

# YEGUA CENTER AT SOMERVILLE ISD

Somerville  
Burleson County, Texas

## I. CONTEXT

Somerville is one of many railroad boomtowns that started as a station stop beside the tracks of a railroad built in Texas from 1870 to 1900. In 1880 the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway Company of Galveston, Texas, built the first railroad bridge over Yegua Creek. People from all over the United States and other countries came to Somerville to work for the railroad or to start businesses, and in 1903 the Somerville Independent School District was established. At that time, there was no gymnasium for the school. Like many other small rural towns in Texas, the Great Depression had a major impact on Somerville's citizens, businesses and the school. Emerging from the depression years, the local school board began working with the Works Projects Administration to build a gymnasium for the school. Located at 616 8<sup>th</sup> Street in Somerville, it is a wonderful and prime example of rustic architecture featuring construction of native stone/petrified wood. The gymnasium was completed by the WPA in 1940 and remains in use for school and community activities.

## II. OVERVIEW

In 1903 the Somerville Independent School District was established, and a two story all grades public school was built by 1905.<sup>i</sup> The mascot for the school became the

Yegua Indian, and the school colors became orange and black. All the school lacked was a gymnasium. The Works Projects Administration (WPA) had been established as a relief measure during the Great Depression; the greatest single area of WPA spending in Texas was construction.<sup>ii</sup> The first impact of the WPA creations was economic since the small communities were able to locally employ their own able, skilled, and unskilled workers. Today, many individuals and communities still value their WPA schools and school-related projects as part of their heritage. They continue to use and preserve these sturdy and aesthetically beautiful buildings, gyms, and athletic fields.<sup>iii</sup>

The Somerville School Board consisting of M. V. Carson, C. F. Hardt, C. V. Welch, C. J. Keese, C. N. Bellenger, Nello Strickland, and Gus Giesenschlag, along with Superintendent of Schools D. W. Cox worked with Travis Broesche, architect, and Joseph Hahn, WPA Superintendent, to do construction for the Somerville Independent School District.<sup>iv</sup> One of the projects was a gymnasium, which was to be built using heavy stone quarried in the nearby Yegua Creek bottom.<sup>v</sup>

On October 3, 1938, a WPA Project Proposal, addressed to the Works Progress Administration in Houston, Texas, was prepared. Stated on the form was a request that the proposal be reviewed and that a formal application be made for an allotment of funds for the building of a native rock gymnasium and auditorium with stage, locker rooms, shower rooms, and lecture rooms, as well as construction of a lighted softball and football field in Somerville, Texas. The amount requested and approved was \$37,852.20. The application was approved, and construction began.<sup>vi</sup> At the July 2, 1940 school board meeting, the board accepted the gymnasium as being completed.<sup>vii</sup>

In a conversation with Bill Neinast, Class of 1946, he stated, “The stone for both the gym and football stadium came from the Friedrich Amandus Neinast hill in Washington County. The supervisor of the men was Joe Hahn, who had no previous experience as a stone mason nor, I think, any experience in the building trades.”<sup>viii</sup> Mr. O. B. Lewis, who was born in 1911, wrote his memoirs of Somerville and included the following in his writing: “A WPA project was the fence on the football field and the gym building made of rock. A crew of about thirty men was used to load the rocks on flatbed trucks and then haul it to the building site. There were at least one hundred men used to build this rock fence and stadium and gym. None of these men had ever done this type of work before; their pay was about \$2.00 per day. The total cost of this project was less than \$3,000. I have heard Clyde Welch, who was on the school board at that time, give the cost of this work, and that money was for the steel beams used in the gym.”<sup>ix</sup>

A new gymnasium was built in the 1980’s, but the original gymnasium remained in use. Repairs were made to the gymnasium in 1988, including strengthening the bleachers, adding new doors and windows, and adding a carpet floor with lines for volleyball and basketball courts. The windows and doors were replaced as the existing windows and doors were metal and had rusted. The stage was made a UIL regulated stage for one-act plays. Air conditioning was also added to the gymnasium for comfort.<sup>x</sup>

After the new gymnasium was built, it was decided to give a name to the WPA constructed gymnasium, as it would still be used for various activities and to distinguish it from the new gymnasium. A contest was held, and students were allowed to suggest names. The names were presented to the school board, and on November 17, 1987, the Board of Trustees, consisting of Dennis Griffin, Jim Kotch, Jimmy McFarland, Ed

Meyer, A. D. Nixon, Don Strickland, and Alvarene Wight voted to name the repaired WPA constructed gymnasium the Yegua Center.<sup>xi</sup>

Initially, the main purpose of the gymnasium was for sporting events. Physical education and athletics classes were held there, and students were taught to play volleyball and basketball.

In early years, the Yegua Center was used for various school activities as well as various community activities, and that remains true to this day. Activities such as donkey basketball games and Halloween carnivals were held here.

One of the main events held for many years in the Yegua Center was the annual coronation. Members of the local Parent-Teachers Association sponsored this event. Students were chosen from the high school to reign as Senior King and Queen, and students from the grammar school were chosen to reign as Junior King and Queen. Many other students in both schools served as members of the royal courts. Each year there was a different theme, and local seamstresses made most of the costumes.

In 1961 when Hurricane Carla hit, many people sought shelter in Somerville at the Yegua Center. This again happened during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Ike in 2009. Local restaurants prepared food for those staying at the Yegua Center, and those staying there were made to feel welcome by school officials and members of the community. The school later signed an agreement with the American National Red Cross for the Yegua Center to serve as a Red Cross Shelter.<sup>xii</sup>

When the high school was demolished in the late 1970's, there was no longer an auditorium for several events, and those events were moved to the Yegua Center. These included Baccalaureate Services for the senior class as well as graduation ceremonies for

both the junior high and the high school. Offices in the Yegua Center were used for classrooms while the new high school was being built.

The Yegua Center is also used for funeral services when the local funeral home cannot accommodate large attendances. Families and friends are seated in chairs on the floor as well as in the stands. Several churches have held services at the Yegua Center, mostly during times of having new churches built and the congregations needing a place to meet. It has also served as a voting precinct polling place for county and hospital district elections.

The Yegua Center continues to be used for such things as staff development, state testing, and physical education classes. Children's sports such as Little Dribblers are held there, also. The students practice their sport after school as well as play games on weekends.

The Elementary PTO always sponsors a Fall Festival to raise funds for the elementary school, and the Yegua Center has been a perfect spot for this festival. There is ample room for all of the activities needed.

The springtime is always a busy time of year for school events to be held, and the Yegua Center has been and still is the perfect site for most of these events. The Junior-Senior Prom has been held there for many years; the students, along with their sponsors, decorate the building from floor to ceiling, and it is transformed from a basketball court into a ballroom. By having the prom there, students do not have to travel to nearby towns and can stay closer to home.

Banquets are also held in the Yegua Center. Most of the school organizations sponsor a banquet to honor their members as well as their families. Tables are set up, and again the Yegua Center is transformed, this time into a banquet hall.

Other school activities include the annual awards ceremonies for the junior high and high school students as well as the Christmas and Spring Band Concerts.

At the April 15, 2015 Somerville School Board Meeting, the board, consisting of Bryan Crook, James Douglas, Linda Pinkerton, Melissa Tharp, Joe Gonzales, Stanley Smith, and Jason Urbanosky discussed the wishes of the Somerville Ex-Students Association to pursue designating the Yegua Center and the Football Stadium with historical markers to preserve the history of each structure. Following Superintendent Charles Camarillo's recommendation that the Board take action to approve this request, the Board voted to unanimously to approve the request.<sup>xiii</sup>

Bill Neinast states, "I hold those WPA structures in Somerville in awe. They were built by unskilled labor more than 75 years ago and are still straight, strong, and useful."<sup>xiv</sup>

Don Strickland, Class of 1945, in an interview with KBTX TV from Bryan/College Station concerning the Yegua Center, stated, "It's special to all of us." Mr. Strickland is a figure in the community himself and says the Yegua Center has provided a place for kids to play basketball and for the city to host meetings, among other things. He stated, "It is such a historical marker for us; didn't even want to think of tearing it down because it is such a wonderful, wonderful facility."<sup>xv</sup>

The Somerville Ex-Students Association remains active and holds activities each fall at the Yegua Center during Homecoming weekend. Ex-students travel from as far

away as 1200 miles to attend these activities. A business meeting is held, and an Ex-Student Queen and King are crowned. While participating in the activities, those present recall the many good days spent there, whether it was participating in a coronation, dribbling a basketball or dancing at the prom.

### III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Yegua Center is quite significant in the Somerville community, but its historical significance also stands alone. While other school buildings have been built since the Yegua Center, it has truly stood the test of time. The gymnasium, along with the football field, are two exceptional examples of Works Progress Administration projects in the state. The use of local stone/petrified wood and the rustic architecture are prime examples of the designs often used by the WPA. The simple straight-forward design has made the building usable for various activities. The Somerville School Board exercised their imagination to seek WPA assistance in order to upgrade their school buildings and help pull the community out of the Great Depression.

Even though repairs have had to be made, due to normal wear and tear, the building itself is still a solid structure. Originally used as only a school gymnasium, the building has evolved into much more, as it serves as a community center, special events center, and town hall. It has provided Somerville with the continuity it needs to provide sports, entertainment and community service activities to the citizens in town and the surrounding area.

#### IV. DOCUMENTATION

<sup>1</sup> “The City of Somerville, 1883-2008 Somerville Burleson County, Texas,” [www.somervilletx.us.com/history](http://www.somervilletx.us.com/history), accessed 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Citizens State Bank Calendar, Somerville, Texas, 2003 edition.

<sup>3</sup> Krane, Gene, *Heritage*, Volume 11, Number 4, Texas Historical Foundation, Fall 1993, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Building Plaque in Yegua Center, 1939.

<sup>5</sup> Giesenschlag, William H., *Burleson County...Back When, A County Timeline*, Burleson County Historical Commission, 2009, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> WPA Projects Folder, Official Project Number 12627, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>7</sup> Somerville School Board Minutes, Somerville ISD, Somerville, Texas, July 2, 1940.

<sup>8</sup> Neinast, Bill, Personal Communication, September 13, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, O. B., “My Life As It Was,” August 18, 1988, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Maler, Gary, Personal Communication, September 16, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Somerville School Board Minutes, November 17, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> American Red Cross Shelter Agreement, February 19, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Somerville School Board Minutes, April 15, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Neinast, Bill, Personal Communication, September 13, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> “On the Road in Burleson County,” [www.kbtx.com/headlines/On-the-Road-in-Burleson-County-268331552](http://www.kbtx.com/headlines/On-the-Road-in-Burleson-County-268331552), accessed July 28, 2014.

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