

Old Elks Lodge Hall

200 East Losoya, Del Rio, Texas 78840

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The property at 200 East Losoya must have been owned by the San Felipe, Agricultural, Manufacturing, and Irrigation Company at one time, though the earliest definitive owner was one of Del Rio's founders: Paula [Losoya Taylor] Rivers.¹ Rivers sold the property in 1886 to A.F. and James Dignowity (one or both of whom Del Rio's Dignowity Street is named). They in turn sold it to James A. Price, one of Del Rio's early developers. He sold the property to W.C. Easterling who sold it to A.M. Gildea in 1894.²

Gildea may have a story (that is yet unrecorded). He may be a West Texan listed in Noah H. Rose's catalog of photographs.³ Gildea was a rancher in the Del Rio area at the turn of the century, and A.M. Gildea & Co. was advertising in 1890, "Real Estate Agents" as well as "Agents for Mutual Life Insurance Company" at a central location at the corner of Perry and Canal Streets.⁴

Gildea likely built a structure there, the one referred to in later records as "Gildea Hall." The Hall at one time was leased to the Del Rio Business College offering bookkeeping and

¹ The deed records use reference points that no longer exist, making the exact date and extent of purchase by Mrs. Rivers uncertain. The Taylor-Rivers House in which she lived has been marked by the Texas and Val Verde County Historical Commissions.

² VVC, County Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 1, pages 583+; Vol. 2, pages 116+; Vol. 5, pages 252+; Vol. 6, pages 23+. The property is referred to as Lot 1, Block A, Range 9, North Del Rio, though the early deeds called it Range 1x.

³ Catalog "#378 A.M. (Gus) Gildea, 1876, as a young Texas frontiersman" and "#379 A.M. (Gus) Gildea, 1878, as he appeared with Selman's Scouts, in New Mexico." Ed Bartholomew, *A Catalog of the World Famous N.H. Rose Collection of Old Time Photographs of the Frontier*, privately published, 1952.

⁴ Advertisement, *Del Rio Record*, April 5, 1890, no page number; Untitled article, *Del Rio Daily News*, December 30, 1905, no page number.

stenography as well as arithmetic and grammar.⁵ No structures are known to have stood there previous to Gildea's ownership. Gildea sold the property in 1910 to C.C. Young who immediately sold it to C.K. McDowell (who would become County Judge at a later date). McDowell sold the site and structure to the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, Del Rio Lodge 837 on October 15, 1910.

The Elks likely bought the property as a result of the uncertainties and costs of leasing property. In 1908 their landlady died, and the Elks were concerned that her inheritors would try to break the lease. In that same year, the rented Hall, or "Home" as they called it, had required an expensive remodeling.⁶

The "Gildea Hall property," on the northeast corner of Cemetery Street (now Pecan) and Gove Street (now Losoya) must have been large enough at the time to serve Elks functions. (The Lodge had been meeting in an upstairs room on Garfield.) J.C. Clarkson, James McLymont and F.C. Blaine acted as trustees for the lodge. The price was \$2,000 cash with \$3,500 in notes due over time. The release of the vender's lien was not entered into the deed records until February 1, 1916.⁷

The very next day, on February 2, 1916 the Lodge signed a contract with Eagle Pass Lumber Company (which occupied the block now occupied by the new federal building). The Company agreed to build a two-story brick Elks Hall to replace what was likely a wooden, single-story Gildea Hall using plans drawn by Martin Brauer. Brauer was a Del Rio builder in

⁵ Advertisement, *Val Verde County Herald*, January 6, 1905, no page number.

⁶ Elks Record Book, 1903-1909, pages 208, 210, 217.

⁷ VVC, County Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 30, page 640. Lot 1, Block A, Range 9; Elks Lodge, *Record [Book]*, Feb. 23, 1910-May 11, 1921, page 28. C.K. McDowell was initiated into the Lodge during the same summer he offered the property for sale. Elks Lodge, page 21.

business as early as 1905.⁸ (He also had won the bid “for remodeling & papering & painting” the old rented Hall back in 1908.) The contract price was \$13,400: \$2,000 in cash and the rest in notes. Construction was substantially completed in June. Details like paint and window screens were being finished when, in August, the Lodge piano was moved into the upper floor ballroom and tuned.⁹

The grand opening dance was held on Friday, September 29, 1916.¹⁰ The Lodge Hall served two major functions: meetinghouse for a fraternal organization and venue for community functions. The Lodge Hall hosted events to raise funds for the Red Cross, “War Relief,” and “Food Conservation” lectures as America entered World War I. The “Officers of the Army” from Del Rio’s Camp Michie, a training camp on the east of town, were allowed to use the Hall for dances.¹¹ During the Second World War, the Elks contributed to National War Fund and the Crippled Children’s Institute while purchasing War Bonds and donating money to the Red Cross.¹² In 1928 the Elks donated the Hall for an event organized by Del Rio’s Associated Charities and American Legion. The dance and supper raised money to keep open the East Side Hospital.¹³

As a fraternal organization meeting room, the Elks Hall proved to be an urban oasis. The Hall was a “relaxing place for a lot of the businessmen downtown.” (Women were not allowed as members.) They would sit in the lounges, read their newspapers, perhaps play some billiards, have a drink and smoke their tobacco. The Hall was one of only two places in town, for a long time, where mixed drinks could be served. The Lodge would host bands for their entertainment

⁸ “I am prepared to make estimates and do all kinds of work which requires a first-class mechanic. Satisfaction guaranteed. Give me your business and have it done right.” Advertisement, *Val Verde County Herald*, January 27, 1905, no page number.

⁹ Elks Lodge, pages 208, 217, 304-307, 326-330, 356.

¹⁰ Elks Lodge, page 344.

¹¹ Elks Lodge, pages 387-394.

¹² Elks Record Book, 1922-1950, pages 331-364.

¹³ Untitled article, *Val Verde County Herald*, November 16, 1928, no page.

and offer monthly or weekly steak nights for members only. It was a “beer joint, saloon and place to play poker.”¹⁴

The earliest image of the Lodge Hall occurs on the 1917 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. A photograph included as part of this application was shot between 1916 and 1924. A Sanborn Map of the latter date indicates the building immediately behind the Elks Lodge had been eliminated.¹⁵

As part of the broader social component of the community, high school functions were commonly held upstairs in the grand ballroom. Students would dress to the hilt. Leslie Schmidt, later a soldier, Foreign Service specialist and teacher, wore his first tuxedo to a school formal at the Lodge Hall. Del Rio’s Civic League also rented the Hall for dances. Over the years, the Hall hosted high school reunions and weddings, and the Elks themselves sponsored Boy Scouts, Little League teams, soccer, Hoop Shoots, other sporting competitions and charity events including the MDA Chili Cookoff.¹⁶

While the Elks Hall was a vital social center for much of the community, Hispanics, African Americans, and other people of color were not welcome. In fact, they were all but prohibited from even entering the building, except through service entrances to deliver beer or other refreshments. Mr. Johnny Paredes, a life-long, third generation Del Rioan, helped his father deliver beer; they were able to do so only up a long flight of outside stairs at the rear of the Hall. Del Rio Mayor Dora Alcalá recalls walking by the Hall from after-school activities at Sacred Heart Academy, and seeing elaborate, formal dances and parties through the abundant, large windows. Her admiration for the beauty of such scenes was offset by wistfulness in

¹⁴ Charlie Lane to DLB, Interview, May 23, 2002.

¹⁵ This City Hall building appears on the 1917 Sanborn Map but not the 1924. In 1924 the “Old City Hall” was completed and occupied. Whatever building the City was rented must have been razed upon its departure.

¹⁶ Elks Lodge, pages 396-397; Elks Minute Book, September 1980-May 1985 various entries; Leslie Schmidt to DLB, personal interview, March 30, 2002; Charlie Lane to DLB, Interview, May 23, 2002.

knowing she could not participate. Mr. Ross Foster, probably the oldest surviving, current member of the Elks Lodge, confirmed that “No Mexicans were allowed in Elks while we were in that old building”, typical of many fraternal and service organizations prior to the 1960s.

Del Rio’s City Hall sat immediately next door to the east. The building had been a hospital, but it apparently was vacant and owned by the Elks in 1918 when the City leased it for municipal use through 1924. The Val Verde County courthouse was across the street to the south, placing the Lodge Hall at the center of governmental affairs.¹⁷ When gambling and liquor were generally illegal, they were still available at the Elks Lodge. The “Law” must have known, given the Hall’s location, but the Law must have also been part of the Lodge.¹⁸

Del Rio’s Elks Lodge occupied the building for nearly sixty years. During the 1970s the Lady Elks bought a nine acre property near San Felipe Creek. The Elks bought it from them when the Lodge realized they had outgrown the Hall. The Lodge “hated to sell it,” but by 1985 the Lodge had built a new, larger facility on the east side of town near the San Felipe Springs, and in April 1986, the move was completed. The old Hall did not have enough parking for Elks and Elks-sponsored events.¹⁹

Eduardo Garza bought the property in 1986. The financing for the deal fell through, and Garza sold it to Billie C. Lewis, Jr. of Southwest Abstract, just twelve days later. In April the Elks vacated the premises for their new home. Lewis sold the property to Vidal Gonzalez [Munoz] in December 1986.²⁰

¹⁷ Leslie Schmidt to DLB, Interview, March 30, 2002. This adjacent location would explain why a 1922 photo of Del Rio’s fire-fighting equipment was photographed in front of the Hall.

¹⁸ C.K. McDowell, who sold the property to the Lodge, later became County Judge; the membership list included names of people who eventually became City Mayors and Commission members.

¹⁹ Chester Rutigliano to DLB, Interview, May 24, 2002. At one point they had proposed selling the Hall to the county under the premise that the downstairs would make good offices and the upstairs a courtroom. Charlie Lane to DLB, Interview, May 23, 2002.

²⁰ VVC, County Clerk’s Office, Deed Records, Vol. 465, pages 270+; Vol. 465, pages 410+; Vol. 474, pages 337+; conversations between Vidal Gonzalez and DLB, April 2002; Elks Minute Book, June 1985-November 1989..

Vidal Gonzalez sold the property to Jay Johnson in 1995.²¹ Johnson has rented the building to a number of businesses. Recently, the Val Verde Democratic Party has rented the structure, placing campaign signs in direct line of sight of Val Verde County Courthouse: early voting as well as election day voting.

In 2002 Johnson and Main Street Advisory Board member Bill Sontag opened the Hall as an art gallery and studio, coffee shop and special events venue.

²¹ VVC, County Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Vol. 630, pages 267+.

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Gonzalez, Vidal to DLB, Conversations, April 2002.

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Schmidt, Leslie to DLB, Interview, March 30, 2002.

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Attachments—

Three pages of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps: 1917, 1924, and 1930.

Photograph of the Hall (shot between 1916 and 1924).

Photograph of the interior of the Hall, second floor ballroom (undated, note the flag in the first and second photos).

Photograph of the Hall and the Del Rio Hospital immediately to the east, shot between 1916 and 1918. The Whitehead Memorial Museum has another photo (mounted into an exhibit) showing the Hall and the building next to it with "City Hall" signage, shot between 1918 and 1924.

The cover of *Sheep and Goat Raisers' Magazine*, February 1922 with City of Del Rio fire trucks in foreground and Hall behind.