

In this picture from the early 1950s, aquamaids Margaret Russell, left, and Shirley Rogers entertain guests from the underwater theatre at the Aquarena Springs theme park. Rogers is the daughter of former park owner Paul Rogers. Today she and Margaret (now Margaret Younger) live in homes near the park.





# Recording Aquarena history

by Alec Jennings

**A**quamaids, bus drivers, pig trainers, boat pilots and others returned to Texas State in November for a historic, three-day celebration that reunited former employees of the Aquarena Springs Resort.

With the rare opportunity of having so many former staff from one of the premier American tourist destinations of the 20th century together in one place, the Department of History and University Archives took the initiative to meet, greet and collect contact information from the attendees for a project to record an important segment of American life.

“There’s really a rich history at that site,” said Lynn Denton, director of Texas State’s Public History Program. “We hope these will be long-term relationships that we can work with for many years to come.”

The Department of History has dedicated its public history class to conducting interviews, piecing together vast amounts of information and recording oral histories to preserve the story of Aquarena Springs Resort for generations to come. Denton said the graduate-level course will be dedicated to the project for as long as it takes to organize the information. She hopes to present the findings to the public ultimately.

“This is a great opportunity to get our students involved in a project that is of such importance to understanding the evolution of American tourism in the mid-20th century,” Denton said. “This place is important for many areas of research.”

A.B. Rogers purchased the land around the headwaters of the San Marcos River in 1926 and built the Spring Lake Hotel in 1929. His son Paul bought the land from his parents in 1949. Fashioning a paddle boat with a glass bottom, Paul Rogers took family and friends out onto the water to see plants, animals and the springs through the crystal-clear waters. Soon, buildings sprang up – a submarine theatre, space needle, restaurant, sky ride, pioneer village and hillside trails, all developed around the original popularity of the glass bottom boats. The attractions drew 300,000 to 350,000 visitors a year at their peak in the 1970s and 1980s, employing 800 to 900 workers a year, many of them students at the nearby university.

“So many students were employed there,” said Andrew Sansom, executive director of the River Systems Institute, host of the reunion, “that it was probably even a bigger part of student life in years past than it is now.” >

With a multitude of people associated with the theme park throughout the better part of a half century, opportunities to collect and record stories from a historian's point of view seem to be endless. Dan Utley, public history instructor, said that his students hope to go beyond collecting stories from former staff at the resort. They plan to cast a wider net by seeking out people who once visited the resort and collecting the memorabilia saved from those experiences. They also want to hear the perspective of the people in the San Marcos community who remember a time when a variety of visitors were welcomed to the national attraction from throughout the country.

"Meeting individuals at the reunion was a terrific opportunity to build rapport and network. But we also want to talk to and learn from others who can tell us the history of Aquarena Springs," Utley said. "It's a much broader story than can be told just by those who worked there. Individuals from diverse backgrounds

and interests have a variety of details to contribute."

Denton said Aquarena is of historical importance when looking at the post-World War II United States and how Americans changed the way they

**"It's a much broader story than can be told just by those who worked there. Individuals from diverse backgrounds and interests have a variety of details to contribute."**

vacationed. With the construction of the interstate highway system, people took to the roads to see and experience the country at large. Aquarena was one of the first places in America to capitalize on this new tradition and

was a pioneer in what would become the modern amusement park and tourism experience.

Alongside Aquarena's importance in U.S. history is the value it has for the San Marcos community and Texas State, which purchased the land in 1994. Humans have lived in the area for thousands of years, making it one of the longest-inhabited places in North America. Ron Coley, director of Aquarena Center, said that the area holds educational importance to a variety of departments and fields of study.

"I can see a substantial amount of interest from archaeology, anthropology and history," Coley said. "But when you look at the importance of water resources to human life and how that will only increase in the future, the study of economics and politics related to water resources becomes important, too." ★

A glass bottom boat glides along Spring Lake in this 1949 photo taken from what is now the Saltgrass Steakhouse parking lot looking east.





The March 8, 1954, issue of *Life* magazine carried the story of the underwater wedding at Aquarena Springs of Bob Smith and Mary Beth Sanger. Bob and Mary Beth wanted to get married where they had met – underwater, where she was an aquamaid and he was a diving clown. Silhouetted in front is the Rev. Curtus Ellison, who performed the wedding, staying dry on the other side of the window. Attendants were Bob Cox, who was a student at the university at the time, and Margaret Russell. The wedding party weighted their suits and gowns with lead weights and gulped air through tubes.

## National spotlight

**A**quarena Springs Resort – with its aquamaids, glass bottom boats and swimming pig – was a state and national phenomenon throughout the second half of the 20th century.

Pictures from its attractions and underwater shows appeared in magazines and newspapers from *Life* and the *Dallas Morning News* to television programs like *What's My Line?* and *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*. A couple who met at the theme park were married underwater in 1954, and *Life* magazine carried the story. Seven years later the magazine followed up with the couple and their two kids celebrating their anniversary underwater.

“After HemisFair – the 1968 World’s Fair in San Antonio – the resort really started to become a household name,” said Ron Coley, director of the current Aquarena Center. “Countless people were traveling up and down I-35 with this unique place in San Marcos on the way.”

“It really was a unique time for Texas tourism,” said Kristine Toma, univer-

sity archivist. She and students in Texas State’s Public History Program met with former employees at the reunion celebration in November to pitch their goal of collecting, cataloguing and preserving pieces from Aquarena’s past.

“We’re looking for items with historical value,” said Toma. “Anything that would show Aquarena from a tourist’s point of view is important to the public history project.”

Toma said that she is now going through piles of flood-damaged news articles, gift shop souvenirs and even the deteriorating, novelty-sized pink Ralph the Swimming Pig mascot suit. Simply determining the real value of something can be a major challenge in their preservation efforts.

“We aren’t just looking for stuff,” said Toma. “But we do want people to know that if they have items they feel are important, we would like to hear from them.” ★



## A star is born

**A** trainer, half submerged in the clear waters of Spring Lake, holds out a bottle filled with nutritious milk. A cute, eager piglet leaps into the water to swim after the bottle as theme park visitors cheer wildly. The scene was repeated so often that it came to define the Aquarena Springs experience.

“The pigs would be weaned from their mothers after they were only a few weeks old,” said Ron Coley, director of Aquarena Center, the former theme park owned by Texas State since 1994. “The trainer really became something of a mother to these pigs.”

Ralph, the famous swimming pig, was a local as well as a national favorite. Crowds of people from across the country visiting Aquarena Springs Resort were almost sure to stick around for the water show in which Ralph was the star.

“There were actually several Ralphs,” Coley said. “If you consider that each pig was able to perform for up to six months, that no pig did more than one of the 10 shows a day, and take into account the number of years the shows were performed – you could estimate that there were about 700 pigs total that were at one point a part of the theme park.”

For approximately the first 10 years, each pig was given its own unique name. But after a trainer’s appearance on the *What’s My Line?* TV show with a pig who happened to be named Ralph, that name stuck. “From that point forward, they were all known as Ralph,” Coley said.

After the pigs grew too big to perform their act of swimming in a circle in front of the audience, they were returned to their original owners, who sold the well-trained, domesticated White Pot Bellies as family pets.