifest destiny.” Like many others in the New World, the Natives peoples of Texas would soon be slaughtered or removed from their ancestral home in favor of European and U.S. colonization.

Despite their ancestral connections to San Marcos, the significant presence of Coahuiltecan and Tonkawa groups would not survive into the era of Aquarena Springs. Conflict with the Lipan and Comanche brought about violence, and the incoming migrations of European and American settlers not only brought horses and technology, but diseases, western ideologies, and warfare that sought to “domesticate” Texas’ original peoples. In 1884, the Tonkawa tribe was removed from Fort Griffin, Texas and in 1885 surviving members were placed on a reservation in Indian Territory (modern day Oklahoma).³⁷ While there is no evidence of a mass expulsion of the Coahuiltecan people, historians believe that their populations declined due to exposure to deadly European diseases and assimilation into the Spanish culture taught in the south Texas mission systems.³⁸ It would not be until over a century later that the descendants of these communities could return to these historic lands and honor their ancestors through repatriation, education, advocacy, and an annual powwow hosted by the Indigenous Cultures Institute.³⁹

The next few decades would bring about much change to the Texas political landscape. Less than one decade after the failed San Xavier mission system departed the land around Spring Lake, Mexico would declare independence from Spain in 1810 bringing

³⁷ “Tribal History,” Language and Culture, Tonkawa Tribe, Accessed March 27, 2023, <https://tonkawatribe.com/language-culture/history/>.

³⁸ James Mooney, "Pakawá Indians," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11402a.htm>.

³⁹ Indigenous Cultures Institute, “About Sacred Springs Powwow,” Sacred Springs Powwow, <https://www.sspowwow.com/>.

with it the water of the San Marcos Springs.⁴⁰ Then, not even three decades later in 1836 Texas would win its independence from Mexico after intense fighting led by White settlers during the Texas Revolution. After a brief run as an independent nation, in 1845 Texas would become the 28th state to join the union, which contributed to the beginning of the nearly two year-long Mexican American War that would finally solidify the Rio Grande as the Texas – Mexico border in 1848. Though still about a century away from the creation of Aquarena Springs, the next significant players in the game of springs settlement would soon arrive.

In March of 1848, just one month after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, State Senator and former Vice President of the Republic of Texas Edward Burleson introduced and successfully passed legislation in the Texas legislative that created Hays County, the home of the San Marcos Springs.⁴¹ Prior to this achievement, Burleson had gathered a popular reputation for himself as a famed Texas Revolutionary veteran and had purchased the land and springs that formed the headwaters of the San Marcos River.⁴² It was this acquisition of land that would take the San Marcos Springs, once described by journalist and Texas pioneer George Wilkins Kendall as “a fountain head” of the “clear, cool, and most delicious water,” and bury them beneath a lake of their own discharge when Burleson constructed a dam in 1849.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Mexican Independence,” Celebrating Hispanic Heritage, “Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Accessed March 28, 2023, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/celebrating-hispanic-heritage-growth-events/mexican-independence>.

⁴¹ Jim Green, “Early County Government was Simple and Close to the People,” in *Celebrate 150! San Marcos, Texas Sesquicentennial 1851 – 2001*, (San Marcos: The Daily Record and The Free Press, March 1, 2001), 4B, <https://www.sanmarcostx.gov/DocumentCenter/View/3183/150-Years-in-San-Marcos-PDF>.

⁴² Jason Crouch, “The Republic of Texas and Vice President Edward Burleson,” *History of Spring Lake*.

⁴³ George Wilkins Kendall, “A Tour Through Texas,” *Narrative of the Texas Santa Fé Expedition*, (London: Wiley & Putnam, 1844), 38; Albert S. McGehee, *A River Reflects on Pepper’s Past: Fact, Lore, Legend about the San Marcos River, the Mill Tract, & the Old Icehouse*, (San Marcos: Pepper’s at the Falls, 1982).

Of course, while covering the once arial springs under its own water was quite devastating to both the historical and aesthetic value of the San Marcos, Burleson was not without his reasoning. Though not yet an official city, the community surrounding the San Marcos continued to attract more residents and thus the need for lumber, food, and water increased. To help alleviate this problem and grow his finances, Burleson would construct a grist mill and sawmill on his land, beginning the industrial history of the San Marcos Mill Tract.⁴⁴ Two years later in 1851, Burleson would go on to help formally establish the town of San Marcos, before passing away that same year.⁴⁵

During its formative years, San Marcos was an agricultural city, and like its southern neighbors relied on enslaved people's labor to ensure production. While there were freed Black people living in Texas during this time, there are no records that any of these individuals lived in Hays County.⁴⁶ Before Burleson died, he was known as one of the first substantial landowners in what would become the Hays County Stringtown, a small former Anglo-American settlement southwest of San Marcos where a "string" of White owned farms lined the road leading to New Braunfels.⁴⁷ Here families brought enslaved people to work the land, who are believed by some to be among the original Black residents in the county, although this is not proven.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Jim Green, "What Was Where in San Marcos in the 1850s? The Young Town as Seen Through a Stagecoach Window," in *Celebrate 150! San Marcos, Texas Sesquicentennial 1851 – 2001*, 30B.

⁴⁵ Helen Burleson Kelso, "Burleson, Edward," *Handbook of Texas Online*, April 8, 2015, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/burleson-edward>.

⁴⁶ Juan R. Palomo and Ollie W. Giles, "As slaves, as free people, blacks faced harsh life," in *Celebrate 150! San Marcos, Texas Sesquicentennial 1851 – 2001*, 7B – 8B.

⁴⁷ Al Lowman, "Stringtown, TX (Hays County)," *Handbook of Texas Online*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/stringtown-tx-hays-county>.

⁴⁸ Hill Rylander, "The Georgia Settlement: Stringtown is just a memory today," in *Celebrate 150! San Marcos, Texas Sesquicentennial 1851 – 2001*, 6B.

Like Stringtown, San Marcos proper relied on enslaved labor to keep the agricultural economy thriving. General Burleson, along with numerous other prominent families in the community owned enslaved peoples who were responsible for the success of the local cotton industry, which thrived until the Great Depression when wool replaced it as the dominate agricultural export.⁴⁹ The agricultural industry of the town would continue the success of Burleson’s mill tract which would continue to operate at Spring Lake until decades after his death, when industrialization began to make its way into the town.⁵⁰

During the next few years, the dry land around the newly formed Spring Lake would change hands several times before finally being sold to the San Marcos Water Company, which in 1883 operated a sawmill and ice factory on the tract.⁵¹ In 1909, the land changed hands once again, this time to the San Marcos Utilities Company, which had recently been formed after a merger of the local water, electrical, and sewage plants. Here, Southland Ice Corporation, the original parent company of Reddy Ice, would continue to operate adjacent to the utility plant which would be purchased by Texas Power and Light (TPL) in the 1920s.⁵²

And now the intricate, and at times confusing history of the San Marcos Springs began, leading to the introduction of Aquamaids and swimming pigs to Spring Lake. The

⁴⁹ “History of the Old Mill,” History, The Old Mill Business Park, Accessed March 28, 2023, <https://www.oldmillproperties.com/history>.

⁵⁰ The Hays County Abstract Company, *Abstract of Title to A.B. Rogers in Hays County, Texas: Prepared for San Marcos Utilities Co.*, (San Marcos: Hays County Abstract Co., n.d.), <https://exhibits.library.txstate.edu/univarchives/exhibits/show/aqua/the-republic-and-vice-president/the-mill-tract>.

⁵¹ “Edward R. Burleson,” *Exploring Spring Lake: the Archaeology and Culture of One of America's Oldest Communities*, Texas State University 2003, <https://www.springlakearchaeology.txst.edu/Archaeology-of-Spring-Lake/history/settlement/burleson.html>.

⁵² Bettina Bovall, “No More Ice Cubes: Technology Closed SM Ice House,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, July 1, 1976.

man responsible for the introduction of the tourist industry to San Marcos would be the next to purchase Spring Lake and its surrounding landscape, the very land that would later be home to a thriving theme park. This acquisition by A.B. (Arthur Birch) Rogers in 1926 would be the first step in making San Marcos unique. Though already a place of historical significance, the changes to Spring Lake brought about by Rogers finally began the story of Aquarena Springs, Texas' most famous defunct amusement park.

Of course, to understand the creation of the iconic theme park, one must first understand A.B. Rogers, the park's grandfather. A Waxahachie, Texas native, as a child he moved with his family to San Marcos where he attended the Coronal Institute of San Marcos, a coeducational school that also provided military training to boys.⁵³ In 1896 he married Irene Swift, and together the couple had four children including Paul Rogers, the father of Aquarena.⁵⁴ A year after his marriage, the elder Rogers would begin his San Marcos business endeavors by establishing a furniture and coffin business, which eventually became the Undertakers and Furniture store, after he obtained his embalmer's license in 1903.⁵⁵

Though not a San Marcos native, Rogers was an influential member of the San Marcos community. During his life, he was an active parishioner of the 1st Presbyterian Church of San Marcos, where he campaigned for the construction of a new building. Along with his involvement in his church, he was also a member of the Elks Club, Rotary Club, and Masonic Orders. In addition to these memberships, Rogers was a board member and

⁵³ Nancy Young, "Coronal Institute," *Handbook of Texas Online*, December 1, 1994, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/coronal-institute>.

⁵⁴ Tula Townsend Wyatt, "Rogers, Arthur Birch," *Handbook of Texas Online*, January 26, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/rogers-arthur-birch>.

⁵⁵ Jason Crouch, "A.B. Rogers, Entrepreneur," *History of Spring Lake*.

the 1931 President of the San Marcos Chamber of Commerce and the President of the Hays County Fair Association, which was active in the 1920s.⁵⁶ Despite this impressive resume, to the town he was known more as “Mr. Tourist” than “Mr. Civic Leader.” This title would be given to him for his crucial influence on San Marcos’ tourist industry, which is what truly made the town stand out among its neighboring cities.

As he ran the Undertakers and Furniture store, Rogers began his recreational business career when he started to purchase property along the San Marcos River. With these acquired lands, in 1912 he opened Rogers Park, also known as the Rogers River Resort, which was among the first swimming parks in Texas, and is still operated as Rio Vista Park just Southeast of downtown San Marcos.⁵⁷ Though not as grand his later developments along Spring Lake, this park was equipped with bath houses, slides, jumping platforms, and full picnicking facilities, making it quite the recreational destination.⁵⁸

In 1916, Rogers would expand the town’s tourist potential by purchasing a local cave from a San Marcos lawman whose home was just north of the formation. The cave, which was formed by ancient earthquakes along the Balcones fault line, was first discovered by Mark Bevers in 1896 while he was drilling for water.⁵⁹ After given the name Bevers’ Cave in honor of its discoverer, it was then sold to W.S. Davis in 1903 who operated it as a tourist attraction by hosting candlelit tours, staging a medicine show, and displaying a live South American anteater.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ “A.B. Rogers, Civic, Business Leader Dies Here Sunday,” *The San Marcos Record*, May 1, 1953.

⁵⁷ “A.B. Rogers, Civic, Business Leader Dies Here Sunday,” *The San Marcos Record*.

⁵⁸ Jason Crouch, “Rogers River Resort and the Golf Course,” *History of Spring Lake*.

⁵⁹ William R. Elliott, “Wonder Cave,” *Texas Speleological Survey*, 1994, <https://texasspeleologicalsurvey.org/showcaves/tsswondercave.php>.

⁶⁰ “History,” *Wonder World Cave & Adventure Park*, 2020, <https://www.wonderworldpark.com/history>.

Years later, it changed hands once again, this time being purchased by Judge Will G. Berber, who then sold it to Rogers for \$50.00, a gray horse, and a saddle. It was under the operation of “Mr. Tourist” that the Bevers’ cave experience was upgraded. During his ownership, Rogers installed electric lighting, gravel paths, handrails, and ladders to make the attraction more accessible. He then renamed the site Wonder Cave which the Rogers family owned and operated for decades. Later in 1958, Paul Rogers sold it to a local family who continue to operate it as the Wonder World Cave and Adventure Park.⁶¹

A.B. Rogers would continue his development of the San Marcos tourism industry when he purchased 126 acres of land from the San Marcos Utility Company which included both the Mill Tract and headwaters of Spring Lake. It was on this beautiful property that he intended to erect a world-class resort. He would begin Spring Lake land development in 1927 when he opened the Rogers Park Golf Course, later named the Spring Lake Golf Course, which was leased to the city and operated municipally for several decades.⁶² Although the green no longer exists, the dream resort of Rogers’ mind continues to look upon the crystal-clear water.

In addition to the construction of a popular golfing green, Rogers had begun to fulfill his desire to open a high-end resort that would further solidify San Marcos as a tourist destination. In 1929 he opened the Rogers Spring Lake Park Hotel, a two story, 55-room high quality resort that was heralded by *The San Marcos Record* as a “great project” that created “one of the finest buildings in the city.”⁶³ Its opening day truly was grand as it hosted a dinner for 300 guests, a golf tournament, swimming, concerts, dancing, and a high

⁶¹ “History,” *Wonder World Cave & Adventure Park*.

⁶² Arthur Birch Rogers, 1953, Aquarena Springs Records, 80.300, Texas State University Libraries, San Marcos, TX.

⁶³ “Rogers’ Dreams Are Realized in Completion of His New Hotel,” *San Marcos Record*, April 19, 1929.

energy speed boat race.⁶⁴ In addition to the grand opening of the hotel, Rogers also upgraded the facilities around Spring Lake, which had been a place of recreation prior to its acquisition.⁶⁵

He included a bathhouse in the lower floor of the hotel that had gendered locker rooms and amenities needed by early 20th century men and women. In addition to this, he removed all vegetation growing in the Spring Lake pool, which to the modern and past peoples of San Marcos would not be considered an improvement. Thousands of yards of dirt and mud were also dredged, allowing the extension of the pool which was boarded by a “U” shape wall. He created a children’s area as well to accommodate the safety of younger visitors, and lifeguards were supposedly always on duty.⁶⁶

On the more extreme side, Rogers added a 100-foot toboggan slide, as well as a water top, floating rubber pad, toy horses, and springboards to the pool grounds for the enjoyment of thrill-seeking visitors at Spring Lake.⁶⁷ The Rogers Spring Lake Park Hotel also offered visitors a chance to dine in a café, shop in a store for the golf course, spend time in a ladies exclusive parlor, and admire the rooftop garden while marveling at the beauty of Spring Lake. Unfortunately, this upscale resort would not survive the infamous stock market crash on October 29th of that same year, and Roger’s dream hotel would be sublet to other operations before its return to the tourist industry in 1961.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Albert S. McGehee, *The Inn at the Head of the River*, (San Marcos: Aquarena Springs, 1989), <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/SMHC%20Files/San%20Marcos%20River/Inn%20at%20the%20Head%20of%20the%20River.pdf>

⁶⁵ “Premier Opening of Fine New Hotel Here Next Monday,” *San Marcos Record*, April 19, 1929.

⁶⁶ “Premier Opening of Fine New Hotel Here Next Monday,” *San Marcos Record*, April 19, 1929.

⁶⁷ “Premier Opening of Fine New Hotel Here Next Monday,” *San Marcos Record*.

⁶⁸ Jason Crouch, “Rogers Spring Lake Park Hotel,” *History of Spring Lake*.

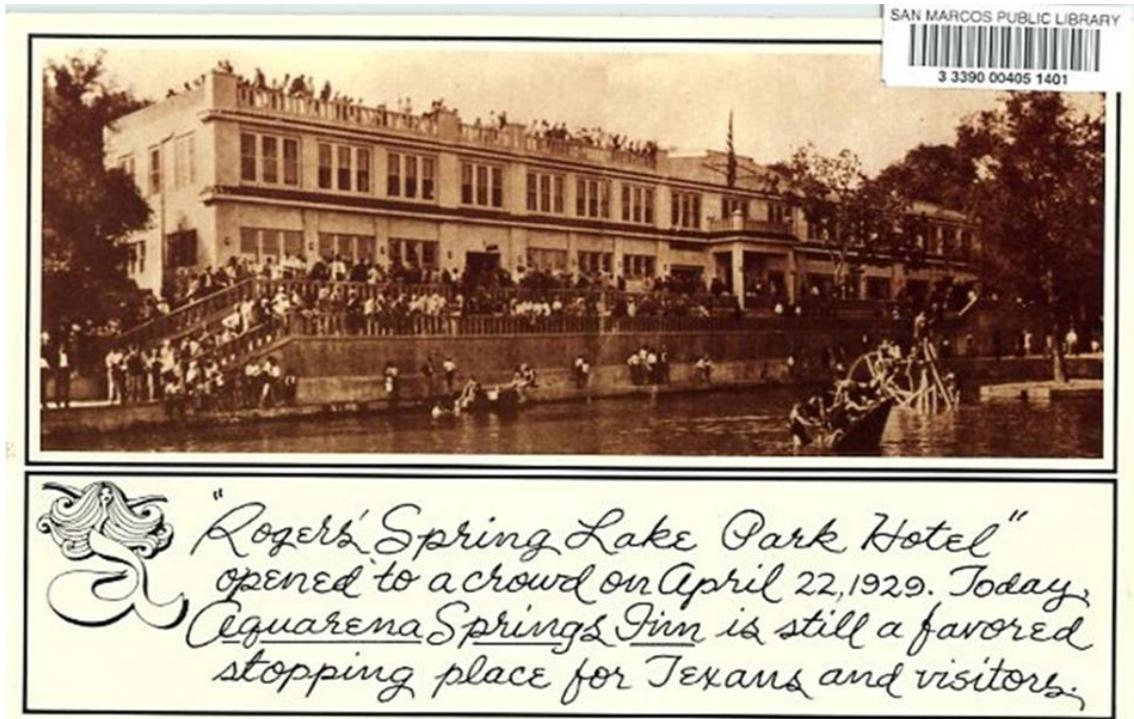


Figure 1. Undated postcard, likely from the 1970s, depicting a 1929 photograph of Rogers Spring Lake Park Hotel on opening day.⁶⁹

During the subletting years of the building's history, it would serve the San Marcos community as the Spring Lake Sanitarium in the 1930s and later the Brown Training School in 1940, which was a psychiatric treatment facility that continues to serve the community as the San Marcos Treatment Center and operates at a nearby location northeast of Spring Lake.⁷⁰ Despite the failure of A. B's dream, the Rogers family continued to turn Spring Lake into a place of tourism and enchantment. Though his father was still involved with the park, it was Paul Rogers who would be responsible for the creation of Aquarena Springs. He would begin this process by introducing glass bottom boats to Spring Lake.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Unknown, *Aquarena Springs hotel, opening day*, Unknown, Postcard, San Marcos Hays County Collection,

<http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390004051401B.jpg>.

⁷⁰ Albert S. McGehee, *The Inn at the head of the river*, 1989.

⁷¹ *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig* directed and created by Bob Phillips, (Reel Human Productions, 2012).

With his love of the lake and his desire for visitors to be able to see all aspects of site's beauty, in 1946 he commissioned the construction of the first glass bottom boat from a local carpenter.⁷² Initially just lifeboats with a strip of glass and canvas roof, these floating exhibits captured the attention of San Marcos residents and visitors as they were now able to view the life of Spring Lake from a new perspective. The first official glass bottom boat tour launched on August 10th, 1947, with a newly built motorized boat that could be used in both summer and winter due to its enclosed design with operational windows. Like the opening of his father's hotel, Rogers' boat tours were popular from the moment they debuted. According to *The San Marcos Record*, the first week of operation attracted crowds of unprecedented numbers to the small town of only 6,000 residents, with Roger's guest register listing visitors from not only Texas, but Oklahoma, Colorado, Virginia, and North Dakota.⁷³

With the glass bottom boats growing in popularity, Rogers decided to provide the increasing crowds with additional entertainment as they awaited their tour of Spring Lake. Like his inspiration for the glass bottom boats, his next idea took its origins from a family vacation. While traveling in Florida, he and his family visited Weeki Wachee Springs and Silver Springs two of the state's oldest roadside attractions.⁷⁴ Like the San Marcos Springs, both Weeki Wachee and Silver Springs were known for their crystal-clear water, which was central to their park's entertainment value. While Silver Springs primarily relied on its

⁷² Jason Crouch, "Glass bottom boats," *History of Spring Lake*.

⁷³ "Quick Facts: San Marcos city, Texas," U.S. Census Bureau July 1, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/sanmarcoscitytexas>; "Week Enders Swell Numbers to View Marine Gardens: New Glass Bottom Boat Draws Many to San Marcos," *San Marcos Record*, August 15, 1947.

⁷⁴ Florida State Parks, "History of Weeki Wachee," *Weeki Wachee Springs State Park*, 2018, <https://www.floridastateparks.org/learn/history-weeki-wachee>.

glass bottom boat tours, Weeki Wachee utilized its water's clarity as a stage for underwater performances.⁷⁵

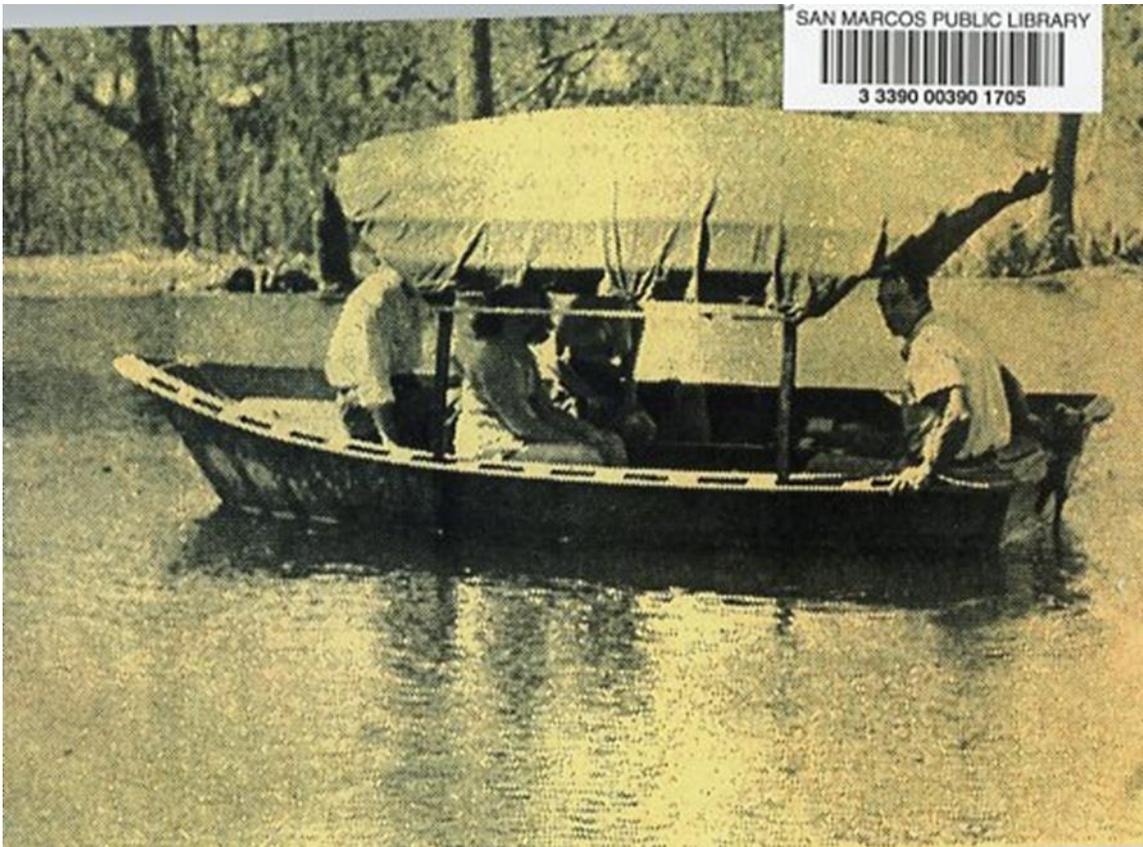


Figure 2. Photograph of the earliest glass bottom boat.⁷⁶

The park, which was founded by former U.S. Navy man Newton Perry, featured underwater entertainment gracefully performed by women dressed as mermaids.⁷⁷ Perry utilized his experience as a former underwater swim instructor as he worked with Margaret Russell, the underwater choreographer for the park's mermaid shows, to teach their performers how to dance ballet, eat and drink, and generally appear to be living

⁷⁵ Florida State Parks, "Park History," *Silver Springs State Park*, 2022, <https://silversprings.com/park-history/>.

⁷⁶ Unknown, *Earliest glass bottom boat*, Unknown, Photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003901705B.jpg>.

⁷⁷ Delee Perry, Interview by Author, San Marcos, January 30, 2023.

underwater.⁷⁸ To make things easier and more “realistic,” Perry created an underwater breathing device that supplied oxygen to the submerged mermaids via hoses and an air compressor. Upon his return to Texas, Paul Rogers was inspired to turn Spring Lake into an aquatic arena fit for a variety of performances, all aimed at bringing a Weeki Wachee-like experience to Texas.⁷⁹

On Tuesday September 26th, 1950, Spring Lake became “Aquarena” (it would not be called Aquarena Springs until 1961), Texas’ newest tourist attraction.⁸⁰ No longer was Rogers simply offering glass bottom boat tours, now visitors would be treated with wonders both natural and manmade. While visitors waited for their Spring Lake safari, they could behold the performances of California sea lions Flipper, Lari, and Peti, that would dazzle the audience with a series of balancing and diving acts, all taught to them by Misses Mary and Frances Dwight of St. Petersburg, Florida, former Weeki Wachee Springs performers.⁸¹ In addition to this, Rogers brought in the talent of Mrs. Dorothy Roederer Perry, a former Ohio State Women’s diving champion, and Miss Margie Kelly, finalist and winner of several beauty contests, to become Aquarena’s first “Aqua-Misses.” Together they performed from a high diving tower to a captivated audience, who was soon to be introduced to something they had never experienced before.⁸²

⁷⁸ Madeline Hollern, “The Famous Mermaids of San Marcos,” *Austin Monthly*, June 2021, <https://www.austinmonthly.com/the-famous-mermaids-of-san-marcos/>.

⁷⁹ Florida State Parks, “History of Weeki Wachee,” *Weeki Wachee Springs State Park*.

⁸⁰ “Aquarena Springs Motor Hotel Opening, Avey-Nemsco Open House Slated Saturday,” *San Marcos Record*, June 8, 1961.

⁸¹ “Submarine Theatre of Aquarena Nears Completion at Spring Lake,” *San Marcos Record*, September 1, 1950.

⁸² “Aquarena Opens Tuesday,” *San Marcos Record*, September 29, 1950.

Announcing
Grand Opening at
AQUARENA
 San Marcos, Texas











The Glass Bottom Boats..

of AQUARENA already have gained widespread popularity with visitors to the Southwest. Here at Spring Lake, nature has created one of the most outstanding possessions of aquatic gardens in the United States. The visitor may leisurely ride in safe and comfortable boats that slowly ply over the crystal clear waters of the springs. Through the convenient glass bottoms, the spectator may explore a veritable fairyland and see revealed aquatic life undisturbed in its natural habitat. Here may be seen the widest variety of fresh water life in the nation in a dramatic setting. The beautifully blue and crystal clear waters, which flow up to the rate of 100,000,000 gallons per day, make for a rural, relaxing and educational trip over the headwaters of the picturesque San Marcos River which once was an early Indian, agricultural and later a Franciscan mission. Here, too, is a home of the fighting large and small mouth bass and dozens of other game and small fish. All this forms a truly scenic setting and is a sportsman's paradise which also will appeal to the entire family.



The Submarine Theatre..

of AQUARENA is unique and novel in the entertainment world. For the first time, spectators may sit comfortably and safely in their seats while the theatre is moved in order to follow the performers. From the time swimmers may enter the theatre, they will be fascinated and intrigued with the performance of the skillfully trained California sea lion and the talented and beautiful Aquanoids. Looking out through the spacious glass portholes on the turquoise waters of Springlake, visitors will first witness a stage presentation by the sea lions including many skilled balancing acts as well as the amazing antics of the younger members. The sea lions are then treated with swimming and diving stunts for a performance from the high diving team. The show reaches a climax as the entire theatre submerges so that the spectators may watch the swimmers and sea lions work together in a team in beauty and grace under the surface of the crystal clear waters of the springs. Developed by the founder and operator of the famed Marine Stadium, Manatee, Fla., home of the world's only manatee, Aquarena is one of the outstanding attractions in the nation.

MARINE THEATRE, Inc. - PAUL J. ROGERS
 SPRING LAKE - SAN MARCOS, TEXAS

Figure 3. Opening day advertisement in The San Marcos Record "Aquarena Edition."⁸³

⁸³ Marine Theatre Inc, *Announcing Grand Opening at Aquarena*, Newspaper Advertisement, 1950, Digital Archives of the San Marcos Daily Record.

While entranced by the acrobatic feats of the Aqua-Misses, the theatre in which the audience sat would begin to submerge bringing the show underwater via the world's first Submarine Theatre. During his visit to Weeki Wachee Springs, Paul Rogers had been introduced to the concept of underwater performances through the park's stationary underwater theatre. However, like his father, Paul wanted to improve upon the idea and make something grander for his amusement park. In May of 1950, with the help of Newton Perry, he commissioned Marine Theatres Inc. to begin construction on a submergible theatre, that loaded guests into a rectangular capsule at ground level and then lowered itself into the water, thus creating the "Submarine Theatre."⁸⁴

The week of Aquarena's debut to the world saw a special section featured in *The San Marcos Record*, titled "Aquarena Edition," which featured nearly seven full pages of articles, photographs, and well wishes from San Marcos businesses and officials to the fledgling attraction. It is clear that the town saw potential in the Roger's family creation and was excited for the opportunities its increasing popularity would bring. As said by then Mayor F.W. Zimmerman in a letter to the owner of Marine Theatre Inc.:

San Marcos is very fortunate in having this unusual enterprise within its boundaries. The City wishes Mr. Paul Rogers, Marine Theatre, and all their associates every success in this venture. We in San Marcos pledge our support and assistance in making this attraction of nationwide significance.

San Marcos, which had reached a population of nearly 10,000 residents by 1950 just four years after the first glass bottom boat tour, was now the proud location of a unique amusement park that would quickly become one of the state's top attractions and remain

⁸⁴ "Mayor Extends City's Welcome to Marine Theatre," *San Marcos Record*, September 29, 1950.

so for the next three decades.⁸⁵ As Mayor Zimmerman put it, the town was hoping for a park that would reach national significance, and soon it would when Rogerrrs brought in the expertise of two Weeki Wachee employees.

Within a year of its debut under the care of Mr. and Mrs. Dick Berg, the sea lion act at Aquarena would come to an end after the health of the marine mammals declined due prolonged exposure to a freshwater environment, an issue discussed further in chapter two. In March of 1951 the couple and their performing animals would pack their bags and leave for Dayton, Ohio to pursue other opportunities. Now lacking a crucial part of the Submarine Theatre's lineup, Paul Rogers once again turned to his Florida connection for assistance. The same month of the sea lion departure, two more Weeki Wachee employees were brought on to team Aquarena to help push the park into a new phase of entertainment.⁸⁶

When Margaret and Don Russell arrived in San Marcos in March of 1951, they brought with them the necessary experience that Roger's hoped would push Aquarena into the national spotlight. The couple met one another in Florida while employed at Weeki Wachee Springs, where Margaret performed as a mermaid. In 1948, Don met Paul Rogers and less than four years later the couple packed their things to begin new lives in Texas.⁸⁷ At Aquarena the pair would be hired for similar responsibilities as they found in Florida, with Don assisting in the management of the park and establishing himself as Aquarena's

⁸⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: San Marcos city, Texas," July 1, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/sanmarcoscitytexas>.

⁸⁶ "Don Russells to Come to Aquarena From Florida," *San Marcos Record*, March 9, 1951.

⁸⁷ Diana Finlay, "Russell Leaves Lasting Legacy: Tourism trailblazer led millions to "Discover Texas," *San Marcos Daily Record*, June 6, 1993.

gator rustler and Margaret continuing her career in the water, this time as the Aquamaid trainer.⁸⁸

Within their first year in Texas, Don and Margaret had managed to secure Aquarena several positions in various national media outlets, including movie and television newsreels, and the park's first of several appearances in *LIFE* magazine, where Aquamaid Peggy Sparks campaigned for both presidential candidates Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson.⁸⁹ By 1955, Aquarena had seen over 1 million tourists, all of which were not just introduced to the imaginative park created by Paul Rogers, but the surrounding beauty of the small Texas town as well. According to Russell, who had become the manager Aquarena Springs in 1954, the year had brought crowds greater than any year since the park's debut five years prior.⁹⁰

Though there are a variety of reasons for the increase in Aquarena popularity, the common factor behind them all was Paul Roger's decision to bring Don and Margaret Russell into the park. During his tenure, Don not only worked tirelessly to expand the national presence of the San Marcos park, but also the Texas tourism industry. According to Jim Battersby, public relations professional and long-time friend of Russell, "as soon as he got here... Don saw that Texas was going to be one of the truly great states for tourism." He says that it was because of Russell's leadership, charisma, forethought, and magnetism

⁸⁸ Margaret Russell, interview by Jean Boone, San Marcos, 1962, Texas Archive of the Moving Image, https://texasarchive.org/2011_03300#utm_source=youtube&utm_medium=videopage&utm_campaign=youtube.

⁸⁹ Diana Finlay, "Russell Leaves Lasting Legacy," *San Marcos Daily Record*.

⁹⁰ Buckner, Tom, "The San Marcos River—Key to the City," San Marcos Tourist Edition, *San Marcos Record*, June 25, 1964; "Aquarena Launches Expansion; Expects Record Crowd in 1956," *San Marcos Record*, December 9, 1955.

that led the state's tourism in the right direction, which eventually saw the creation of the Texas Tourism Development Agency in 1963.⁹¹

Of course, while Don was responsible for the managerial aspects of Aquarena and more direct impacts on the state tourism industry, Margaret ensured that the main entertainment featured at the park was at the same level of professionalism found in Florida. Though not seemingly as important as her husband's duties, without the popularity of the performances in the Submarine Theatre, Aquarena could never have achieved national recognizability or financial success. With the experience at Weeki Wachee under her belt, she became the highly respected trainer of the Aquamaids and underwater clowns, who were typically played by students from the neighboring Southwest Texas State College.⁹²

When Aquarena first opened in the late summer of 1950, the park only had 20 employees.⁹³ During its prime, employment increased by 600% and hired many local high-school and collage aged students to help run the park.⁹⁴ Being responsible for the training and safety of such young employees was quite the daunting task, however according to former Aquamaids, Russell's instruction was both effective and cautious.⁹⁵ According to Russell, it took over two months of strenuous practice before she would allow new Aquamaids or clowns to perform in the Submarine Theatre. During this time, she ensured

⁹¹ Diana Finlay, "Russell Leaves Lasting Legacy," *San Marcos Daily Record*; Anonymous, "Texas Tourist Development Agency," *Handbook of Texas Online*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-tourist-development-agency>.

⁹² Margaret Russell, interview by Jean Boone.

⁹³ Buckner, Tom, "The San Marcos River—Key to the City," *San Marcos Record*.

⁹⁴ "High School Students Center Work, Activities In Tourist Industries and Outside Interests," *San Marcos Record*, August 3, 1967.

⁹⁵ *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig* directed and created by Bob Phillips.

that her performers would be more than comfortable keeping themselves underwater and utilizing the breathing apparatuses.⁹⁶



Figure 4. Aquamaids enjoying fresh fruit underwater, while using the air hoses to breathe.⁹⁷

An Aquamaid or underwater clown's training would begin with the primary goal of learning how to properly hold oneself beneath the water, a task which Russell admitted was not as easy as it sounded. Once a prospective performer mastered this skill, they would then be taught how to utilize the high-pressure breathing tubes, how to control one's movement to be able to gracefully perform underwater feats, and genuinely entertain folks who curiously watched from behind the glass of the Submarine Theatre. It was the

⁹⁶ Margaret Russel, interview by Jean Boone.

⁹⁷ Unknown, *Aquamaids eating*, 1955, Photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003901796B.jpg>.

entertainment of the crowd that Margaret saw as the most important job of an Aquarena performer, and it is safe to say that she was a master of her work as the Submarine Theatre remained a staple at the park throughout its operation.⁹⁸

While it was important that the audience was entertained, Russell also saw it necessary to ensure that the performers loved it as well. Throughout its operation, Aquarena Springs employed dozens of Southwest Texas State College and San Marcos High School students, who would have the honor of not only performing in the shows of the Submarine Theatre, but also assisting in other park operations such as maintenance or food service.⁹⁹ According to former mayor Frank Arredondo, this employment opportunity was important to the town youth, many of whom got their first work experience from seasonal jobs at the park.¹⁰⁰ Stories and pictures of the participating students were featured in the *Pedagog*, the University yearbook. In the 1966 edition of the annual, the pages describing student employment state that regardless of the jobs undertaken by students, “none are any more fun nor more unusual than the one... at Aquarena’s Submarine Theatre.”¹⁰¹

Fun and unusual are perhaps the best descriptors for the era that ensued after the arrival of Don and Margaret Russell. It was under their leadership that the quirkiest aspects of Aquarena would appear, many of which received national or statewide attention and are still discussed today by park alumna and past visitors. The first of these unique aspects of Aquarena Springs history would occur on March 7th, 1954, with the underwater wedding of two of the park’s Submarine Theatre entertainers. Accompanied by Margaret, who was

⁹⁸ Margaret Russel, interview by Jean Boone.

⁹⁹ *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig* directed and created by Bob Phillips.

¹⁰⁰ Frank Arredondo, interview by author, San Marcos, February 6, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Southwest Texas State College, “It’s the Life of a Clown for Me,” *Pedagog*, (San Marcos: Southwest Texas State College, 1966), 122 – 123.

the bride's maid of honor, diving clown Bob Smith and Aquamaid Mary Beth Sanger tied the knot in the historic waters of Spring Lake. This matrimonial ceremony was so unique that it garnered the interest of national and state media outlets with the event being featured in a two-page spread in *LIFE*, on a Dallas – Fort Worth news station, and various newsreels shown as far as the United Kingdom.¹⁰²

According to an article in *The San Marcos Record*, the couple had met two years prior while performing as an Aquamaid and Glurpo the Underwater clown. Due to constant contact as part of their work, they continued to build their relationship with one another until they both left the park following an auto accident in 1952. Wanting to wed at the place that joined them together, the two had their outfits lined in lead beads and took the plunge into marriage before a handful of their family and friends. The couple and park would receive national attention once again seven years later when they celebrated their anniversary underwater accompanied by their two children and a plaster wedding cake.¹⁰³ Decades after they married, footage of the event would once again be shown nationally when parody song writer Weird Al Yankovic included clips of the event in the music video for his song “Dare to be Stupid.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² “Pooling Their Future,” *LIFE*, March 8, 1954, 36 – 37; Pathé Newsreels, *Sea News – Underwater Wedding*, British Pathé, (1954; London: Pathé News), video, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/55339/>.

¹⁰³ “A Plunge into the Past,” *LIFE*, April 7, 1961, 79.

¹⁰⁴ Weird Al Yankovic, “Dare To Be Stupid,” YouTube, July 27, 2010, music video, <https://youtu.be/SMhwddNQSQQ>, 2:19 – 2:24.



Figure 5. Bob Smith and Mary Beth Sanger taking the plunge into marriage. This is just one example of the many unique features found at Aquarena Springs that made it nationally recognizable.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Unknown, *Underwater wedding*, 1954, Photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003525819B.jpg>.

While underwater matrimonial ceremonies were no doubt unique enough to get the park featured in national media, that same decade, Aquarena would introduce to the world a star large enough to land on the television screen across the country. With his exuding charm, captivating performance skills, and unconditional support by theme park patrons, this newly employed sensation would be yet another factor in the growing popularity of Aquarena Springs and San Marcos tourism. Though not a marketing or planning professional like Don Russell and Paul Rogers, this employee would do something that neither men could; become a household name. Within a decade of his appearance in San Marcos, Aquarena Springs would now also be known as the home of the one and only Ralph the Swimming Pig.

The 1950s were not only a time of economic and industrial advancement, but also one that saw the rising popularity of a swimming pig from Texas. Not just one pig in fact, but over 700 would play the role of the famous swimmer in the Submarine Theatre. While that figure may seem large, it should be noted that pigs grow relatively fast and thus could no longer participate in the shows when they reached a certain size. Though the swimming pigs of Aquarena are referred to as “Ralph” today, when they were initially introduced to the Spring Lake show, they started out with their own unique names such as Missy, Magnolia, and Little Mister.¹⁰⁶ The idea to incorporate a pig into the show was somewhat of a joke when it was first purposed, but since the park was lacking an animal act after the departure of the sea lions, Rogers approved, and soon pigs joined the Aquamaids and underwater clowns in the Submarine Theatre.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Camille Wheeler, “The Swimming Pig,” *Texas Co-Op Power*, April 2010, <https://texascoopower.com/the-swimming-pig/>.

¹⁰⁷ *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig*, directed and created by Bob Phillips.

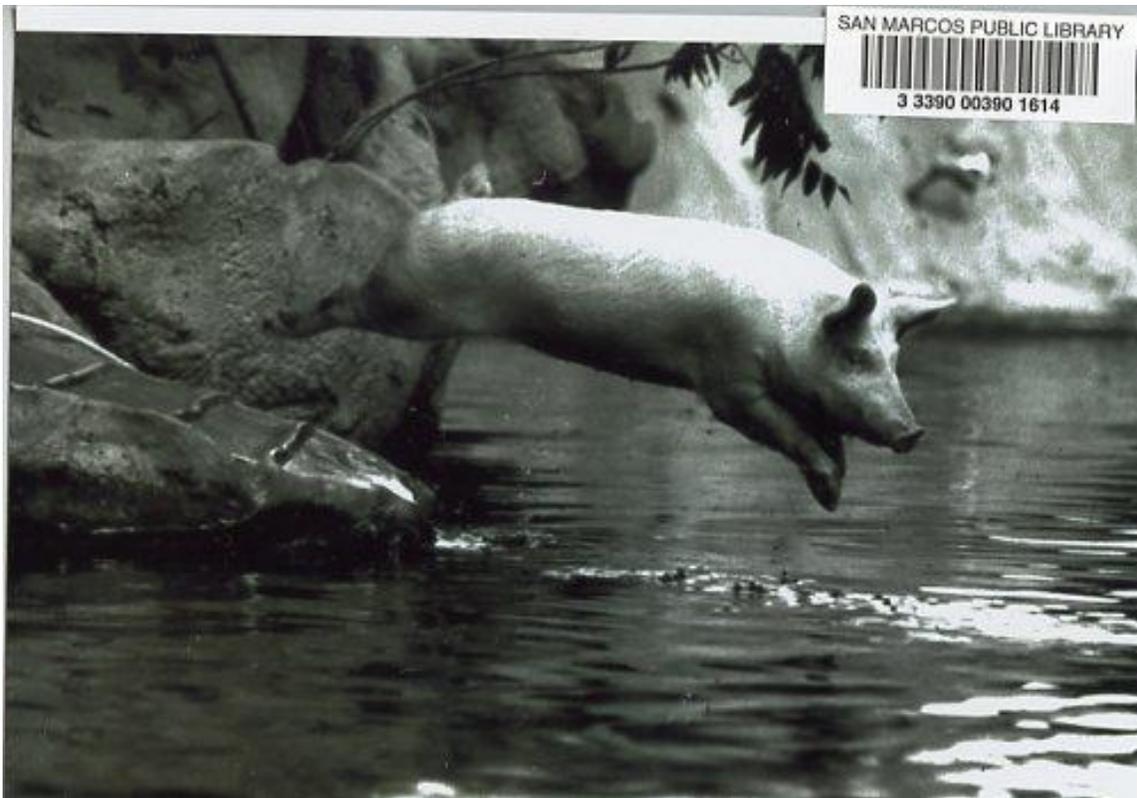


Figure 6. One of the many Ralphs performing the famous “swine dive” into the water surrounding the Submarine Theatre.¹⁰⁸

Natural born swimmers, the pigs used by Aquarena were obtained soon after weaning to be trained and ready for their first official appearance by the age of two to three months.¹⁰⁹ While they were only included in a brief segment of the show, like their human co-stars a swimming pig was featured at the Submarine Theatre every 30 mins during the 10-hour workday.¹¹⁰ Unlike their coworkers however, the pigs were known to be quite stubborn, as jumping into a 72°F pool is not the most ideal task for any warm blooded mammal. To entice the unique entertainers to demonstrate their famous “swine dive,” a

¹⁰⁸ Unknown, Ralph diving, Aquarena Springs Resort, Unknown, Photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003901614B.jpg>.

¹⁰⁹ Camille Wheeler, “The Swimming Pig,” *Texas Co-Op Power*.

¹¹⁰ Jeff D. Opdyke, “Roadside Attractions: Texas Hot Spots of Old Steering New Course for Business,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, July 19, 1998.

human performer would precede the animal in the water and offer a bottle of milk which the pig would suckle while swimming a lap around the pool.¹¹¹

With word of these animal's performances spreading, the swimming pigs of Aquarena soon became known nationally when their trainer Barbara Backus appeared on an episode of "What's My Line?" in 1969 and "To Tell the Truth" in 1972, where she fooled the panel of judges who were attempting to guess her profession.¹¹² The Ralphs themselves, who were finally given the collective name in the 60s to dishonor an unfaithful husband, would be included in the national spotlight with an appearance on Walter Cronkite's CBS "Evening News" in 1967 and a television show titled "That's Incredible" a few years later.¹¹³ In addition to these appearances, some Ralphs would also perform their swine dive at the New Orleans World's Fair, ride next to other famous animals in an out of state parade, and entertain guests at a New Year's Eve party in Austin.¹¹⁴

Back home in San Marcos, Ralph was given the star treatment with the creation of "Ralph's Pig Palace," a new attraction that allowed older and heavier swine to remain in the spotlight, without having to perform in the Submarine Theatre. Here pigs had access to a pool, sleeping area, and ample amounts of guest interaction which quite often brought with it tasty treats from amused visitors or incautious children who held their candy too close. Ralph was not the only unique animal attraction found in Aquarena. In addition to swimming pigs, guests could find bike riding parrots, basketball playing chickens, a firefighting rabbit, and a hen who was undefeated at tic-tac-toe.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig*, directed and created by Bob Phillips.

¹¹² "Pig Trainer On Quiz Show," *San Marcos Record*, March 30, 1972.

¹¹³ Camille Wheeler, "The Swimming Pig," *Texas Co-Op Power*.

¹¹⁴ *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig*, directed and created by Bob Phillips.

¹¹⁵ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 56 – 59, 100 – 101.

Along with the introduction of swimming pigs, Aquarena gained several more attractions in the 1950s that would thrust it into its busiest decade. After experiencing their most popular tourist season in 1955, Don Russell and Paul Rogers agreed that the park was in need of fresh acts to further its growth and development. Due to the success of the first marketing campaign which brought media outlets such as *LIFE* and *Popular Mechanics* to the park, Russell would once again launch a national advertising campaign ensuring that potential visitors from across the country would know the name Aquarena. With flyers sent to AAA offices around the country, billboards erected along state and interstate highways, and commercials on the air, Russell and Rogers were gearing up for fresh crowds to welcome the park's newest additions.¹¹⁶

These features included 40 additional seats to the Submarine Theatre, a remodeling of the park restaurant, the addition of three artificial waterfalls off the slopes to the west of Spring Lake, a new glass bottom boat, botanical gardens, new effects to the underwater show, and construction of the park's first attempt at historical interpretation, Texana Village.¹¹⁷ Like the people of San Marcos, Aquarena Springs recognized the history of the San Marcos Springs and presented visitors with a romanticized exhibition of these narratives through shows, reconstructed homes, displays, and demonstrations.¹¹⁸

As quoted several times in *The San Marcos Record*, Russell and Rogers strived for "complete authenticity," (which was never achieved, and will be discussed in chapter two) in the park's historical attractions. The pair collected entire buildings, furnishings, and artifacts to create this one-of-a-kind experience that paid homage to the state's supposed

¹¹⁶ "Aquarena Launches Expansion; Expects Record Crowd in 1956," *San Marcos Record*, December 9, 1955.

¹¹⁷ "Aquarena Launches Expansion; Expects Record Crowd in 1956," *San Marcos Record*.

¹¹⁸ "Colorful Frontier Comes to Life in Texana Village Exhibit," *San Marcos Record*, December 4, 1958.

frontier heritage.¹¹⁹ Like attractions of a similar caliber such as the modern-day town of Tombstone Arizona, visitors to Texana Village were able to explore period themed businesses such as a blacksmith, saloon, barber, and general store, as well as watch a horse show, walk through alligator infested swamps, peruse a wide variety of southwestern antiques, and stroll through one of the country's largest collections of cacti and succulents in a western themed garden.¹²⁰

The park continued to include historical attractions in its line-up nearly a decade later when Rogers oversaw the reconstruction of a grist mill, Mission San Xavier, and the home of Republic of Texas Vice President Edward Burlison.¹²¹ These sites offered visitors a celebratory and speculative look into the history of Spring Lake while enjoying their time at Aquarena Springs, and offered demonstrations designed to “edutain” (educate and entertain) tourists.¹²² Of course it is important to acknowledge that the practice of grouping together historical buildings and displaying artifacts without proper context is not proper interpretation. Rather, Rogers’ and Russell’s effort to pay homage to the lake’s history demonstrates not only a level of admiration but also an understanding of the marketability of Texas history.

By including historically themed attractions rather than purely fantastical ones, Aquarena Springs marketed Texans’ admiration for their own history, which, in turn, set the precedent for future Texas amusement parks like Six Flags Over Texas and Schlitterbahn. Like the San Marcos attraction, these parks continue to utilize elements of

¹¹⁹ “Area Building Up Attractions for Visitors,” *San Marcos Record*, May 7, 1959.

¹²⁰ “Colorful Frontier Comes to Life in Texana Village Exhibit,” *San Marcos Record*.

¹²¹ Tom Buckner, “The San Marcos River—Key to the City,” San Marcos Tourist Edition, *San Marcos Record*, June 25, 1964.

¹²² Carl Johan Svensson and Tobia Samuelsson, ““A Gunpowder-Smelling History Lecture”? – Learning at a Wild West History Theme Park,” *Social Studies* 112, no.1 (January 2021): 14 – 27, <https://bit.ly/3TPYXTX>.

Texas history within their own park atmospheres for the purpose of education and entertainment (but mostly entertainment). When Six Flags opened in 1961 it took “edutainment” to the next level by theming the entire park around elements of Texas history, rather than a handful of attractions like those found at Aquarena.¹²³

Aquarena was an early pioneer in Texas marketability and thus a significant piece of the Texas tourism industry. Its inclusion of historical, aesthetic, aquatic, and animal attractions made Aquarena the vacation destination for Texans and Americans who were captivated by the mythological ideas of Texas history and clear water of the San Marcos Springs. During its peak operating years in the 1960s, the park edutained hundreds of thousands of excited visitors.¹²⁴ As people continued to flock to the park to experience what was marketed as “a waterful wonderland of sights and thrills,” the need to continue updating facilities increased.¹²⁵

In 1961, Paul Rogers was able to fulfill his father’s dream by reopening the hotel at Spring Lake, now under the name of the Aquarena Springs Motor Hotel. Here families lucky enough to get a reservation were treated with spacious rooms, newly renovated accommodations, and views of both the springs and the newly placed aviary that contained hundreds of bright and colorful exotic birds.¹²⁶ Upon entry into the park, visitors during the prime years of Aquarena were met with cheerful music and the sounds of running water, produced by a large fountain at the entrance and artificial waterfalls cascading down the western slopes.

¹²³ Brantley Hightower, “A Theme Park Under Six Flags,” *Texas Architect*, March/April 2022, <https://magazine.texasarchitects.org/2022/03/07/a-theme-park-under-six-flags/>.

¹²⁴ Diana Finlay, “Russell Leaves Lasting Legacy: Tourism trailblazer led millions to “Discover Texas,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, June 6, 1993.

¹²⁵ Aquarena Springs, *Aquarena Springs: A Waterful Wonderland of Sights and Thrills*, (San Marcos: Aquarena Springs), 1968., http://smmercury.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/aquarena_68_brochure.jpg.

¹²⁶ “San Marcos IS Building Itself a Better Town,” *The San Marcos Record*, May 18, 1961.

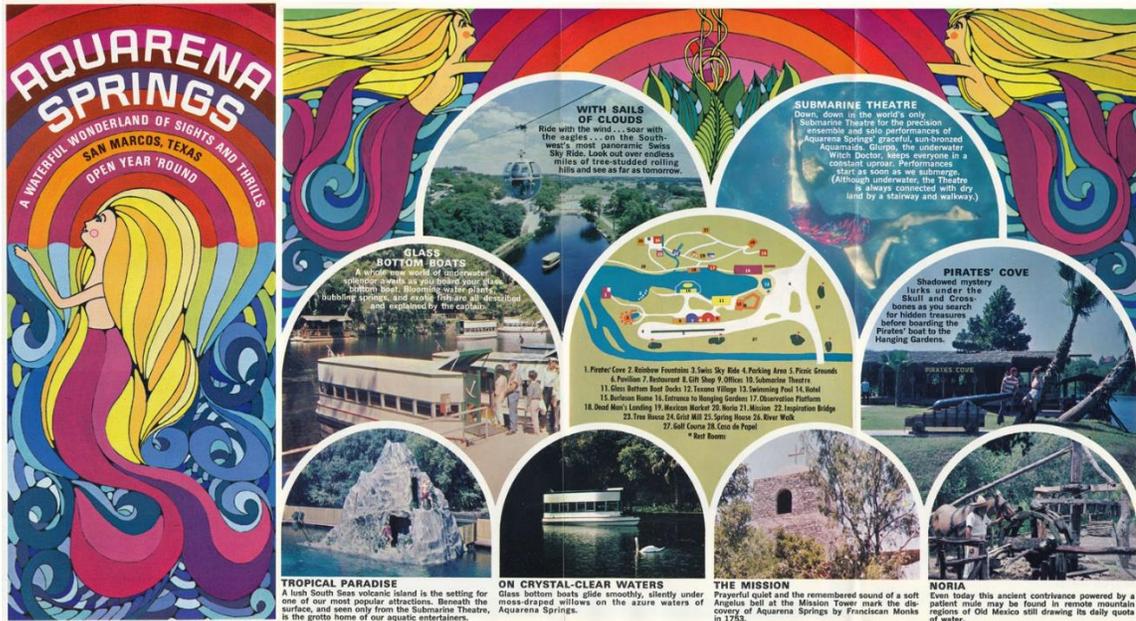


Figure 7. An Aquarena Springs brochure from 1968 that describes the various attractions found at the unique park and provides a small map of the grounds.¹²⁷

Walking through the grounds, visitors could see the fleet of freshly painted glass bottom boats giving tours of the ecological wonder as children giggled at the turtles and fish passing beneath them. Nearby, they had the opportunity to catch one of the many performances at the Submarine Theatre which would begin shows above the water and slowly transition beneath the lake to scenes of bubble curtains, a giant clam revealing a talented young Aquamaid, and relaxing music all keeping the performers in time as they entertained their audience.¹²⁸ Once finished with the show, guests had just enough time to run to Texana Village to watch a horseshow or eat in of the park's restaurant.

Guests wanting to explore the areas west of Spring Lake could either take a ferry from Pirates Cove, an aquatic themed gift shop that offered marine trinkets and treasures,

¹²⁷ *Aquarena Springs: A Waterful Wonderland of Sights and Thrills*, (San Marcos: Aquarena Springs, 1968), Obtained from <http://www.edwardsaquifer.net/sanmarcos.html>.

¹²⁸ "Aquarena Slates Volcano," *The San Marcos Record*.

or if they visited after 1963, catch a ride for 75 cents on one of the highest sky rides in the Western Hemisphere.¹²⁹ These enclosed gondolas took passengers over one hundred feet in the air, giving them an overview of the lake and park before dropping them off just above the Aquarena Springs Motor Hotel. Once on the steep hillside, visitors could find the reconstructed Spanish mission, a working grist mill, hanging gardens of exotic plants and water features, and paths leading to observation decks that dotted the historic foliage and geology. One of the last grand features to be added to the park was the 190-foot high sky spiral, a slow spinning observation tower that gave visitors an even grander view of the Texas Hill Country before slowly returning to its dock.¹³⁰

Despite the wide variety of attractions and close proximity to two large metropolises, Aquarena Springs would not survive long after its most successful seasons in the 1960s and 1970s. With the death of Paul Rogers in 1965 and departure of Don Russell in 1971, Gene Phillips was now the general manager of the business.¹³¹ Like Rogers and Russell, Phillips did a commendable job maintaining the park and marketing its attractions to visitors, however with the upcoming phenomenon of thrill-ride based parks and gas shortage of the 1970s, Aquarena Springs was at risk of losing relevancy.

According to Phillips, the prime markets for Aquarena's tourist attraction were in the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston metroplexes, some of the most densely populated areas in the U.S. In 1961, the first Six Flags franchise, Six Flags Over Texas, opened in Arlington, Texas, a city located directly between Dallas and Fort Worth and roughly three and a half hours away from San Marcos. Seven years later, in 1968 Houston would see the

¹²⁹ "New Sky-Ride Crossing Spring Lake," *San Marcos Record*, May 23, 1963.

¹³⁰ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 108 – 109.

¹³¹ Diana Finlay, "Russell Leaves Lasting Legacy: Tourism trailblazer led millions to "Discover Texas," *San Marcos Daily Record*, June 6, 1993.

opening of AstroWorld, a park that would later come under the management of Six Flags. While the introduction of these two roller-coaster hosting parks did not initially affect the annual attendance at Aquarena Springs, the introduction of closer attractions such as Schlitterbahn, a water park in nearby New Braunfels, and San Antonio's Sea World, began to attract visitors away from the San Marcos park.¹³² Americans wanted adrenaline rushing attractions, and with the numerous gas shortages of the 1970s, Aquarena Spring's primary marketing hubs were now being entertained by more modern attractions that were much closer than the land of swimming pigs and Aquamaids.

When the first of these crises hit the nation in October of 1973, Phillips said that they were "really scared" and rightly so because by the end of the decade, attendance to the park had declined 40 to 45 percent.¹³³ However, like his predecessor, Phillips was a good marketer and shifted the park's advertising campaign to target the surrounding communities and incoming "snowbirds" from the north who frequented the Hill Country during the winter. Now marketed as "less than a tank of gas away," Aquarena saw an increase in visitors during that season, however this was to be the last time the park remained out of detrimental financial decline.¹³⁴

Unfortunately for Aquarena, the several unsuccessful seasons it saw in the early 1980s led the Paul J. Rogers Trust to sell the property to Baugh/Moore I Joint Venture in 1985. Under this new management, Phillips served as General Manager for one last season before departing in late 1985. Like Phillips, the new owners hoped to bring Aquarena

¹³² Jason Crouch, "Changes in Ownership," *History of Spring Lake*.

¹³³ Livia Gershon, "Gas Shortages in 1970s America Sparked Mayhem and Forever Changed the Nation," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/1970s-gas-shortages-changed-america-180977726/>.

¹³⁴ Paul Homburg, "Aquarena Springs Eases Pain of Energy Pinch," *San Marcos Daily Record*, August 2, 1981.

Springs out of its downward spiral by taking advantage of the unique landscape as a marketing device. The company planned to add additional rooms to the Aquarena Springs Motor Hotel, as well as develop a recreation club that offered “the relatively untapped markets” of the local community and University unique recreational opportunities on the lake.¹³⁵

The town however, had different ideas about Moore and Baugh’s development plans, and the City Council refused to approve their ideas in an effort to push the city towards a stronger stance on river conservation and preservation. Despite this roadblock, to San Marcos, Aquarena was still considered to be one of its most valuable economic assets and pushed for its inclusion in the marketing efforts of the 1986 National Tourism Week. Though still known for its swimming pigs and underwater shows, the park and town were now also focused on marketing it as a place of ecological wonder, labeling it as “Nature’s Amazement Park.”¹³⁶

This new shift in park marketing was not enough to bring it back from decline, and so in 1994 Aquarena Springs changed hands once again after being purchased by Southwest Texas State University for seven million dollars.¹³⁷ Determined to keep the park running while working towards the preservation of the Spring Lake ecosystem, then University President Jerome Supple heralded the purchase as “a very important day” that ensured “the preservation of an environmental jewel for Texas and for tomorrow.”¹³⁸ The park would not remain open for long however, as the University lost 1.5 million dollars in

¹³⁵ Acquisition of Aquarena, April 22, 1985, Aquarena Springs Records, 80.300, Texas State University Libraries, San Marcos, TX.

¹³⁶ Julie Sullivan, “Tourism: A Thriving Local Industry,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, May 18, 1986.

¹³⁷ National Council on Public History Presentation, n.d, Aquarena Springs Records, 80.300, Texas State University Libraries, San Marcos, TX.

¹³⁸ “Aquarena Springs: SWT purchases resort for \$7 million,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, January 25, 1994.

the first year, and faced a state audit that questioned the integrity behind the massive purchase.¹³⁹

On February 23rd 1996, nearly 46 years after first opening its doors, Aquarena Springs no longer operated as a “for-profit site,” but rather as a place for education and service as an extension of the University.¹⁴⁰ Though the grounds were still open to visitors, the iconic attractions such as the sky spiral, Submarine Theater, and sky lift were closed, and the shows were discontinued, thus ending the days of Aquamaids and Ralph the Swimming Pig.¹⁴¹ Now running the park under the name Aquarena Center, University officials met with various government agencies including the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and Texas Parks and Wildlife to discuss ways in which they could reestablish the aquatic ecosystem.¹⁴²

Within the next two decades, on-site evidence of the defunct theme park would become virtually non-existent as the University worked to clear the lands of Spring Lake from its Aquarena history. Today the site is home to the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment where Texas State University educates visitors on the importance of the fragile ecosystem while also displaying artifacts uncovered by the archaeological digs of the 1970s. The only accessible remnants of Aquarena Springs are the remaining fleet of glass bottom boats and old hotel building, which is now used as a museum and office space.

Visitors unfamiliar with the history of the site are unlikely to learn that less than 30 years ago an attraction unlike any other in Texas was entertaining hundreds of thousands

¹³⁹ National Council on Public History Presentation, n.d., Aquarena Springs Records, 80.300, Texas State University Libraries, San Marcos, TX.

¹⁴⁰ Scott Maier, “Aquarena: Commercial use out; educational use is in,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, February 25, 1996.

¹⁴¹ Scott Maier, “Aquarena transition: SWT team guides park toward education,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, March 7, 1996.

¹⁴² Jason Crouch, “Changes in Ownership,” *History of Spring Lake*.

of visitors from across the nation. Aside from a sentence on the San Marcos Springs state historical marker and a panel on the side of the glass bottom boat ticketing booth, Texas State University has wiped any mention of its days as an amusement park. Despite this adamancy to erase history however, there is still hope for the preservation of its memory through the use of interpretation. By hosting millions of tourists during its tenure, Aquarena bolstered the growth of San Marcos, contributed to the creation of the Texas Tourist Development agency, and provided edutainment for people around the nation through its highly publicized performers. As will be discussed in the second chapter, though it was not a perfect place, Aquarena Springs is a significant piece of San Marcos history that deserves to be interpreted.

III. A PIG DOES MORE THAN SWIM: RALPH THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN

When the for-profit Aquarena Springs closed in 1996, some members of the San Marcos community were devastated.¹⁴³ Just two years prior when Southwest Texas State University first acquired the state treasure, concerned citizens were shown images of Boko the Bobcat, the University's mascot, posing with Ralph the Swimming Pig, seeming to promise a bright future for the new relationship. Little did Aquarena lovers know that their beloved site would be just another page in the history of Spring Lake before the close of the millennium. While many citizens were saddened to hear that Aquamaids would no longer perform in the clear waters of the springs, not all members of the San Marcos community were attached to the park.

The San Marcos Springs have been home to thousands of years of history prior to the development of the theme park, and while this project primarily focuses on advocating for the interpretation of that era of history, it cannot be properly done without analyzing all aspects of the park's history. Like more well-known eras of human history such as the American Revolution and the Civil Rights Movement, the story of Aquarena Springs is not simple nor one-sided. Although it was held in high regard by a large number of Texans, there are people who do not share the same nostalgic memories of swimming pigs and Aquamaids. To some members of the Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities, as well as environmentally savvy citizens, the park was not a magical place. It is this complexity

¹⁴³ Kimberly Reeves, "Last Goodbye to Aquarena Springs: Texas State plans to trade in Aquarena Springs' renowned Fifties kitsch for turn-of-the-century simplicity," *Austin Chronicle*, November 14, 2008, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2008-11-14/702485/>.

that makes Aquarena Springs even more important to the history of San Marcos and any future interpretive efforts by the University.

As stated by Teresa Bergman, author of *Exhibiting Patriotism: Creating and Contesting Interpretations of American Historic Sites*, public memory sites, or places the community has a significant recollection of, are often subject to tensions. According to Bergman, these tensions result from “inherent challenges” that come with attempting to accurately represent the history of sites with complicated stories.¹⁴⁴ While Aquarena Springs’ story may not be considered as complicated as the Battle of the Alamo or the storming of the Bastille, it is subject to these tensions all the same.

As Aquarena Springs celebrated its opening day in 1950, *The San Marcos Record* released the “Aquarena Edition” of the weekly paper to mark the occasion. While being an excellent source in the provision of information regarding the who’s who and the early operations of the park, this paper also provided readers with a snapshot into the community’s feeling towards the new development. Within the pages dedicated to reporting on the park’s opening are many congratulatory notes and good will from businesses and city officials, all praising San Marcos’ new tourist endeavor. What had once been a dream to local entrepreneur A.B. Rogers was now a reality as his son Paul officially introduced Aquarena to the world.¹⁴⁵

While the newspaper was celebrating this momentous occasion, not all San Marcos citizens were excited for the park. The year Aquarena debuted was one engulfed in state

¹⁴⁴ Teresa Bergman, *Exhibiting Patriotism: Creating and Contesting Interpretations of American Historic Sites*, (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 19

¹⁴⁵ “A.B. Rogers Sees Dream Come True with Development of San Marcos River,” *San Marcos Record*, September 29, 1950.

sponsored discrimination and segregation. The edition that reported on the upcoming opening day of the park also has two articles demonstrating this separation of citizens. The first, found on the front page just below a massive headline reading “Aquarena Opens Tuesday,” briefly informs readers of San Marcos ISD’s decision to auction off the Center Point Mexican School and Center Point Negro School properties. The second, located on the second to last page is even smaller and easier to miss, but its headline, “NEGRO ENTERS UNIVERSITY AFTER THREE-YEAR FIGHT” is enough to represent the inequality faced by darker skinned residents.

To these San Martians, the opening of Aquarena Springs was not a day of celebration and excitement, but rather a reminder that they were not welcome to enjoy the same recreational facilities as their neighbors. Although there is no physical evidence that Aquarena was segregated, according to lifelong residents, because other recreational facilities in town were segregated, it was assumed that the theme park was no different.¹⁴⁶ Although San Marcos was considered by some to be more inclusive of its Black and Brown citizens than its fellow Southern towns, it still did not grant them access to the same spaces as their White counterparts.¹⁴⁷ It would not be until the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* case that San Marcos would begin the process of integration of public schools and spaces.

Even though segregation would eventually end, a community was still haunted by the presence of Aquarena. To the descendants of the Coahuiltecan people, the development of an amusement park on top of the San Marcos Springs was sacrilegious. The site where they believe their ancestors arrived from the underworld was now teeming with tourists

¹⁴⁶ Carl and Gertrude Durham, interview by author, San Marcos, February 23, 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Carl and Gertrude Durham, interview by author.

and non-native animals, all blissfully unaware of the disrespect brought by the park.¹⁴⁸ This issue would not be recognized or repaired until Southwest Texas State University would officially close Aquarena Springs 46 years later and begin to interpret the Indigenous history of the site, although not well, as will be examined in chapter three.

While relationships between the Latino, Black, and Indigenous communities have improved due to the efforts of Texas State, the University is still faced with the impact the park left on the environment.¹⁴⁹ While in operation, Aquarena Springs was responsible for introducing exotic species and pollutants to the water in addition to causing significant erosion on the lake's banks. Seen as an inexhaustible resource, uneducated managers of the park did not understand the significance the springs had on sustaining one of the most unique and significant ecosystems in the state. Because of this, many of the practices they implemented are still impacting the San Marcos River system, though today policies exist to help combat these stressors.

In addition to furthering the exclusion felt by Black and Brown San Martians, disrespect to an Indigenous sacred site, and destruction of a fragile ecosystem, Aquarena Springs also promoted romanticized and stereotypical ideas of the American frontier. With the creation of Texana Village, labeled by *The San Marcos Record* as “one of the most remarkable frontier town exhibits in the country,” Rogers’ and Russell’s presented their idealized interpretation of early Texas history to hundreds of thousands of impressed visitors. While their goal for creating such an attraction was to “preserve the heritage on which the state was founded,” their attempts at historical interpretation emphasized many

¹⁴⁸ Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author, San Marcos, February 18, 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Frank Arredondo, interview by author, San Marcos, February 6, 2023; Rachel Sanborn, San Marcos River Foundation, email message to author, February 17, 2023.

offensive and erroneous stereotypes, including comedic Native American names and an all-White wild west.¹⁵⁰

It is stories like these that must be acknowledged and included in the interpretation of Aquarena Springs to truly preserve its history. Although the memory of the park was one quite often held in high regard by Texans, the complete story of Roger's tourist attraction is complex and can be used as an examination of the broader history of San Marcos, Texas, and America as a whole. By including an analysis of these aspects within Aquarena interpretation, visitors can learn not only about the park's history and significance to the nation, but also the evolution of the social, commercial, and natural history of San Marcos. Coahuiltecan elders Dr. Mario Garza and Maria Rocha of the Indigenous Cultures Institute, former mayor Frank Arredondo, longtime residents Carl and Gertrude Durham, and San Marcos River Foundation Director of Operations Rachel Sanborn have shed light on the other side of Aquarena history. These individuals should not be assumed to represent the absolute opinions of their respected communities, but rather provide an alternative insight on the attitudes towards Aquarena Springs.

The Submarine Theatre Presents: Indigenous Stereotypes

The first of these perspectives to be discussed is that of Dr. Mario Garza, chairman and founder of the Indigenous Cultures Institute (ICI), and his wife Maria Rocha, secretary of the ICI and member of the Council for the Indigenous and Tejano Community. Both Garza and Rocha are members of the Miakan-Garza Band, a group of Coahuiltecan Indians,

¹⁵⁰ "Colorful Frontier Comes to Life in Texana Village Exhibit: Aquarena Achieves Realism with Display of Rare Artifacts," *San Marcos Record*, December 4, 1958.

who received state recognition by the 83rd Legislature for providing “cultural and educational programs and presentations” for almost over 20 years.¹⁵¹ Since 2006 the ICI has worked tirelessly to “preserve the cultures of the Native Americans indigenous to Texas and northern Mexico while maintaining” their covenant with sacred sites.¹⁵²

Though the institution was founded in 2006, both Rocha and Garza have worked to preserve the heritage of their people as well as protect sacred sites and the remains of Coahuiltecan ancestors. Although not a federally recognized tribe, the Coahuiltecan were originally composed of “hundreds of small, autonomous, distinctively named” hunter-gather groups, who populated northeastern Mexico and southern Texas. The name Coahuiltecan, stems from a construction of information recorded by the Spaniards who came in contact with the Coahuilteco speaking peoples and did not come about until most of the groups were extinct.¹⁵³ Believed to be related to the original peoples who inhabited the San Marcos Springs, the Coahuiltecan people regard the site as sacred and a crucial part of their origin story.¹⁵⁴

According to their origin story, called Napakō which means “our journey,” the universe was divided into two spheres of existence. The upperworld contained all of the things of the earth except the people, who resided as spirits, or napak, in the underworld. One day, an entity threw her head into the sky to become the moon which began to pull on the earth creating the energy needed to turn the spirits into human beings. Unable to live in

¹⁵¹ Honoring the Miakan/Garza Band of the Coahuiltecan Indians of Texas for its cultural and educational contributions, H.Res. 1618, 83rd R.S., *Texas Legislature Online*, (April 29, 2013).

¹⁵² “Welcome: Indigenous Cultures Institute,” Home, Indigenous Cultures Institute, Accessed February 20, 2023, <https://indigenoucultures.org/>.

¹⁵³ Anonymous, “Coahuiltecan Indians,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/coahuiltecan-indians>.

¹⁵⁴ Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author, San Marcos, February 18, 2023.

the underworld, the pilam (humans) prayed for release into the upperworld. One day a sacred deer, known as a panama appeared to the pilam and guided them over difficult terrain until they reached a water filled portal leading to the upperworld. The pilam grabbed hold of the mighty antlers of the panama as they began to swim through the portal towards the upperworld. Above the surface sat a miakan, or waterbird who noticed the struggle of the swimming beings, and dove into the water to pull them out into the sunlight of the upperworld. It is the San Marcos Springs where this event is believed to have taken place.¹⁵⁵

This belief not only comes from oral tradition but is also represented in Indigenous rock art located near the Pecos River near Seminole Canyon State Park and is believed to be over 4,000 years old. This mural, known as the “White Shaman Panel,” includes images of four spring locations in Texas, which geographically correspond to the San Marcos, Barton, Comal, and San Pedro Springs, all of which are revered by the Coahuiltecan people.¹⁵⁶ In addition, the mural also features elements of the creation story, including guiding panamas, a headless female deity, and figures that are speculated to represent the spirits before they transformed into pilam.¹⁵⁷

Considering this intimate connection to the San Marcos Springs, it is easy to understand that Garza and Rocha share very different feelings towards Aquarena Springs than many of their San Marcos neighbors. According to the pair, the park was a “money

¹⁵⁵ Maria Rocha, “Coahuiltecan Creation Story | Napakō,” The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, November 30, 2021, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eqhmQNjvQA.

¹⁵⁶ Maria Rocha, “Story of the Coahuiltecan,” Filmed by Jameson Dunn and Hector Montemayor-Perez, September 22, 2020, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MHtlRJHGd4, 1:55.

¹⁵⁷ Eric A. Powell, “Reading the White Shaman Mural,” *Archaeology*, November/December 2017, <https://www.archaeology.org/issues/274-1711/features/5996-reading-the-white-shaman-mural>.

making venture” focused solely on providing entertainment to visiting tourists, rather than educating them on the history of the site and significance of the ecosystem. As is demonstrated in the first chapter, this is not far from the truth although it is important to acknowledge that this commercial mindset was not exclusive to Aquarena Springs, but rather one that was utilized across the nation at many roadside attractions.

The tourist culture of the mid-twentieth century was one based around the “presence of an entrepreneurial vision” that had the ability to define the significance of particular place, regardless of whether that display was accurate to the facts.¹⁵⁸ For places like Aquarena Springs, this involves not only physically changing the landscape to match a planned appearance, but also creating a falsified sense of history that helped present the culture of the American frontier as one born purely from Euro-American cultures, rather than a mix of Indigenous, Latino, Black, and White heritages.¹⁵⁹ Rogers’ and Russell’s attempts at educating the public of the history of early Texas through entertainment and amusement was a tactic utilized by similar sites such as Weeki Wachee Springs, whose name actually derives from the Seminole Indians, and Silver Springs parks in Florida.¹⁶⁰

While there were many aspects of Western life that were displayed at Aquarena Springs, the portrayal of the American Indian is perhaps the most inaccurate and offensive, an issue that persists at entertainment sites around the country to this day.¹⁶¹ While there is

¹⁵⁸ Hal K. Rothman, “Selling the Meaning of Place: Entrepreneurship, Tourism, and Community Transformation in the Twentieth-Century American West,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 4 (1996): 525–57.

¹⁵⁹ Susan Rhoades Neel, “Tourism and the American West: New Departures,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no.4 (1996): 517.

¹⁶⁰ “The Magnificent History of Weeki Wachee Springs State Park,” History, Weeki Wachee Springs, Accessed March 29, 2023, <https://weekiwachee.com/about-us/history/>.

¹⁶¹ Julie Scimmel, “Inventing the Indian,” in *The West as America, Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1991), 149.

not much evidence regarding the actual information included on Indigenous cultures in Texana Village, there is documentation of the Indian themed shows performed at the Submarine Theatre after the installation of the fiberglass volcano in 1967.¹⁶² Like the attempts at “complete authenticity” found in Texana Village, the Submarine Theatre performances claimed to tell the tale of “an Indian who actually lived in this area.”¹⁶³ According to Maria Rocha however, at least in the Coahuiltecan mythos, the characters and story being told were purely fictional.

When the Submarine Theatre first began performances in 1950 it featured acts similar to those found at Weeki Wachee Springs, the inspiration behind Roger’s Aquarena.¹⁶⁴ Aquamaids and Glurpo the Clown would entertain curious onlookers with underwater feats such as ballet, smoking, drinking a soda, and having a picnic. While these acts, of course, took place within the sacred waters of the San Marcos Springs, they did not yet promote stereotypes or poke fun at Indigenous cultures.¹⁶⁵ It would not be until the 1967 remodeling of the Submarine Theatre that these offensive acts would occur.

Gone was the comparably simplistic stage of old Aquarena, now replaced by volcanic smoke and eruptions. This change in direction actually corresponded with the growing obsession White America had with the “Old West” and Indigenous cultures in the 1960s. Considered by some historians, such as Phillip J. Deloria, author of *Playing Indian*, to be a result of the anxieties surrounding personal identity as a result of the Cold War, the

¹⁶² Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*,” (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 50 – 55; “Aquarena Slates Volcano.” *San Marcos Record*. June 8, 1967

¹⁶³ ViagensImagens, “AQUARINA SPRINGS / SAN MARCOS TEXAS / Remember Aquarena Springs in San Marcos / We miss you! (1994),” published October 19, 2010, video, <https://youtu.be/w0eoOHEK4dk>.

¹⁶⁴ Rich Woodrick, “Mermaids of Weeki Wachee film footage from 1950s,” published April 9, 2020, video, <https://youtu.be/vsofSV9oz6U>.

¹⁶⁵ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*,” 33 – 50.

United States was embracing the romanticized portrayal of the American Indian, and Aquarena played into that trend.¹⁶⁶ Though originally Polynesian themed, as is demonstrated in several period home movies and news reports, the show eventually transitioned into a story of love between a Comanche warrior and beautiful Indian maiden. Regardless of which culture was being portrayed, the Indigenous themed performances at the Submarine Theatre were far from flattering.

In addition to physically changing the Submarine Theatre's structure, cast member roles were revamped to better fit the new show. While the role of the female performers remained virtually the same throughout the park's run, Aquamaid costumes evolved from tutus and Esther Williams like swimsuits to outfits reminiscent of a commercialized luau. It is during the volcano era of the Submarine Theatre that we see the introduction of mermaids to the underwater show though not all female performers donned synthetic tails. Like the original performers they would continue to amaze audiences with underwater ballet, picnics, and interaction with the fish and waterfowl of Spring Lake.

Glurpo however, who fortunately no longer donned a terrifying silicone mask, went through more significant character changes, as he would become an essential part of the story being told. During the Polynesian themed shows he was known as Glurpo the Witch Doctor who appeared in a grass skirt and teeth necklace, and was "poised to bring help to the native village."¹⁶⁷ When the show eventually evolved into one centered around the Plains Indian cultures, he was split into three characters, Singing Wolf, Big Mouth, and the "old and ugly medicine man" He Smells, who were costumed in oversized wigs, swim

¹⁶⁶ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 129.

¹⁶⁷ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, " 53.

shorts with brown loin cloths, and the occasional necklace.¹⁶⁸ Like the Glurpos of the original show, these comedic men would perform underwater pantomime acts that involved blowing bubble rings (now in the context of smoking the peace pipe in a “real underwater powwow”), interacting with audience members, and being a pest to the Aquamaids.¹⁶⁹

In the performance documented by a 1989 home movie, the audience is told the story of a fight between the three men for the love of “beautiful Indian maiden” She Blushes. While the entire performance was not captured in this video, it does depict some of the stereotypes put on display for the audience. When introduced to the main protagonist Singing Wolf, the narrator tells the audience that he is looking for “Comanche Indian Squaw” She Blushes.¹⁷⁰ If the utilization of stereotypical names for the Indigenous characters, who were portrayed by non-Indigenous cast members was not enough to make a modern observer cringe, the theatre also utilized the term “squaw.” Though once a commonly used word for female Indigenous people, today the term is universally regarded by the Indigenous community as being derogatory and misogynistic.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Chris Loper, “Aquarena Springs, San Marcos, TX video 1989,” August 16, 1989, video, <https://youtu.be/H3pRSe68otg>

¹⁶⁹ Chris Loper, “Aquarena Springs, San Marcos, TX video 1989;” Anthony Shane McKenzie, “Aquarena Springs Featured on FOX After Breakfast 1994,” published March 1, 2012, video, <https://youtu.be/oHqSL6sfb80>.

¹⁷⁰ Chris Loper, “Aquarena Springs, San Marcos, TX video 1989.”

¹⁷¹ Georgetta Stonefish Ryan, “Why is the Word Squaw Offensive?” in *Do All Indians Live in Tipis? Questions and Answers from The National Museum Of The American Indian*, (New York: Collins in association with the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 12 – 13.



Figure 8. Actor in the original Glurpo the Clown costume before the introduction of the Indigenous themed production.¹⁷²

¹⁷² Unknown, *Aquarena Clown*, n.d., photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003902901B.jpg>.



Figure 9. Submarine Theatre Actors, including Glurpo the Witch Doctor and Ralph the Swimming Pig, wearing stereotypical Indigenous costumes in the Polynesian Themed Submarine Theatre.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Unknown, *Aquarena Springs Submarine Theatre*, n.d., photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003901671B.jpg>.

As the show progresses, the audience is encouraged to help Singing Wolf find the beautiful maiden by calling out to her three times. Although *She Blushes* does not appear until the theatre sinks below the water line, it is during this moment that the most famous performer at Aquarena, Ralph the Swimming Pig emerges to perform his famous swine dive before swimming a lap around the arena.¹⁷⁴ While no further videos could be found that show the rest of the story, it is evident from what we have that the portrayal of Indigenous people was on par with the worst of the national trend. For decades, Indigenous people were the subject of unflattering Hollywood films, cliché television, racist literature, and anti-Native stage performances. While this practice has seemingly disappeared, some argue that it still occurs.

Though people of Indigenous heritage have been connected to nationally significant events and organizations, they have long to be victims of dehumanization by media and entertainment. Their connection to the earliest inhabitants of North America and continued presence through American history make their culture familiar to White Americans, yet their non-White, non-Christian appearance makes them akin to foreigners easily discriminated against and persecuted.¹⁷⁵ Like the many diverse cultures that make up people who are classified as White, Black, or Latino, Indigenous people are more than stereotypes. However, if they did not act like the stereotypical “Indians” found in the Submarine Theatre or other media, they were not considered “true Indians.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Chris Loper, “Aquarena Springs, San Marcos, TX video 1989.”

¹⁷⁵ Julie Scimmel, “Inventing the Indian,” in *The West as America*, 149.

¹⁷⁶ Colin G. Calloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*, 5th ed, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016), 584 – 587.

While Aquarena Springs was a product of its time, its attempts at “authentically” portraying “true” stories of the American frontier contributed to the dehumanization of the American Indian. To Rocha and Garza, a pig swimming in their sacred waters and the derogatory utilization of their Indigenous heritage for the purpose of entertainment and marketing was beyond offensive.¹⁷⁷ While the characters portrayed in the performances at the Submarine Theatre were not directly associated with the Coahuiltecan people, the act of having them perform in the sacred waters of the San Marcos Springs made visitors associate Spring Lake with offensive stereotypes rather than the true history and people who have a spiritual and ancestral connection to the site.

Even years after the park closed, Rocha’s emotions were still strong as she discussed the frustration she had with not only its sacrilege to the sacred springs, but the modern ignorance the town still has to its connection with the Coahuiltecan people. The town’s embrace of a fictional creature as the symbol of river guardianship, rather than the five guardians of creation who were tasked with that responsibility since people have walked the Earth, is perhaps the most prominent cause of her frustrations.¹⁷⁸ Unlike the Aquarena mermaids who were not created for the purpose of ecological preservation, the Coahuiltecan people already have totems responsible for the restoration of harmony in the ecosystem. This task is believed to be accomplished by the pa-uta’p (eagle), miakan (waterbird), clam paya yuye (wolf), panama (deer), and apamxuepet (jaguar), who all have a quality that allows them to “step in and out of two opposite components of a single reality” to perform their guardianship duties.¹⁷⁹ Of course, unlike the fictional mermaids,

¹⁷⁷ Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author.

¹⁷⁸ Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author.

¹⁷⁹ Dr. Mario Garza, “Spirit Guardians of Creation,” Project Designed by Thom Rogers, Date Unknown.

these real life animals are not as marketable or unique and thus the mermaid has been adopted as the symbol and guardian of the San Marcos River.

Despite the many issues with Aquarena Springs, Rocha and Garza are hopeful about the path forward. According to them, one of the first good things the University did for the Indigenous community was remove the structures of Aquarena Springs from the sacred waters of Spring Lake. Regardless of the reason for restoring the park to its natural state, to them that represented progress for the community. The experience of watching the removal of Aquarena features was “unbelievable” and a moment in which Rocha believes that society was going the right way, an opinion far different than those of some community members who watched as their beloved attraction was turned into a memory.¹⁸⁰ With those features gone, the Meadows Center continued to evolve into a center for research and environmental preservation, although it does display information on the archaeological digs and Indigenous history.

Because of this shift away from the commercialization of Spring Lake, the Indigenous Cultures Institute has a “very good” relationship with the city of San Marcos and Texas State University, that continues to grow and develop with the passing years. After the removal of the Aquarena structures, another example of this positive relationship building can be seen with the recent trend of repatriation of Indigenous artifacts and remains. For decades, Garza has advocated for the removal of Coahuiltecan ancestors from archives for reburial in their native soil. While problems continue with some institutions

¹⁸⁰ Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author.

such as the University of Texas, he states that Texas State University is one of the few places that have returned remains to a non-federally recognized tribe.¹⁸¹

With the return of these remains and the establishment of an Indigenous reburial ground on non-flood plain land donated by the city, the Indigenous Cultures Institute has been able to return eleven ancestors to the earth.¹⁸² In addition to this “monumental victory,” since 2010 the ICI has hosted the Sacred Springs Powwow, a two day long festival on the shores of Spring Lake for the “celebration of culture featuring art, music, dance, and food from across Native America.”¹⁸³ This event, which is sponsored by both the University and San Marcos Arts Commission, is currently the best way for residents of San Marcos to experience the town’s Indigenous roots and get an authentic display of Native American culture as opposed to that preciously seen in the Submarine Theatre.

Although Aquarena Springs is no longer around as a theme park, the Meadows Center does not offer a lot of historical interpretation. While the center does provide several informational signs on the site’s connection to the Coahuiltecan ancestors, more could be done to further the education available to visitors. Although suggestions provided in chapter three pertain to Aquarena Springs, they can be used to include other aspects of Spring Lake history, especially those related to the Paleo-Indian and Coahuiltecan peoples. While the suggestions made by this project may never come to fruition, fortunately the University and Indigenous Cultures Institute already have plans for further on-site interpretation at Spring Lake.

¹⁸¹ Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author.

¹⁸² Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author.

¹⁸³ Denise Cathey, “Repatriation for native tribe to near fruition in 2016,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, December 30, 2016; “About Sacred Springs Powwow,” Sacred Springs Powwow, Indigenous Cultures Institute, Accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.sspowwow.com/>.

In an interview conducted in December of 2022 with Texas State University President Dr. Kelly Damphousse, the president stated that the University hopes to further this relationship with the local Indigenous community by opening a cultural center near campus, a plan which the ICI elders expanded upon during their interview.¹⁸⁴ According to Garza, the Indigenous Cultures Institute received a grant of five million dollars to be used for the establishment of a cultural center on land across from Spring Lake, given to them by Texas State University.¹⁸⁵

It is here that Garza and Rocha hope to display Indigenous art and artifacts, as well as provide spaces for theatrical and religious performances. In addition, members of the community who still practice the Indigenous religion hope to see a specific area where ceremonies can be held away from the spectating public. Plans also include constructing a sweat lodge and herbal garden to not only build community within the population, but also educate the younger members of the tribe about their culture and medicine. While the completion of this project is still years away, it is encouraging to hear that Texas State University and the city of San Marcos are doing what they can to protect and honor the area's Indigenous culture after it was mocked for decades on their sacred land.

Far from Authentic: Aquarena's Frontier

While some members of the Indigenous community consider the era of Aquarena Springs to be one of sadness and disrespect, some Black and Latino San Martians view the theme park as a place built for non-colored visitors. Although this study found no

¹⁸⁴ Dr. Kelly Damphousse, interview with author, San Marcos, December 14, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Maria Rocha and Dr. Mario Garza, interview by author.

documentary evidence that confirms Aquarena was segregated during its first few seasons, the community members interviewed suggest that it was. According to lifelong resident Carl Durham, because San Marcos adhered to the laws that mandated segregation in public spaces, he believed he was not welcome at the park just as he was segregated from other local recreational facilities.¹⁸⁶

When the park opened in 1950, San Marcos was still upholding Jim Crow laws and customs enacted during and after Reconstruction.¹⁸⁷ Although this era is often associated with the state sponsored discrimination of Black Americans, Latinos, especially those of Mexican heritage were also victims of this discrimination in Texas.¹⁸⁸ According to former San Marcos mayor Frank Arredondo, a native resident and an individual who experienced this discrimination first-hand, there was, and continues to be, an invisible division line in the city that separates the minorities and working class citizens from their well-to-do White neighbors.¹⁸⁹

While San Marcos is noted for its fast transition to desegregation, with the high school being the first of any size in Texas to admit students of color, it still harbored discrimination of its non-White communities.¹⁹⁰ In 1924, the town hosted 20,000 people for a Klu Klux Klan parade and barbeque, with businesses and community leaders welcoming the members.¹⁹¹ Like the general misconception of segregation only targeting

¹⁸⁶ Carl and Gertrude Durham, interview by author, San Marcos, February 23, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ "The 1890's: Jim Crow Laws," Forever Free: Nineteenth Century African-American Legislators and Constitutional Convention Delegates of Texas, State Preservation Board and Texas State Library and Archives Commission, April 22, 2015, <https://www.tsl.texas.gov/exhibits/forever/endofanera/page3.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Arnolde De León, Ph.D. and Robert A. Calvert, "Segregation," *Handbook of Texas Online*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/segregation>.

¹⁸⁹ Frank Arredondo, interview by author, San Marcos, November 3, 2023.

¹⁹⁰ "A history of desegregation in San Marcos," *San Marcos News*, February 12, 1987.

¹⁹¹ "20,000 Attend Klan Parade and Barbecue," *San Marcos Record*, July 25, 1924.

Black Americans, the resurgence of Klan activities in the 20th century targeted not only Black communities, but foreigners, Jews, and Catholics. Catholicism has been practiced widely throughout Latin America's population from the first Spanish settlement in the 1500s to this day. Because of this, many Latinos were targeted by the Klan for their nationality and religious beliefs.¹⁹²

Although Aquarena was not documented as being segregated, before desegregation Black and Latino San Martians were not welcome to explore many of the recreational opportunities in their town. Such places, which teem with diversity today, did not begin to cater to its non-White citizens until the desegregation efforts of the late 1950s through the 1960s. When A.B. Rogers opened Rogers River Resort in 1912, that section of the San Marcos River became a private investment that did not allow the entry of "colored" individuals.¹⁹³ Even when the park was finally acquired by the city, discrimination continued. It took the courage of Black and Latino residents to simply jump into the water if they did not receive an entry handstamp to finally end segregation of the city park.¹⁹⁴

For citizens like Frank Arredondo and Carl and Gertrude Durham, the privatization of aquatic resources such as Spring Lake by the Rogers family was detrimental to Black and Brown residents. When these community members were not permitted to enjoy the maintained private parks, they found other areas of the river to use for recreation. Arredondo notes the area below the Spring Lake dam as one location for public enjoyment

¹⁹² Christopher Long, "Ku Klux Klan," *Handbook of Texas Online*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/ku-klux-klan>; James Bell, Neha Sahgal, *Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region*, (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>.

¹⁹³ "A.B. Rogers, Civic, Business Leader Dies Here Sunday," *The San Marcos Record*, May 1, 1953.

¹⁹⁴ "A history of desegregation in San Marcos," *San Marcos News*, February 12, 1987.

while Durham mentions the southern section of the river east of Interstate 35 as another. Although these places may not have offered the same facilities as the private parks, they allowed excluded San Marcos residents to enjoy the river.¹⁹⁵

In addition to finding their own places for river recreation, Black and Latino San Martians also found solace within their own communities. According to Durham, churches, schools, and neighborhoods helped ease the pain inflicted by segregation by hosting events and creating organizations that allowed them to experience the same joys as their White neighbors. While he knew he was not able to experience the same privileges as White citizens, he notes that teachers, community leaders, and families did what they could to make the most out of an unjust situation.¹⁹⁶

Eventually of course, San Marcos desegregated and soon all communities were able to come together to truly appreciate all their town had to offer. Unfortunately, while the city hoped to become a good example of integration and acceptance to other Southern communities, Aquarena Springs remained an example of the persistence of stereotypes in entertainment.¹⁹⁷ Along with the offensive Native American portrayals being performed in the Submarine Theatre, the park was noted for its attempts at interpreting various aspects of Texas history through performances and exhibits located around the grounds. Unsurprisingly, these attempts at education and entertainment often left out unappealing historical facts and played into familiar stereotypes of American frontier life so often found in the media of the time.

¹⁹⁵ Frank Arredondo, Interview with author.

¹⁹⁶ Carl Durham, Interview with author.

¹⁹⁷ "San Marcos a Model for Peaceful Integration of Schools," *San Marcos Record*, February 7, 1963.

Texana Village, the Old Burleson and Merriman Cabins, and the reconstructed Spanish Mission, along with several other attractions, were all utilized by Aquarena as a way of furthering this mythological perspective of the American West.¹⁹⁸ Visitors to these sites would find no mention of the enslaved peoples who created most of the wealth of San Marcos settlers such as Burleson and Merriman, nor would they get a true picture of the diverse peoples who made up frontier culture. Like the stories being told in the Submarine Theatre, the purpose of these “historical” aspects of Aquarena Springs was not necessarily to educate but rather entertain to ensure the park’s finances continued flowing.

Aquarena Springs was not the only attraction in the United States to be employing these mythicized methods of historical presentation. Along with the nation’s Cold War era obsession with Indigenous cultures, America has been engrossed in a fondness for the romanticization of the frontier for well over a century. According to historian Richard Slotkin, author of *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, the economical and geographic expansion brought about between 1815 and 1870 led to a popular belief in the fortunes and mysteries of the American West for the White population, thus creating the accepted frontier stereotypes and racism of the modern era.¹⁹⁹

Beginning with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show, which ran from 1883 to 1917, and surviving in modern western attractions like those found in Aquarena Springs and Tombstone, Arizona, businessmen have capitalized on this accepted notion of what the frontier was and was not.²⁰⁰ For commercial purposes, like the American Indian who was

¹⁹⁸ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*,” 81 – 99.

¹⁹⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 1998, 17.

²⁰⁰ Paul Fees, “Wild West shows: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, Western Essays, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Accessed March 31, 2023, <https://centerofthewest.org/learn/western-essays/wild-west-shows/>.

clothed in feathers and bison hide, the American frontier was a place filled with handsome (White) cowboys and bad, ugly, non-White banditos, horses and wild beasts, open ranges and untamed landscapes. In actuality, along with White settlers, Black and Latino populations were integral to the development of the cultural and geographic landscape of the 1800s western frontier.²⁰¹

According to Gina DeAngelis, author of *The Black Cowboys*, African Americans were integral to the settling of the American frontier through their participation as mountain men, scouts, fur traders, lawmen, cowboys, outlaws, and businessmen, among other professions. Though their influence on the development of the west is not as heavily documented as that of the White pioneers, they still served an important role in the conquest of the frontier.²⁰² Even the first Vaqueros, a term strongly associated with Latino cowboys (though African Americans were included), were originally enslaved Black “moriscos,” or Muslims who converted to Christianity on the Iberian Peninsula.²⁰³

Similarly, Danielo and D.H. Figueredo, authors of *Revolvers and Pistolas, Vaqueros and Caballeros: Debunking the Old West* credit Latinos with playing an important role of the development of the American West not only due to their presence in the area prior to the settlement of White migrants, but also through their participation as vaqueros, explorers, settlers, ranchers, and vigilantes. Though they are not as frequently left out of the narrative as their African American counterparts, like Native Americans,

²⁰¹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*

²⁰² Gina DeAngelis, “Blacks in the Americas” in *The Black Cowboys*, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1998), 9 – 23.

²⁰³ Danilo H. Figueredo, and D.H. Figueredo, *Revolvers and Pistolas, Vaqueros and Caballeros: Debunking the Old West*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2015), 44 – 45.

their roles in the stereotyped American West are typically vilified.²⁰⁴ While no evidence was found that demonstrates Aquarena Springs had offensive stereotypical characters perform in the historically themed attractions, the supposed authenticity strived for by Rogers and Russell did involve the romanticization of Mexican culture while ignoring the influence of Black frontiersmen.

When Aquarena Springs underwent a significant renovation in anticipation of the 1956 season, Russell and Rogers both agreed that the park was in need of new additions to further attract and entertain tourists. Along with a new marking campaign, additional 40 seats to the Submarine Theatre, and updated landscaping, the pair began to collect artifacts, buildings, and furnishings to add to the attraction pool. The two would attempt to provide visitors with a historical attraction that strived for “complete authenticity” as it told the story of the western frontier and history of early Texas life.²⁰⁵ They would put these items on display at various points in the park, most notably in Texana Village, a place *The San Marcos Record* reported as being one of three local frontier towns deemed to be “the most authentic and best developed” in the nation.²⁰⁶

Created by several years of active research and collecting, there is no reason to believe that the way in which Rogers and Russell chose to portray the Texas frontier came from a place of malicious intent. Rather, it can be argued that it was born of a fondness for this era, and a desire to increase visitation to Aquarena Springs. Despite this probable lack

²⁰⁴ Danilo H. Figueredo, and D.H. Figueredo, *Revolvers and Pistolas, Vaqueros and Caballeros*.

²⁰⁵ “Aquarena Launches Expansion; Expects Record Crowd in 1956,” *San Marcos Record*, December 9, 1955.

²⁰⁶ “Frontier Fever: Area Building Up Attractions for Visitors,” *San Marcos Record*, May 7, 1959.

of malevolence, these exhibits did not accurately portray early Texas history but instead presented guests with a Hollywood-like experience that successfully entertained.

Unlike the performances of the Submarine Theatre, the exhibits and shows featured in these attractions were not well documented. Because of this, one must rely on Doni Weber's *Images of America: Aquarena Springs, The San Marcos Record*, and postcards to get an idea of the features that were on display in that section of Aquarena Springs. Although the park was open to all visitors when these features were introduced, Durham admitted to never being able to visit the park due to financial restrictions, and Arredondo did not provide commentary on the matter as he too had little interaction with the place.²⁰⁷

Despite this lack of documentation and first-hand experience, it is still evident that the historical attractions of Aquarena Springs utilized offensive and romanticized elements. Given the representation of Indigenous peoples found in the Submarine Theatre, it can be inferred that the frontier themed attractions too pulled from a stereotypical understanding of the American West. The evidence provided from photographs and articles demonstrates that the importance of African Americans in the development of the frontier was seemingly nonexistent and the use of Mexican American culture was more for entertainment and marketing, rather than legitimate education.

²⁰⁷ Carl Durham, Interview with the author; Frank Arredondo, Interview with the author.



Figure 10. W.E. "Papa" Phillips reading a newspaper in the replica of the Sattler, Texas Post Office.²⁰⁸

In Texana Village visitors could view artifacts, buildings, and furnishings collected by Rogers and Russell, which included the Golden Eagle Saloon, a barbershop, blacksmith (which burnt down and was later rebuilt), post office, general store, livery stable, jail, and

²⁰⁸ Unknown, *Texana Village Post Office*, 1977, photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003901762B.jpg>.

Dr. Eli T. Merriman's cabin, one of the oldest surviving structures in San Marcos. These buildings were collected from around the state and carefully reconstructed at Aquarena for the purpose of preserving "authentic" frontier life and educating visitors, regardless of their connection to the town.²⁰⁹ While some of these buildings served as standalone structures, others, such as the old post office were staffed by local community members such as W.E. "Papa" Phillips, who provided visitors with information on Texas and San Marcos history.²¹⁰ While the information they conveyed has not been documented, the inclusion of local residents to provide information to visitors was perhaps one of the most "authentic" features of Texana Village due to their first-hand knowledge of the town and its history.

In addition to getting to walk through a frontier town display, visitors could also delight in a variety of shows and activities featuring talented animals. From the debut of Texana Village through the mid-1960's Sam King ran a horse show, which quickly grew to become a highlight of the park. While short lived, these shows displayed seemingly more legitimate aspects of frontier life through the exhibition of experienced riders and their steeds who performed the meticulous tricks and maneuvers that would be expected of a Hollywood cowboy.²¹¹ On the other hand however, for a less frontier themed experience, visitors could also watch the Bird of Paradise show, an idea also likely taken from Weeki Wachee which had a show of the same name, where tropical birds such as macaws (which

²⁰⁹ "Frontier Comes to Life in Texana Village Exhibit," *San Marcos Record*, December 4, 1958; "Governor Briscoe gives Texana Village host Hospitality Award," *Hays County Citizen*, November 6, 1975.

²¹⁰ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 97.

²¹¹ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 91 – 101.

are not native to the state) performed stunts that included riding bicycles and speaking to the audience.²¹²

In addition to these shows, visitors could also experience the wild beasts of Aquarena's fictionalized American frontier. Here they could walk through a recreated alligator infested swamp, a geological feature found in east Texas not San Marcos, where Russell kept 24 live animals on display. (These living dinosaurs, along with Russell's renowned gator wrestling skills will be discussed later in this chapter.) It was also in Texana Village that visitors could play tic-tac-toe against a chicken or watch as other poultry performed various tasks such as piano playing or shooting hoops, all for the amusement of visitors.²¹³ It is displays such as these that make Aquarena's Texana Village less authentic and more gimmicky as they catered to the entertainment of visitors, not their education.

Similar to Texana Village's failed attempts at authentically portraying history through historical displays and inclusion of local residents to provide information, the attractions located on the hillside above Spring Lake, known as the Hanging Gardens, also attempted to include "authentic" displays of history. Unfortunately, it is also here that Mexican culture appeared to be utilized for atmospheric effect rather than education. These additional "authentic" historical displays included a reconstructed Spanish mission, a working 300-year-old water lift known as a "noria," the indoor market Casa de Papel (House of Paper), which was an open-air Mexican market that sold a variety of Mexican themed goods and souvenirs, and the reconstructed cabin of Texas Vice President General

²¹² Chris Loper, "Aquarena Springs, San Marcos, TX video 1989."

²¹³ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 100 – 101.

Edward Burleson.²¹⁴ Like the history presented in Texana Village, these features lacked a proper representation of the true frontiersmen whether Black, White, Indigenous, or Latino.

The most authentic historical aspect of this section of the park was a state historical marker erected during the Texas centennial celebrations of 1936. This marker set in the iconic Texas pink granite utilized in signs erected during the centennial, marked the “approximate site of the missions San Francisco Xavier de Los Dolores, Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, [and] San Ildefonso,” and stands next to the recreated Spanish mission. While some markers erected during the centennial are products of Texas exceptionalism (the belief that Texas stands alone in its history and geography), the information displayed on the one featured at Spring Lake does not convey that ideology. Rather, it provides a quick explanation of the significance of the site and history of the San Xavier mission system.²¹⁵

In addition to this, the other most authentic piece of history on display in this section was a marker signaling the approximate location of General Edward Burleson’s cabin, erected by the Moon – McGehee Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas in 1932. While the original cabin was still present when A.B. Rogers acquired the homestead tract in 1926, it had been flattened nearly a decade prior during a significant storm. Paul had the original structure dismantled and stored in 1960 until a replica was built in 1964, though it is unknown whether any original materials were used during the reconstruction. The marker and design however were the only authentic aspects of the Burleson cabin as it was

²¹⁴ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 77 – 97.

²¹⁵ Helen Johnson, “‘IT’S LIKE A WHOLE OTHER COUNTRY:’ Texas Exceptionalism and the 1936 Centennial,” (master’s thesis, Texas State University, 2023).

used to house the workshop of Richard Manley, a talented glassblower who delighted visitors with his art for years.²¹⁶

While little is known about the other attractions featured in the Hanging Gardens, what can be seen in the few sources documenting their operations is that their utilization of Mexican culture was purely cosmetic. Like its competitor Six Flags Over Texas, which has themed areas designed to represent the nation's whose flags once flew over the state, Aquarena Springs' Mexican Village was used for entertainment purposes. It was a fabricated Mexican settlement that included the stereotypical elements of paper crafts and bright colors, often found in whitewashed Mexican restaurants.²¹⁷ Though this study did not find evidence of attempted historical interpretation in the Hanging Gardens, such as the inclusion of local residents to provide historical information and shows found in Texana Village, like the Submarine Theatre, this area probably utilized Mexican culture for entertainment and aesthetic purposes rather than education.

Though it is not documented whether or not these locations also featured non-Hispanic employees dressing in stereotypical costumes, during Casa de Papel's operation as a Mexican market, it employed the talent of a Ciudad, Juarez, native. Artist Jose de Jesus-Otero, along with his wife Maria del Carmen and nephew Geronimo Medina were hired by Aquarena in 1968 to create impressive paper flowers, along with other works of art all sold in the market. According to Don Russell and Gene Phillips, the inclusion of the family and their talent at Aquarena was a way to add "a touch of authenticity" to the park's Mexican village.²¹⁸ With this reasoning, it would not be unfair to suggest that the family's

²¹⁶ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 88 – 89.

²¹⁷ "Business is Blooming at Aquarena Springs," *San Marcos Record*, August 8, 1968.

²¹⁸ "Business is Blooming at Aquarena Springs," *San Marcos Record*, August 8, 1968.

introduction to the staff at Aquarena was financially motivated and not in fact an effort at accurately displaying Texas history.

While it is important to note that these attractions were a product of their time, and do not necessarily come from a place of purposeful racism or hatred, it should still be acknowledged that presenting history in such a commercialized way further added insult to the real people of Spring Lake's history. Places highly regarded by the public, like Aquarena Springs, that own or operate historically or naturally significant properties, should educate their visitors properly and accurately. When financial ventures are allowed to avoid this responsibility, they have the potential to misrepresent the site's history thus incurring the risk of physical damage and broken relationships with communities that claim a connection to the site.

Fortunately, although Aquarena Springs misrepresented the history of early Texas, when Southwest Texas State acquired the park in 1994 steps were taken to rectify this issue. When the University decided to officially close Aquarena Springs, it continued to allow the public to enjoy the historic features of the park by being a stop on the Tanger Trolley Tour, a weekly history tour that took visitors of the Tanger Outlet Mall around various historical places in San Marcos, including the Merriman and Burleson Cabins and Golden Eagle Bar at the Aquarena Center.²¹⁹

Although the Tanger Trolley Tours were not run by the school, the University allowing visitors to explore to historic buildings located at Spring Lake was a small step towards better historical interpretation, as this kept them in the public's memory through

²¹⁹ Frances Stovall, "Trolley Tour is delightful way to discover Old Time San Marcos," *San Marcos Daily Record*, August 6, 1997.

interaction. In 2001, Texas State continued to assist in the telling of San Marcos history by moving a historic structure to a place with better public access. The school gifted the Dr. Eli T. Merriman cabin to the San Marcos Heritage Association for its “relocation to a public site” in order to be preserved as a historic structure, four decades after it was brought to Texana Village in 1960. Today the cabin is featured in the town’s Veramendi Plaza where visitors can tour the home along with other historic structures to learn about what life was like for Texans living in the 1850s.²²⁰

Nature’s Destruction Park

Although the placing of a historical structure in a public place and inclusion of proper historical interpretation at Spring Lake are two ways in which the University worked to repair the issues caused by the Aquarena Springs park, there was another negative aspect of the park that was not as easily repaired. Aquarena Springs was not only responsible for the misrepresentation of Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities, but also for the degradation of the San Marcos Springs and river ecosystems. According to San Marcos River Foundation Director of Operations Rachel Sanborn, when Aquarena was opened in 1950 “there was no consideration” that the lands it was operating on held unique ecological significance.²²¹

Though there was no concern for the conservation of Spring Lake’s ecological landscape by management, the idea of conserving our natural landscapes dates back to the

²²⁰ “The Dr. Eli T. Merriman Cabin Museum,” Plaza and Museums, Heritage Association of San Marcos, Accessed March 1, 2023, <https://www.heritagesanmarcos.org/dr-eli-t-merriman-cabin.html>.

²²¹ Rachel Sanborn (San Marcos River Foundation), email message to author, February 17, 2023.

late 19th century and the Progressive Era of the early 20th century. Born as a counter to the increasing urban growth and exploitation of resources, and paired with new scientific understandings, conservation has been a constant subject of debate ever since. In the United States this movement was led by people such as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Theodore Roosevelt, all highly praised (and condemned by some) for their efforts at promoting the protection of our natural landscapes and wildlife.²²² To these men and others like them, the protection of our natural resources was of utmost importance, especially due to the growing visitation of some of the nation's most unique landscapes as advertised via the "See America First" campaign of the railroads.²²³

While this movement helped promote the tourism industry in the United States, an increased number of visitors to natural landscapes put the sites in danger of contamination and commercialization. Railroads increased travel to domestic sites, and this was furthered in the early 20th century with the growing availability of the automobile, due, in part, by the Good Roads Movement, which campaigned for the improvement of better roads across the nation.²²⁴ In places such as Niagara Falls, the uncontrolled commercialization of the 19th and 20th centuries permanently damaged the landscapes of some of the nation's most unique sites both physically and aesthetically.²²⁵ Because of this, organizations such as the National Park Service, Sierra Club, and The Wildlife Society formed to help advocate for the protection of the country's natural resources.

²²² Matthew Mason, "Conservation: History and Future," What's New, Environmental Science, September 14, 2018, <https://www.environmentalscience.org/conservation>.

²²³ Jane Whiteley and Lee Whiteley, *The Playground Trail: The National Park-to-Park Highway: To and Through the National Parks of the West in 1920*, (N.p.: 2003), 16.

²²⁴ Isabel Gonzalez, "The Good Roads Movement and the National Park Service," Texas State University, November 18, 2021.

²²⁵ Brian J. Hudson, "Waterfalls, Tourism and Landscape," *Geography* 91, no. 1 (2006): 3–12. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40574128>.

The efforts of these organizations and conversationalists began to pay off as Congress began to enact laws designed to protect America's natural resources and prevent the growing economy from damaging water and air quality.²²⁶ Beginning with the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 and the Antiquities Act of 1906, which established the first legal protection of cultural and natural resources, Congress continued to implement laws designed to enhance the conservation of our undeveloped landscapes.²²⁷ While each decade in the twentieth century had a number of legal conservation victories, it is the 1960s and 1970s that are best known for their efforts in environmental protection.

While there had been many efforts by the 1950s to preserve landscapes and places of geologic significance, the San Marcos Springs were not yet considered worthy of protection. To Rogers, the most important factor was that it produced clean and clear water that allowed him to model Aquarena Springs after Weeki Wachee Springs and Silver Springs parks in Florida. Though it was known that the lake was home to unique species, such as the fountain darter and San Marcos gambusia which were listed as endangered in 1970 and 1980 respectively, the idea to protect these dwindling populations was not yet realized.²²⁸ Instead, Aquarena management focused on what they could do with the property to ensure continued visitation and relevancy in the amusement business.

²²⁶ "Environmental Conservation Laws: The foundation of cleaner water and healthier lands in America," The Nature Conservancy, Policy, July 7, 2022, <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/how-we-work/policy/environmental-conservation-laws/>.

²²⁷ "Antiquities Act: 1906 – 2006," Archaeology Program, National Park Service, April 20, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/archeology/sites/antiquities/about.htm>

²²⁸ "Fountain Darter (*Ethwestoma fonticola*)," Species, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, Accessed April 1, 2023, <https://fws.gov/species/fountain-darter-ethwestoma-fonticola>; "San Marcos Gambusia (*Gambusia georgei*)," Species, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, Accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.fws.gov/species/san-marcos-gambusia-gambusia-georgei>; Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.

This maximum capitalization attitude held by park management led to not only the misrepresentation of diverse cultures and degradation of a centuries old sacred site, but also the introduction of invasive species, pollutants, and damaging erosion that continue to plague the river and lake today. It is through the efforts of The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, The San Marcos River Foundation, the Texas Living Waters Project, and other environmental organizations that the damage caused by Aquarena Springs is gradually being repaired. Though not all practices employed by the park were permanently harmful to the river ecosystem, it is still important to acknowledge the negative impacts it had on this fragile landscape.

The San Marcos Springs, which rise from the Edwards Aquifer, are considered to be “one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems known in the southwestern United States.”²²⁹ The upper 4.5 miles of the river are home to a number of endemic species that rely on the constant flow and 72°F water produced from the springs.²³⁰ Like its sister rivers, the water of the San Marcos eventually makes its way to the bays of Texas on the Gulf, along with all of the pollutants it contains. While efforts are made today by communities along the river to clean it of visible contaminants and eliminate the use of harmful herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers, 1950s San Marcos was not as conscious about its impact on the river.

While near the end of Aquarena’s run, the park began to attempt to slowly shift towards a place of both entertainment and aquatic stewardship, but the effects of nearly 50

²²⁹ “Our River,” San Marcos River Foundation, Accessed February 22, 2023, <https://sanmarcosriver.org/our-river/>.

²³⁰ “Endangered Species,” Explore Spring Lake, The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment,” Accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.meadowscenter.txst.edu/ExploreSpringLake/EndangeredSpecies.html>.

years of poor natural resource management had already done its damage. Rebranded in 1994 as the Aquarena Springs Nature's Fun Park, Southwest Texas State University tried to keep the iconic theme park alive by promoting the attractions introduced by Rogers while also praising the ecological significance of the San Marcos Springs.²³¹ As we have already seen, unfortunately, this new tactic was not enough to bring the park out continued financial losses nor justify its continued ecological damage, and so the for-profit park officially closed in 1996.

While this loss of a nationally known attraction was devastating for the community members who loved it, with many comments left online relaying sentiments like “sad it is gone,” and “sorry to hear it closed,” it was ultimately the best thing to happen.²³² According to Sanborn, when the Rogers family decided to put Aquarena up for sale, Southwest Texas State University was not the only institution interested in purchasing the property. Interested buyers included Ozarka Water Bottling, a potential zoo, and the state famous waterpark company Schlitterbahn which has a large resort located in nearby New Braunfels, Texas, on the spring fed Comal River. To the San Marcos River Foundation, the head of the river being purchased by the University was by far the best scenario for its conservation.²³³

²³¹ “Aquarena Springs Presents Ambitious Events Calendar for '94 – '95 Season,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, August 23, 1994.

²³² Carmen Casas, “It was the most beautiful peaceful place for families to enjoy also educational. sad it is gone,” YouTube, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRufXnK5ZN0&lc=UgwueqrY2XumreZ9dkl4AaABAg>; Jody Guilbeaux, “i was in my early 30s and took my wife and 1st child there for vacation. my 1st child is now in her 40s and she remembers the good times we had there. sorry to hear it closed, but with inflation no one can afford to do anything now,” YouTube, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clflvKvms5g>.

²³³ Rachel Sanborn (San Marcos River Foundation), email message to author.

Throughout its operation, Aquarena Springs employed environmentally damaging methods to ensure the appearance of a clean and picturesque landscape. During the upgrades to park facilities in anticipation for the 1956 season, the park not only brought romanticized history to the attraction pool, but also invasive species, pollutants, and increased erosion to the Spring Lake hillside. While the park did employ damaging practices, it is important to acknowledge that Aquarena Springs was not the sole contributor to river ecosystem damage, as the introduction of invasive species and harmful land management practices were, and continue to be, an issue caused by residents and other businesses along the river.²³⁴

When constructing the Hanging Gardens, home of the Mexican Village and Spanish Mission, a series of concrete paths and wooden bridges were built, meandering through the thick trees. Unfortunately, while these walkways provided guests with an aesthetically pleasing walk through lush gardens, some of the exotic plants brought in to line them became invasive.²³⁵ The most notable of these are elephant ears, which are an increasing problem across the state, not just in San Marcos. Although Aquarena did contribute to the planting of additional elephant ears along the lake, these invasive plants were recorded to be present at Spring Lake decades before Paul Rogers began his tourism endeavors. Regardless, these plants can grow so thick that they choke out native species and outcompete them for resources thus reducing diversity in the river foliage.²³⁶

²³⁴ Marina Garcia, “Invasive Aquatic Species Are Threatening Texas Waterways,” Reporting Texas, University of Texas at Austin, March 16, 2022, <https://www.reportingtexas.com/invasive-aquatic-species-are-threatening-texas-waterways/>.

²³⁵ Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.

²³⁶ Jenny Webster Jurica, “Elephant Ear Plant Becoming Bug Problem in Central Texas,” Nature, Texas Hill Country, November 17, 2017, <https://texashillcountry.com/elephant-ear-problem-texas/>.

These gardens not only introduced invasive plants that created stressful competition for native species, but also required a lot of water to maintain. While the San Marcos Springs appears to be a never-ending supply of fresh water, it is far from limitless. As of the publication of this thesis, San Marcos has been in stage two drought restrictions since April of 2022, and while the river continues to flow, it is understood that the water is exhaustible.²³⁷ Unfortunately, when the driest period in the state’s recorded history hit from 1950 – 1957, Aquarena Springs was boasting about the opening of brand-new gardens featuring waterfalls and tropical plants, as well as maintaining the park’s golf course, all of which required the use of large amounts of water.²³⁸

Fortunately, the San Marcos Springs did not run dry even with a significant drought and increased water usage by the park, but that did not mean that the impact of the Hanging Gardens’ stopped. In addition to the invasive plants and major use of water, this area of Aquarena Springs also contributed to enhanced erosion at Spring Lake through the improper construction of the walking trails. These trails which remain today, contribute to large amounts of sediment, including topsoil, a necessary component of plant life, running off into the lake.²³⁹ This increased amount of erosion clogs the flow of the springs and river, which causes a number of problems. These include an increased likelihood of flooding, destruction of fragile plants that rely off the continuous flow of water and decline

²³⁷ “Conservation & Drought,” SMTX Utilities, The City of San Marcos, Accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.sanmarcostx.gov/3704/Conservation-Drought>; Zara Flores, “San Marcos to enter Stage 2 drought restrictions effective April 17,” San Marcos – Buda – Kyle, Community Impact, April 13, 2022, <https://communityimpact.com/austin/san-marcos-buda-kyle/environment/2022/04/13/san-marcos-to-enter-stage-2-drought-restrictions-effective-april-17/>.

²³⁸ Terrence Henry, “A History of Drought and Extreme Weather in Texas,” StateImpact Texas, NPR, November 29, 2011, <https://stateimpact.npr.org/texas/2011/11/29/a-history-of-drought-and-extreme-weather-in-texas/>; Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.

²³⁹ Dede Sulaeman and Thomas Westhoff, “The Causes and Effects of Soil Erosion, and How to Prevent It,” Insights, World Resources Institute, February 7, 2020, <https://www.wri.org/insights/causes-and-effects-soil-erosion-and-how-prevent-it>.

of fish populations choked out by an increase of sediment in the water.²⁴⁰ According to Sanborn, it is significant enough that the University is still working on how to best solve the issue of the erosion caused by walking trails.²⁴¹

The 1956 upgrades to Aquarena Springs brought about more issues than those caused by the Hanging Gardens. In Texana Village, Russell introduced twenty-four alligators to the park's artificial swamp. This feature was on the same level as Spring Lake, and so when a flood hit San Marcos in 1970, the alligators swam free from their enclosure. Fortunately for residents and the environment, the intense wrangling efforts of Russell and his team led to the successful recapturing of all the escaped gators, preventing a potentially life-threatening invasive species from entering the ecosystem.²⁴²

Of course, alligators were not the only foreign animal brought to Aquarena Springs. While none of these species continue to inhabit the waters, unlike many of the exotic plants used to beautify the landscape, there were two animals that should have never been housed in Spring Lake. Before the introduction of Ralph the Swimming Pig, the Submarine Theatre exploited the draw of sea lions and a “monster” sea turtle to entertain audiences.²⁴³ Unfortunately, unlike the many pigs used to play Ralph, who are natural born swimmers and able to handle the cool freshwater of the lake, these other performers were far from their natural salt water homes. Though their presence did not cause any significant damage

²⁴⁰ “Soil Erosion and Degradation,” Threats, World Wildlife Fund, Accessed March 8, 2023, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/soil-erosion-and-degradation>.

²⁴¹ Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.

²⁴² *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig* directed and created by Bob Phillips.

²⁴³ “‘Sea Monster’ Prowls Waters of Spring Lake, Slough,” *San Marcos Record*, July 22, 1955.

to the ecosystem, the ecosystem and exploitation of their marketability caused significant damage to the animal's health.²⁴⁴

Like the alligators, sea lions, and the sea turtle, the hundreds of Ralphs who swam in Spring Lake can no longer be seen by visitors. While they did not create lasting issues on the freshwater environment, their presence was less than beneficial. When the pigs were not performing they were able to rest and interact with guests in Ralph's Pig Palace, a popular attraction amongst visitors. Like any livestock, these pink performers would naturally produce significant amounts of waste which needed proper disposal. Unfortunately, while it is likely the park staff utilized some methods of proper waste disposal, according to Sanborn they were also known to simply wash the soiled stalls out with a hose. This water of course would flow directly into the lake, and while fecal matter is organic, it was still a pollutant that reduced water quality.²⁴⁵

In addition to the introduced pollutants and issues, each time it rained the park unintentionally added more contaminants to the water. Like many parking lots today, the one for Aquarena Springs was designed so that water flowed from it into the lake to prevent water pooling, bringing oil, antifreeze, and other chemical wastes with it.²⁴⁶ While perhaps not as significant as the major oil spills of the twenty-first century, motor oil of any amount is highly poisonous and can have a negative impact on wildlife including complications with waterproofing, lung damage, and eye and skin irritation.²⁴⁷ In addition to this, as can be seen firsthand when exploring the San Marcos River, rainfall also brings large amounts

²⁴⁴ "Don Russell to Come to Aquarena From Florida," *The San Marcos Record*, March 9, 1951.

²⁴⁵ Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.

²⁴⁶ Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.

²⁴⁷ "Effects of Oil on Wildlife," Oiled Wildlife Care Network, UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, Accessed March 8, 2023, <https://owcn.sf.ucdavis.edu/effects-oil-wildlife>.

of garbage, such as Styrofoam, plastic, rubber, and textiles into the ecosystem. These pollutants not only create a filthy appearance but also slowly break down into chemicals and smaller pieces which are often consumed by wildlife.²⁴⁸

Flooding introduced even more pollutants and debris to the water. Aside from releasing twenty-four alligators, the 1970 flood also severely damaged several attractions at the park including the Submarine Theatre and buildings at Texana Village. The theatre itself continuously added issues to the lake environment as it blocked out the natural sunlight for a large segment of the lake. In addition to this, it also gradually wore away which allowed chipped paint and rust to enter the water. During the flood, the original theatre was so severely damaged that it was decommissioned and purposefully sunk to the bottom of the lake, beneath the newer and larger contraption that replaced it.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ “Learn About Aquatic Trash,” Trash Free Waters, United States Environmental Protection Agency, October 31, 2022, <https://www.epa.gov/trash-free-waters/learn-about-aquatic-trash>.

²⁴⁹ Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.



Figure 11. Aerial view of Spring Lake after a significant flood event that damaged the Submarine Theatre. Note the highly manicured landscape surrounding the theatre.²⁵⁰

Fortunately, as with the issues caused by the misrepresentation of cultures, Texas State University has worked to reverse the damage to the environment brought about by Aquarena. While closing the park immediately ended some of the issues, such as the chances for future alligator escapes or further pig excrement from being washed into the water, other issues would take more time to correct. As stated in a management plan published by the River Systems Institute, now the Meadows Center, it is the University's

²⁵⁰ Unknown, *Aquarena Submarine Theatre flood damage*, 1970, photograph, San Marcos Hays County Collection, <http://www.hank.ci.san-marcos.tx.us/SMHC/PHOTOS/33390003902919B.jpg>.

“overarching goal” to protect the springs and lake habitat for the enjoyment of future generations.²⁵¹

While there are issues with the University’s preservation of the history of the lake, it can be confidently stated that it has done a commendable job in protecting and reviving the fragile ecosystem. Despite the for-profit park being closed, Southwest Texas State immediately began to market The Aquarena Center as a place for education and river stewardship. Although visitors could no longer watch shows or ride the imported Swiss attractions, the school continued to offer educational glass bottom boat tours as well as erected exhibits in the old motor hotel that displayed endangered species and replicas of the artifacts uncovered in the Shiner excavations.²⁵² Though Ralph was no longer swimming, visitors could freely explore the return of natural beauty to Spring Lake.

Two years after closing, the University furthered its restoration efforts by working on the lake’s wetland habitat, which was being encroached upon by the parking lot. The school’s biology department led the project and hosted events throughout the years that not only educated visitors on the importance of the lake’s riparian habitat to the overall health of the river ecosystem, but also began efforts to remove invasive species such as the overgrowth of elephant ears.²⁵³ The interpretive boardwalk, constructed of boards made of 100% recycled plastic, was officially completed in 2001 and has been open to the public ever since.²⁵⁴ Today it is noted for passing by an active beaver den, a native resident of the

²⁵¹ Emily R. Warren et al., *San Marcos Observing System Spring Lake Management Plan*, (San Marcos: Texas State University, 2011), https://gato-docs.its.txst.edu/jcr:62aa112c-a41d-4f3c-8351-c02bc7fce059/San_Marcos_Observing_System_Spring_Lake_Management_Plan_.pdf.

²⁵² “Team to oversee transition at Aquarena Springs Park,” *Free Press*, March 14, 1996.

²⁵³ “Wetlands Walk scheduled,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, April 15, 1998.

²⁵⁴ Deborah Lane, “A Living Time Capsule,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, March 1, 2001.

San Marcos River that has returned to the ecosystem after years of habitat loss and competition among invasive species.²⁵⁵

Along with the creation of interpretive exhibits and beginning the process of invasive species removal, the University furthered the repair of the Spring Lake ecosystem with the removal of several significant features. Both Submarine Theatres were taken out of the lake in 2012, which opened the lakebed for further vegetation growth and increased territory for aquatic species. In addition, the Swiss Sky Lift and Sky Spiral were also removed, preventing any further destruction to the landscape through erosion. The removal of these structures also kept daring students from injuring themselves as they frequently would climb the abandoned structures. Eventually the remaining buildings around the lake, including Texana Village and Pirates Cove were also removed, finally restoring the area to a more natural appearance which unfortunately obliterated the park's history from Spring Lake.²⁵⁶

In addition to the efforts made by the University, several community organizations have contributed to the restoration and management of the San Marcos Springs. The San Marcos River Foundation was founded in 1985 to “protect public access and preserve” the river by improving the water quality, promoting the flow of the springs, and protecting the beauty via parks and clean up events.²⁵⁷ Their efforts led to the creation of the San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance in 1998, another non-profit organization dedicated to the ensured

²⁵⁵ Anita Miller, “Beavers have returned to Spring Lake,” *San Marcos Daily Record*, December 28, 2014.

²⁵⁶ Rachel Sanborn, email message to author.

²⁵⁷ “Our Mission,” San Marcos River Foundation, Accessed March 9, 2023, <https://sanmarcosriver.org/our-mission/>.

protection of the town's natural areas.²⁵⁸ In addition to these two organizations, the Mermaid Society of Texas was founded in 2014 to utilize their creative platform to “inspire community engagement and connection” in support of environmental awareness and education.²⁵⁹

With support of the University and assistance of student organizations, these groups continue to play a vital role in the restoration and maintenance of the San Marcos River ecosystem. Though the damage caused by Aquarena is primarily in the hands of the University, these organizations still do what they can to assist in its reversal. In addition to helping clear invasive species, the groups also host regular river clean ups designed to tackle the large amounts of trash that finds its way into the water. While there are numerous smaller events hosted throughout the year, the Great Texas River Clean-Up brings out thousands of volunteers pull waste out of the river and help maintain its natural beauty.

Of course, the San Marcos Springs and River will never truly look as they did centuries ago. Prior to the construction of Spring Lake dam by General Burleson, the springs were known to rise several feet into the air like fountains and were surrounded by relatively undisturbed landscapes filled with native flora and fauna. Although buried beneath their discharge and surrounded by the remains of several eras of San Marcos history, the San Marcos Springs continue to remain a place of natural refuge for the community's wild and human residents. For those seeking a connection to the past however, the University provides few experiences. Although Indigenous representation

²⁵⁸ “Who We Are,” About SMGA, San Marcos Greenbelt Alliance, Accessed March 9, 2023, <https://smgreenbelt.org/about-smga/>.

²⁵⁹ “Vision and Mission,” Who We Are, The Mermaid Society of Texas, Accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.mermaidsocietysmtx.com/vision-mission>.

currently has and is in the process of receiving further interpretive efforts, the complex history of Aquarena Springs is hardly ever discussed.

IV. REMEMBER THE FILTH AND THE SPLENDOR! INTERPETING AQUARENA SPRINGS

As the waters of the San Marcos Springs continue to flow south towards their eventual union with the Gulf of Mexico, so too does time take us further from events of the past. While Aquarena Springs was a nationally known park that entertained millions of tourists for almost fifty years, today it is but a distant memory that an increasing number of Texans are unaware of. Due to its local, state, and national significance however, this history should be interpreted to keep Aquarena within the public's memory. Unfortunately, for the incoming freshmen of Texas State University and influx of out of state residents, the rich history of San Marcos is often uninterpreted thus risking its fall into obscurity. From an outsider perspective the town is seemingly no different from the surrounding central Texas communities. While the river is a beautiful feature, several cities in the area also boast about being home to a spring fed water feature, thus making it difficult for San Marcos to stand out among its neighbors.

Despite this, there is one aspect of the community that sets it apart from other Texas towns. A quick tour around the center of San Marcos reveals one reoccurring subject that seems relatively out of place for the landlocked city, mermaids. Despite the distance of San Marcos from salt water, this mythical creature is more at home here than in any other town in the Lonestar state. Although there is no proof that mermaids exist anywhere, as we have seen, Spring Lake was once home to Aquamaids, the closest thing to the mythical creature that Texas has ever seen. These real-life aquatic performers helped make Aquarena Springs

famous throughout the United States through their impressive underwater feats and performances beside their unique swimming swine co-stars.

Although Aquamaids have not performed in Spring Lake since Aquarena's closing in 1996, many in the community have never forgotten the impact they and the rest of the park's attractions left behind. Since its conception, San Marcos and Aquarena Springs have been associated with mermaids despite the original performers never donning fins.²⁶⁰ As the decades rolled on however, various costume transformations would take place eventually introducing finned Aquamaids to the Submarine Theatre during the 1970s.²⁶¹ They would join their Aquamaid sisters in Spring Lake as the park developed through the decades further solidifying the town's connection to the mythical creature. Regardless of the late arrival of mermaid tails in the water, the San Marcos community continues utilize these sirens as a symbol for their town.

In 2014, nearly twenty years after the closing of Aquarena Springs, San Marcos resident July Moreno created the Mermaid Society of Texas, a local organization aimed at preserving the town's "history and river culture."²⁶² Since its inception, the society has spearheaded the movement of Aquarena historic preservation and river conservation in the community. In 2016 San Marcos welcomed the first "Mermaid Week," a celebration hosted

²⁶⁰ "San Marcos Well Represented At B&PW Convention in Tyler," *San Marcos Record*, June 18, 1959; "What—No Gills And Scales Like Mermaid Tails?" *San Marcos Record*, July 21, 1960.

²⁶¹ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 41; "San Marcan featured," *San Marcos Daily Record*, May 17, 1973.

²⁶² July Moreno, "Founder's Story," *Mermaid Society of Texas*, 2018, <https://www.mermaidsocietysmtx.com/founders-story>.

by the Mermaid Society and sponsored by local businesses that celebrates the beauty and importance of the San Marcos River and the city's fondness for Aquarena Springs.²⁶³

The town continued to embrace this mermaid identity with the unveiling of ten uniquely painted statues of the mythical creatures in 2017, in which three directly reference Aquarena Springs through their name and or artistic design.²⁶⁴ With support from the San Marcos Arts Commission, the statues were erected across the city and can be visited via the "San Marcos Mermaid March," a semi-guided tour that navigates spectators across town to each of the seven-foot-tall installations.²⁶⁵ In addition to the sculptures, visitors to San Marcos can also find several murals featuring mermaids scattered around, including one at Roger's Park, one of the original tourist endeavors of A.B. Rogers.²⁶⁶

While the Mermaid Society of Texas continues to work towards the preservation of San Marcos' natural and historical legacies, Texas State University, the owner of arguably one of the most historic properties in the state, is lacking when it comes to historical interpretation. Although there is some information on display regarding the Paleo Indian cultures that inhabited the Springs 13,000 years ago along with plans to house a museum for the Indigenous Cultures Institute, there is virtually nothing when it comes to the history of the Aquarena Springs park. In fact, since the University acquired Spring Lake in 1994, it has done much more to damage the preservation of the amusement park than it has to protect its history.

²⁶³ Lori Steindorf, "Get Your Mermaid On! Mermaid Week SMTX 2016 gets underway Sept. 10," *San Marcos Daily Record*, July 24, 2016.

²⁶⁴ Robin Blackburn, "Mermaid statues revealed but locations still pending," *San Marcos Daily Record*, September 20, 2017.

²⁶⁵ "Mermaid March," San Marcos Convention & Visitors Bureau, Arts and Culture, 2023, <https://www.visitsanmarcos.com/things-to-do/arts-and-culture/mermaid-statues/>.

²⁶⁶ "A.B. Rogers, Civic, Business Leader Dies Here Sunday," *San Marcos Record*, May 1, 1953.

Visitors to the Meadows Center seeking information regarding Aquarena Springs find nothing more than one outdoor exhibit, a mention at the end of the San Marcos Springs state historical marker, a sign at the southwest end of the old hotel informing visitors of the closed Hillside Garden trails, and a sun-bleached photograph of an Aquamaid hidden behind a neglected ficus tree inside Discovery Hall. Given the national historical significance of the park and its importance to the town's history, Texas State is obligated to properly interpret Aquarena Springs. As demonstrated in chapters one and two, to tell the complex story of Aquarena is to tell the story of San Marcos and American roadside entertainment of the 20th century, and thus the University should properly interpret this history for visitors.

As an institution that applauds itself for leading the way in scientific research and environmental conservation, Texas State University should also work to become a champion in historic and cultural preservation. Its ownership of one of the most historic sites in Texas should be enough to encourage the University to do what it can to better protect both the natural and human history that flows from the San Marcos Springs. These cultural resources deserve to be accessible to the public, and this segment of the project aims to provide reasonable suggestions for how this can be properly achieved.



Figure 12. Picture of Aquamaids hidden behind an unhealthy ficus tree in the entry way of Discovery Hall at the Meadows Center.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ Isabel Gonzalez, *Aquarena Photograph Behind a Dying Tree*, 2023, photograph.

Unfortunately, updating the interpretive efforts at the Meadows Center requires extensive funding and planning, and suggested methods may not be financially feasible, although it is unlikely that the cost would be out of the University's abilities. Because of this, the suggestions provided here for Aquarena's interpretation can give the University preliminary ideas that can be modified or expanded upon should they be utilized. These ideas include updating the pre-existing nonpersonal interpretive efforts found at the Meadows Center, the utilization of the few remaining structures from Aquarena Springs located on the hillside above Spring Lake to create an interpretive trail navigated with the assistance of an online guidebook, and the further development of personal interpretive programming available to glass bottom boat passengers.

These suggestions have been formulated from practices enlisted by public history institutions, professionals, and the author's personal experience within the field of interpretation. In addition, site visits to Weeki Wachee Springs State Park and Silver Springs State Park in Florida by the author also provided inspiration for the ideas for Aquarena interpretation presented here. Furthermore, the information on the unappealing side of Aquarena Springs history discussed in chapter two will also be taken into account when formulating plans for accurate and meaningful interpretation. While the park no longer exists, it deserves to be remembered for its uniqueness and its significance to the San Marcos community.

Of course, it is difficult to begin a discussion of these interpretive plans without first defining the word. Although this project primarily focuses on historical interpretation,

the act of interpreting information can be done for a variety of subjects.²⁶⁸ This practice, known as “heritage interpretation,” is defined by the National Association for Interpretation as the “purposeful approach to communication that facilitates meaningful, relevant, and inclusive experiences that deepen understanding, broaden perspectives, and inspire engagement with the world around us.”²⁶⁹ Managers of sites of natural, anthropological, historical, and archaeological significance, such as battlefields, mountain ranges, Indigenous sites and old theme parks, utilize this method to better connect their visitors to the importance of the site. According to heritage interpretation pioneer Freeman Tilden, this process is not simply about conveying information, but rather helping visitors make personal revelations based on the information.²⁷⁰

This can be accomplished in a variety of ways which fall under the personal or nonpersonal interpretative categories. As the name suggests, personal interpretation involves methods of presenting information to an audience in a face-to-face environment. Examples of this include living history exhibits, live talks, demonstrations, and guided hikes or tours. On the other hand, nonpersonal interpretation utilizes artificial elements to convey information to visitors such as museum exhibits, guidebooks, informational signs (also known as wayside exhibits), and interactive digital activities.²⁷¹ While there are benefits and disadvantages to both forms of interpretation, they are equally important to successfully applying meaning to a site.

²⁶⁸ Larry Beck and Ted Cable, *Interpretation for the 21st Century: Fifteen Guiding Principles for Interpreting Nature and Culture*, (Champaign: Sagamore Publishing, 1998), 3.

²⁶⁹ “Mission, Vision, and Core Values,” About, National Association for Interpretation, Accessed February 18, 2023,

https://www.interpnet.com/NAI/interp/About/About_NAI/What_We_Believe/nai/_About/Mission_Vision_and_Core_Values.aspx?hkey=ef5896dc-53e4-4dbb-929e-96d45bdb1cc1.

²⁷⁰ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 9.

²⁷¹ Larry Beck and Ted Cable, *Interpretation for the 21st Century*, 5.

For public historians, (historians that make information relevant and understandable to the public rather than just to fellow academics), interpretation is a vital aspect of their career. When information is exhibited via personal and nonpersonal means of interpretation, it becomes significantly more accessible to the public than information conveyed in scholarly works, such as this thesis.²⁷² While books and journals can be written on Aquarena to justify its significance and its need for preservation, the way to truly keep this in public memory is to utilize the physical space it encompassed as a place of education.

Fortunately, the Meadows Center does utilize methods of personal and nonpersonal interpretation to convey site significance to visitors. This is currently being done through the exhibits located in Discovery Hall, outdoor wayside paneling, the interpretive boardwalk trail over the lake's wetland ecosystem, and on the glass bottom boat tours. Most of this interpretation only pertains to the natural and archaeological significance of Spring Lake however, with only a few examples of historical interpretation being found via wayside paneling. For those panels that do convey historical information, only one discusses Aquarena Springs. Considering the significance of the park, this is not suitable, and more should be done to boost the interpretation of San Marcos' former attraction.

For a site such as Spring Lake, which has been mostly cleared of historic structures and restored (more or less) to a natural appearance, proper historical interpretation is vital to preserve the memory of its history. When there are no longer physical remains for visitors to explore, the human influence of the site can be overshadowed by its still visible

²⁷² Cauvin, Thomas, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 141.

natural features. Like preserved battlefields which rely on interpretation to “show” visitors the significance of the site without having many original physical structures (if any) to look at, Spring Lake also requires these kinds of efforts to preserve its human history. The inclusion of personal and nonpersonal means of historical interpretation helps keep the history of a site alive through the establishment of a strong sense of place, regardless of a lack of visible remains.²⁷³

Though a majority of Aquarena Springs structures were removed in the 2010s, there are still some remaining features that could be utilized by the University to tell the park’s complex story. The first of these structures is the former Aquarena Springs hotel, which is currently being utilized by the University as the headquarters for The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment. It also contains a small exhibit hall on the first floor that educates visitors on the biodiversity of the river, archaeological history, and water systems of Texas. While the building’s relatively unchanged appearance from its time as a hotel and usage as a place for education is a sign of good historic integrity, as determined by the criteria of eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places, its interpretative efforts are not as favorable.²⁷⁴

During its nearly century long lifespan, the building has been utilized for many purposes including a high-end resort, a school, and a sanitorium. Unfortunately, visitors to the exhibit hall are left unaware of this impressive resume as there is no information available on the structure’s history. In addition, the interpretive efforts that do exist do not

²⁷³ Douglas M. Knudson, Ted. T. Cable, and Larry Beck, *Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Resources*, (State College: Venture Publishing, 1995), 4.

²⁷⁴ Scott F. Anfinson, *Practical Heritage Management: Preserving a Tangible Past*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 2019, 114 – 117.

all follow the standards set by the Harpers Ferry Center, the media center of the National Park Service. While Discovery Hall is not an entity of the NPS, the guidelines created by the organization are beneficial to all institutions looking to create effective interpretive displays.

Inside the hall, visitors can find an interactive exhibit on Texas waterways and live animal displays, including an endangered species collection that features aquariums housing the lake's protected animals. While both of these exhibits are useful and memorable, the display case of replica Paleo Indian artifacts discovered in Spring Lake is less navigable. The information it conveys is relevant, however it does not utilize plain language principles, a practice designed to make information more understandable for the public. In addition, the display does not format information in a way that is easily readable or digestible by a visitor, thus making it inaccessible to some individuals.²⁷⁵

Along with a need to reduce the informational overload presented in the archaeological display, the exhibit hall is in need of upkeep. Visitors are met with cracked and worn flooring, dirty glass, unwelcoming lighting, unused space and equipment, and poorly kept indoor plants. As we have seen, the one picture of Aquarena Springs in the hall is on display behind an unhealthy tree. Ultimately, while the hall is a good opportunity for visitors to examine artifacts and the biodiversity of Spring Lake, it is a place that conveys information not interpretation. Fortunately, many of these issues are easily correctable thus making the museum an ideal location of nonpersonal Aquarena Springs interpretation.

²⁷⁵ US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *HFC Editorial Style Guide* by the Harpers Ferry Center, February 28, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/hfc-editorial-style-guide.htm>; US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Exhibit Planning, Design, and Fabrication Specifications* by the Harpers Ferry Center, March 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/upload/NPS-Exhibit-Planning-Design-and-Fabrication-Specifications-2019.pdf>.

Regardless of the way in which the University chooses to present information on Aquarena Springs, it is important to adhere to the basic guidelines of museum planning. Though it is easy to suggest broad ideas that could potentially be implemented, exhibit creation is a long process that requires extensive research. It is important to consider available space, objects, visitation, and budgeting, among other factors when creating a plan.²⁷⁶ Considering that the mission of the Meadows Center is to inspire research, innovation, and leadership to ensure a healthy environment, it is important to create a meaningful connection between Aquarena Springs' days in the amusement industry and the center's current work in favor of environmental protection.²⁷⁷

With the current exhibits in the hall, the inclusion of a summative explanation of Aquarena Springs along with an examination of its environmental impact would further its significance to Spring Lake. Creating a connection between the park and the Meadows Center mission statement would demonstrate to visitors that the University both values the site's history while also working to correct the environmentally damaging impacts the park left behind. This can be best exhibited through a museum whose ultimate responsibility is to convey a message held by the institution using visually appealing and thought-provoking exhibits.²⁷⁸ By displaying a connection between the Spring Lake environment and the history of Aquarena Springs, visitors can further their appreciation of the significance of the site as well as gain respect for an institution that is not ashamed to discuss past events.

²⁷⁶ Cauvin, Thomas, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice*, 150 – 155.

²⁷⁷ “About,” The Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, Texas State University, Access March 15, 2023, <https://www.meadowscenter.txst.edu/About.html>.

²⁷⁸ Douglas M. Knudson, Ted. T. Cable, and Larry Beck, *Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Resources*, 238 – 239.

While there are many ways to accomplish this, it is recommended that the University follow the basic functions of a museum when creating a plan for an Aquarena Springs exhibit. This includes the assembly and preservation of objects, provision of opportunities for object-centered research, and interpretation through contact with real things and possibly real people. The University Archives houses many Aquarena objects including postcards, brochures, merchandise, and a Ralph the Swimming Pig mascot costume, all of which could provide visitors with the “creative and emotional” stimulus that aids the memory “through physical sensations.” Unlike the complex information accompanying the replica artifacts, authentic physical objects are accessible to nearly everyone regardless of their literacy skills.²⁷⁹

The objects chosen to be displayed should be able to visually represent or add to the message being conveyed through the exhibit. Because of the current environmental focus of the exhibit hall, it would be beneficial to include images of the practices employed by Aquarena that negatively impacted the lake and river ecosystems. This would help visitors visualize the type of attractions offered by Aquarena Springs, as well as serve as a local case study of the issues faced by Texas waterways such as erosion, invasive species, and water pollution. Like other sites that interpret complex stories, it is important that however the University chooses to include Aquarena in the exhibit hall, it be done in a way that both respects the significance of the park and acknowledges the damages it caused to the environment along with its insensitivity to the cultures of people of color.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Douglas M. Knudson, *Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Resources*, 239.

²⁸⁰ Douglas M. Knudson, *Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Resources*, 240 – 242.

The next remaining feature of Aquarena Springs is not a physical building like the former hotel but rather the original attraction installed by Paul Rogers in 1947. Since their debut, the glass bottom boats at Spring Lake have been a popular experience for individuals visiting San Marcos. In fact, it is due to their popularity that Aquarena Springs came about because Rogers wanted to give visitors something to do while awaiting their scheduled ride.²⁸¹ While the use of the hotel has changed over the years, the glass bottom boat tours have remained relatively consistent through the last seven decades.

In an original brochure for Aquarena, the cruises are advertised as an opportunity for visitors to “take a leisurely ride...over the crystal-clear waters of the springs” while getting to observe “one of the most outstanding panoramas of aquatic gardens in the United States.”²⁸² Today guests can expect to experience a tour similar those provided by the original fleet, but with an updated interpretive program that details the natural, archaeological, and historical significance of Spring Lake. Like the other interpretive efforts at the park however, these tours primarily discuss ecological subjects with only a small segment mentioning the history of the site. This should be corrected.

Fortunately, like the problems found in Discovery Hall, this is an issue easily remedied through an updated script or creation of a history specific glass bottom boat tour. While it would be easier to simply throw in a few more facts about Aquarena Springs during the current glass bottom boat tour, that would not do the park’s history justice. Hosting a separate or even an extended tour of Spring Lake to accommodate for proper interpretation on the former theme park would not only further a visitor’s understanding of

²⁸¹ “Submarine Theatre of Aquarena Nears Completion at Spring Lake,” *San Marcos Record*, September 1, 1950

²⁸² *Aquarena*, (San Marcos: Aquarena Springs)

the site's history but also demonstrate the University's willingness to preserve the legacy of an iconic San Marcos landmark.

Should the University choose to further the information presented on Aquarena Springs during glass bottom boat tours, it is important that this be done properly. In a rewording of Freeman Tilden's six principles of interpretation, Larry Beck and Ted Cable state that an important understanding of interpretation is that it is a work of art designed to not only inform but to entertain and enlighten visitors as well.²⁸³ Anyone who has been on a tour, either at a National Park or local history site knows that the guide has the power to make or break a visit. Good interpreters utilize audience participation, a confident and clear demeanor, and relatable storytelling to both capture an audience and assist them in making a personal connection to the story.²⁸⁴

Effective personal interpretation of Aquarena Springs should not only include the "what" but also the "why" and "how" in order to truly tell the story. Because the history of Aquarena is complex and still within public memory, this is not easily accomplished. Fortunately, it is not impossible as there are many sites with complex stories that are properly interpreted such as the two Florida parks Rogers drew inspiration from. Weeki Wachee Springs' and Silver Springs' guided boat tours are good examples of how to utilize personal interpretation at a historic site with a complex history. While each park offered its own unique line up of amusement features during their prime, both continue to pay homage to their past (good and bad) through admirable interpretative efforts. Both places continue to operate similarly to that of their period of significance and are managed by the Florida

²⁸³ Larry Beck and Ted Cable, *Interpretation for the 21st Century*, 10.

²⁸⁴ William T. Alderson, and Shirley Payne Low, *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, 62, 69 – 70.

State Parks Department, thus increasing the emphasis on natural conservation while still presenting the history of the attractions.

Silver Springs, which also continues to be known for its glass bottom boat tours, utilizes these interpretive opportunities to not only discuss the natural significance of the spring and river environment, but also its importance in the history of the Florida tourism industry. Being the oldest tourist attraction in the state and the largest spring in Florida, commercialization of Silver Springs has taken many forms through the years. From being the set for many Hollywood films to exhibiting zoological displays, the park shared many similarities to Aquarena Springs thus making it a good model for future interpretive efforts.²⁸⁵

Although the museum was closed during the author's site visit, the extended glass bottom boat tour provided a good example of how to interpret a site that has both natural and cultural significance. Home to a variety of flora and fauna, including manatees and alligators, the cruise primarily functioned as a way to bring visitors closer to these natural attractions. Despite this, the guides do not ignore the human history of the park and while navigating the historic vessels along the river in search of noteworthy animals, they provide information on the history of the site before and after its commercialization. These tours tackle nearly all aspects of the park's history including Indigenous history, introduction of the railroad and passenger boats, famous visitors, segregation, and environmental conservation.

²⁸⁵ "It's a long story!," Park History, Silver Springs State Park, Accessed March 16, 2023, <https://silversprings.com/park-history/>.

Similarly, the boat tour at Weeki Wachee Springs presents individuals with information regarding the river and lake, and also discusses the tourist endeavors that have occupied the site over the years. Unlike Silver Springs which feels more like an institution dedicated to the preservation of the site's cultural and natural resources, Weeki Wachee is still operating as a family tourist attraction with continuing features such as the mermaid show (which is used to also interpret history and push for river conservation), water park, and animal shows being among the most popular.²⁸⁶ Because of this, the guides for the boat tours are closer to the type being employed at the Meadows Center in the sense that they are not trained interpreters but rather students who have not yet developed their interpretive skills.

While not as well presented as the Silver Spring's guided tour, the program at Weeki Wachee is still informative and thought provoking. Like its sister park, it includes information on various aspects of spring history including the area's Indigenous history, introduction of Newton Perry and his commercialization of the park, and current environmental conservation efforts all while giving passengers an up-close look at the various plants and animals that inhabit the area. Though both sites presented information that could be digestible by all adults, Weeki Wachee's tour was better written to accommodate children as the language used and content of the program was much simpler than that given at Silver Springs. Though it was easily understood by children, as is important with proper interpretation, the information presented was still relevant and informative to audiences of all ages.

²⁸⁶ "Experiences and Amenities," Park Menu, Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, Accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/weeki-wachee-springs-state-park/experiences-amenities>.

Like Aquarena, both sites have faced similar issues due to the presence of a tourist attraction such as pollution and the introduction of invasive species. While both parks at one point hosted a jungle cruise which featured an “island” with living monkeys, the species brought to Silver Springs were able to swim and quickly escaped their fictitious enclosure. Because of this, today the area has a considerable population of rhesus monkeys that not only compete with local species but are also known to carry the herpes B virus which can be deadly to humans.²⁸⁷ Despite the poor land management techniques of the past, each park acknowledges its impact on the environment and works as an advocate to better protect Florida’s natural landscapes.

Should the University work to better the interpretive efforts of Aquarena Springs via the use of its glass bottom boats, it should take after the precedents set by Weeki Wachee and Silver Springs, both of which connect their current conservation efforts with the history of their attractions. Like the multiple ways in which Discovery Hall could be used to house an exhibit on Aquarena Springs, there are numerous ways in which the glass bottom boats could be utilized for the betterment of park interpretation. Regardless of how the University chooses to use the boats, it is important that the personal interpretive efforts follow the guidelines laid out by public historians.

While not the same as a formal talk, which relies primarily on the speaker to entertain, inform, and provoke thought within a tour group, a guided tour takes some of this pressure off the presenter due to its sightseeing basis. In an ideal situation, glass bottom boat guides serve as the narrator for the sights and sounds that the visitors experience as

²⁸⁷ Adam Gabbatt, “Furry, cute and drooling herpes: what to do with Florida’s invasive monkeys?,” *The Guardian*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/dec/30/florida-monkeys-herpes-macaques>.

well as a storyteller who can bring to life the many stories witnessed by the springs. Guides can answer questions, alter their presentation based on audience participation and natural encounters, and provide meaning to the areas picked for designated stops.²⁸⁸ Of course these traits are to be expected of professional interpreters not the college students employed at the Meadows Center, though this could be an opportunity to utilize the University's public history faculty and students to help create better personal interpretive plans.

Despite this, it is still possible to provide visitors with well-crafted programs similar to those found in Florida. To do this, it is important that the guide utilizes effective means of storytelling and public speaking to keep the visitors captivated while successfully demonstrating the significance of the site. Like a talk, guided tours should be developed using the introduction – body – conclusion format, all while tying in a central theme that can be easily understood by the audience.²⁸⁹ The guide should be able to properly convey the message through a “to the point” strategy that utilizes various attention grabbing techniques that keep the visitors engaged and connected to the information.²⁹⁰ This can be accomplished via the use of audience participation, such as dialogic questions which are essential to audience-centered programs and are inviting, inclusive, generative, non-judgmental, and experimental.²⁹¹

Ultimately while there are many ways to provide personal interpretation on Aquarena Springs, it is important that the University do so in a way that both engages the audience and properly addresses the true story of the theme park. While Aquarena Springs

²⁸⁸ Douglas M. Knudson, *Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Resources*, 319 – 323

²⁸⁹ Douglas M. Knudson, *Interpretation of Cultural and Natural Resources*, 321 – 323.

²⁹⁰ William T. Alderson, and Shirley Payne Low, *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, 62, 69 – 70.

²⁹¹ NPS Interpretive Development Program, “Dialogic Questions,” Learning Resources, Common Learning Portal, May 14, 2018, <https://mylearning.nps.gov/library-resources/dialogic-questions/>.

no doubt caused many issues as discussed in chapter two, it was still a significant site that deserves proper presentation through unbiased storytelling. Like the guided tours offered at Silver Springs and Weeki Wachee Springs, the glass bottom boats on Spring Lake are vessels with the potential to share the complex story of the successes of the park and its many mistakes. Its ability to physically take visitors to points of interest as well as provide descriptive visualizations of the landscape's many appearances help visitors better connect with the story.

Another feature that the University should utilize for interpretation is the physical landscape of Spring Lake. While not a manmade structure, Aquarena Springs' location at the lake was not coincidental. It was a deliberate choice by Paul Rogers to try and create an attraction similar to Weeki Wachee and Silver Springs based around on crystal-clear body of water.²⁹² Though not used to interpret the story of Aquarena Springs, scattered around the land level with the water are fifteen wayside exhibits, informative panels that serve as nonpersonal enhancements to the direct and meaningful connection visitors make to the landscape.²⁹³ The panels at the Meadows Center serve as tools that educate visitors on Texas watersheds, invasive species, pollution, archaeology, and ecology.

Unlike the displays inside Discovery Hall, when evaluated based on the Harpers Ferry Center standards for wayside exhibiting, the current practices of outdoor interpretation employed at the Meadows Center are satisfactory. The center's "Wayside Exhibit Evaluation Checklist," provides interpreters with easy assistance in "identifying

²⁹² *Aquarena Springs and Ralph the Swimming Pig* directed and created by Bob Phillips.

²⁹³ US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Wayside Exhibits: A Guide to Developing Outdoor Interpretive Exhibits* by the Harpers Ferry Center, 1st ed., October 2009, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/upload/Wayside-Guide-First-Edition.pdf>, 7.

the deficiencies of installed wayside exhibits.”²⁹⁴ After reviewing all fifteen outdoor wayside exhibits utilizing this checklist, it can be said that the Meadows Center follows the minimum practices laid out in the NPS wayside exhibit management and creation guide.

The information displayed on each panel is clear, concise, and relevant to the location of the exhibit, while provoking further thought by spectators. For the most part, font and color choices match the physical space and make it easy to read, and the images included add to the information on the panel. In addition, all but four of the wayside exhibits include a Spanish translation of the text, which demonstrates an awareness of potential audience by the interpreter, an important factor to consider when planning interpretive programming or exhibits.²⁹⁵ Finally, the displays appear to be well maintained and suggest evidence of routine upkeep based upon the general cleanliness and lack of sun-bleaching or vandalism.

While these exhibits pass the minimum standards laid out by the checklist, the more in-depth “Wayside Exhibits” guide reveal the need for minor improvements. The most notable of these is the lack of depth that comes with interpretation of the Indigenous history associated with the San Marcos Springs. Of the fifteen wayside exhibits, four discuss site history, one of which pertains to Aquarena Springs and the other three to the Paleo Indian cultures that resided here over 13,000 years ago. While the information they display is relevant and accurate, it is lacking in the depth needed to truly captivate a reader. In fact,

²⁹⁴ “Wayside Exhibit Evaluation Checklist,” Waysides, Harpers Ferry Center, December 18, 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/wayside-exhibit-evaluation-checklist.htm>.

²⁹⁵ William T. Alderson, and Shirley Payne Low, *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, 2nd ed, (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996), 23 -26.

two of the three panels on display are virtually identical in the information they display, thus creating a missed opportunity for further interpretation.²⁹⁶



Figure 13. Wayside Exhibit on the Spring Lake Food Chain located along the Wetlands Boardwalk.²⁹⁷

While the lack of impactful historical wayside paneling may be frustrating to individuals looking to learn about the site, due to the complexity of Aquarena Springs' story, this form of interpretation is not ideal. According to the Harpers Ferry Center, while wayside exhibits can be excellent tools to tell the stories of sites that no longer appear as they did during the period of significance, they do not tell dynamic stories well due to the

²⁹⁶ US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Wayside Exhibits: A Guide to Developing Outdoor Interpretive Exhibits*, .

²⁹⁷ Isabel Gonzalez, *Spring Lake Wetlands Wayside Exhibit*, 2023, photograph.

limited information they can convey. If the complete story of Aquarena Springs, including the issues discussed in chapter two, were to be properly interpreted via wayside exhibits, Spring Lake would be a forest of placards which would take away from the natural beauty of the park.²⁹⁸

Fortunately, while the addition of new outdoor exhibits may not be a viable option, there is another non-personal method of interpretation that could be utilized to help visitors understand the full story of the park. Online guidebooks have become a popular feature at many public history sites, and according to William T. Alderson and Shirley Payne Low's *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, they provide visitors with the information needed to understand the significance of the site without the use of personal interpretation. Of course, when their publication came out in 1996 the widespread use of smartphones was not yet established and so they caution the use of guidebooks due to their costly production.²⁹⁹

Like the suggestions for included interpretation in Discovery Hall, an interactive online guidebook could continue to provide further context to visitors by leading them to points of interest in the Aquarena story. While Weeki Wachee Springs and Silver Springs do not utilize this method of interpretation, the National Park Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife do, providing visitors with an easily accessible source of interpretation. What was once done by physical guidebooks and CD audio tours can now be done utilizing the personal technology device of patrons. This technology has the ability to provide users

²⁹⁸ US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Wayside Exhibits*, 10.

²⁹⁹ William T. Alderson, and Shirley Payne Low, *Interpretation of Historic Sites*, 74 – 75.

with site orientation, informational videos and audio, photographs, and activities, all without the need for additional staffing.³⁰⁰

In addition, the utilization of an online guidebook via website or web application allows for information to be accessed by individuals with disabilities and or language barriers. Unlike physical wayside panels, which are limited in their accessibility, online applications can be strategically planned to include translations, accessible audio/visual resources, and be easily utilized by visitors of all learning abilities. In doing so, interpretation via an online guidebook can be an effective way at providing visitors of all backgrounds with the information needed to make a meaningful connection to the site.³⁰¹

An online guidebook for Aquarena Springs could include a variety of information and media to further enhance a visitor's understanding and appreciation for the former theme park. In addition to being able to direct visitors around Spring Lake, it could serve as a virtual tour guide that provides information about certain attractions when the visitor reaches the area they used to be. For example, when a visitor arrives at the banks where the Submarine Theatre used to stand, they could be able to browse a collection of photographs, videos, and testimonials about the variety of shows through the years. In addition, this would also be an opportunity to discuss the environmental impact the theatre had on the lake as well as the insensitivity toward Indigenous cultures it promoted.

The use of a guidebook at Spring Lake could also open the possibility to add interpretation to the remaining structures of Aquarena that are not being utilized by the

³⁰⁰ "Digital Media," What We Do, Harpers Ferry Center, June 22, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/hfc/digital-media.htm>.

³⁰¹ US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Programmatic Accessibility Guidelines for National Park Service Interpretive Media* by the Harpers Ferry Center, 2nd ed., October 2019, 14 – 21.

Meadows Center. Although the University uses the hotel and glass bottom boats in its interpretive efforts, there remains a large segment of property teeming with abandoned structures that has the potential to enhance the non-personal interpretation available to visitors. As revealed in the previous chapters, when Southwest Texas State University elected to close Aquarena Springs to restore the natural environment of Spring Lake, they made the decision to remove structures and exotic plants that were causing issues for the ecosystem.³⁰²

In 2012 Texas State University would literally and symbolically remove the last remaining symbols of Aquarena, after years of slowly removing various smaller structures located throughout the park. In May of that year, both Submarine Theatres, the original structure from 1950 which was purposefully sunk below the newer one, constructed in 1972, were removed from Spring Lake, and recycled completely removing them from existence.³⁰³ Later that year, the University continued the removal of iconic Aquarena structures as it demolished the Sky Spiral and the Swiss Sky Tram. In 2011, the process of removing these structures began when the school relocated the Morning Glory statue (which was located at a loading station for the Swiss Sky tram) back to Wimberly where it was created in 1963.³⁰⁴

Although the more iconic features of Aquarena are long gone, multiple attractions from the park's operating days still exist on the property. Hidden behind a restrictive chain linked fence stands the last physical remains of the theme park. Surrounded by dense

³⁰² Rachel Sanborn (San Marcos River Foundation), email message to author, February 17, 2018.

³⁰³ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*, 60; Anita Miller, "Subsequent success," *San Marcos Daily Record*, May 25, 2012.

³⁰⁴ Anita Miller, "A cut above," *San Marcos Daily Record*, July 25, 2012; Linda Keese, "Morning glories going home," *San Marcos Daily Record*, August 12, 2011.

overgrowth and litter left behind by trespassing explorers, the ghostly remains of the reconstructed Burluson cabin, Spanish Mission, and Old Grist Mill, as well as the upper loading station for the Swiss Sky Tram quietly watch over Spring Lake as they continue to fall into further ruin. Despite having remained untouched for over 25 years, these structures, which are potentially eligible for the National Register for Historic Places, can serve as sentinels to an interpretive trail that tells not only the story of Aquarena but the history of San Marcos as well.³⁰⁵



Figure 14. Remains of the upper loading station for the Swiss Sky Tram, which sit behind a restrictive chain linked fence. Though the sign says a major project is underway to restore the trails, there is no evidence of an active restoration project.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Thomas F. King, *Cultural Resource Laws & Practice*, (United Kingdom: AltaMira Press), 2013, 86 – 103.

³⁰⁶ Isabel Gonzalez, *Restricted Remains*, 2022, photograph.



Figure 15. A posted sign in front of closed trails informs visitors to the Meadows Center of the inaccessible Aquarena ruins located on the hillside above Spring Lake.³⁰⁷

Alongside these surviving remains also stand two markers, formal pieces of interpretation that officially declare the significance of the site or object being commemorated.³⁰⁸ The first of these is a state historical marker placed during Texas' centennial celebrations and sporting the iconic Texas pink granite.³⁰⁹ Standing next to the remains of the reconstructed Spanish mission, this marker designates the “Approximate Site of the Missions San Francisco Xavier de los Dolores, Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria,

³⁰⁷ Isabel Gonzalez, *Inaccessible*, 2023, photograph.

³⁰⁸ Texas Historical Commission, “Remembering Texas: Guidelines for Historical Research,” Publications, July 2001, <https://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/publications/Remembering%20Texas.pdf>.

³⁰⁹ “1936 Texas Centennial Markers,” State Historical Markers, Texas Historical Commission, Accessed March 18, 2023, <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/state-historical-markers/1936-texas-centennial-markers>.

San Ildefonso,” the defunct mission system which underwent several relocations before formally being incorporated into the doomed Mission San Saba in New Braunfels.³¹⁰

The second marker, though not as informative or formal, was placed by the Moon – McGehee Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas in 1932 to mark where General Edward Burleson built his home in 1848. It stands in front of the ruins of the reconstructed Burleson Cabin which was destroyed by a fire in 2006. While there were efforts to raise money for the restoration of the building, they never came to fruition and today the building appears as a pile of burnt and decaying timber with the lonely stone chimney towering over.³¹¹

Unfortunately, these markers serve no purpose when the area in which they stand is not accessible. Formerly open to the public as a walking trail, the Hillside Trails of Spring Lake were closed years ago during a major flooding event. According to signs posted along the fence, visitors are no longer allowed to enter the area, although the University is now conducting a “major project to restore and reopen” the trails for future use. Unfortunately, it is unknown whether this project is still underway, as communication with the school’s facilities department has yielded no answer. Regardless, should the trails be restored they would be able to serve both an opportunity to walk through the natural foliage of Spring Lake and interact with the last structures of Aquarena thus keeping its memory alive.

Through an online guidebook, these ruins could have the potential to come back to life with the inclusion of images of their usage by theme park patrons, as well as

³¹⁰ National Park Service, “San Xavier Missions (San Ildefonso, San Xavier, and Candelaria,” <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/travelspanishmissions/san-xavier-missions-san-ildefonso-san-xavier-and-candelaria.htm>.

³¹¹ Doni Weber, *Images of America: Aquarena Springs*,” 121.

information that connects their presence to real Texas history. Interpreting these structures would be an opportunity to correct the misrepresentation of culture and history found at Aquarena, while also educating visitors on the vibrant history of San Marcos. Though these buildings are falling into ruin, they deserve to be explored by curious citizens eager to learn about the story of Aquarena Springs.

Interpretation is the process by which information is made meaningful and relatable for the public. While it can take many forms, it is an essential process in the preservation of history. No matter the amount of available academic literature, if a subject is not interpreted for public understanding, its significance will not be widely understood. Because academic papers are not often consumed by non-academics, public historians work to bridge the gap between gown and town through various means, including interpretation.³¹² When something of historical significance is properly interpreted, it can be easily shared with the public and thus preserved in communal memory.

Texas State University should interpret the history of Aquarena Springs for public consumption to ensure the preservation of its memory. While this process would no doubt be time consuming and require additional finances, it is an important project that the University should prioritize due to the aging population of individuals who experienced the park first-hand. These primary sources can be beneficial to the interpretive process, and by including them in the project, the University would continue to build its relationship with the community. In addition, members of the school's public history program could

³¹² Aaron Gordon, "Killing Pigs and Weed Maps: The Mostly Unread World of Academic Papers," *Pacific Standard*, June 14, 2017, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/killing-pigs-weed-maps-mostly-unread-world-academic-papers-76733>.

also be consulted, giving students experience with public history work through exhibit design, creation of guidebooks, and scripting interpretive tours at the Meadows Center.

Aquarena Springs is a significant site of Texas history that deserves to be preserved through interpretation. Its hosting of millions of tourists, unique attractions, and attempted connections with real Texas history are just a few of the many reasons San Marcos should be proud of its connection with the site. While it no-doubt had its issues such as racist portrayals of Indigenous people and exploitation of natural resources and animals, these should not overshadow the significance the park had on Texas tourism. Instead, these major flaws should provide encouragement to utilize the history of Aquarena Springs as a means of interpreting the history of San Marcos. No longer should Aquarena be remembered through a sun-bleached photograph or an afterthought on a historical marker. Through the adoption of proper interpretive techniques, Aquarena Springs' memory, and the history of San Marcos, will continue to live on, years after the last visitors pass away.

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