



GLORIES OF THE PAST—Castroville, near San Antonio, founded more than 100 years ago, retains some of the glories that make it an outstanding tourist attraction. Top, left, the living room of Landmark Inn, built in 1854, is furnished with antiques. The lofty spire of the village Catholic church, founded in 1844, is at the right. Bottom, left, the bath house used by travelers stopping at the Vance Hotel, as the Landmark Inn was first known. Center, a Sunday house, built in the 1850s for use by farmers when they came to Castroville for church service, is still in use. Right, Henri Castro, the Frenchman who founded the village on a grant from President Sam Houston of the Texas Republic.

Founded by Frenchman

Alsatian Village of Castroville, Near San Antonio, Has Old World Charm

BY STELLA WOODALL

Written for the Star-Telegram. Many a tourist, intent on reaching his destination in as short a time as his automobile will get him there, misses the quaint and picturesque places along the byways within a stone's throw of Texas Highways.

One such place well worth the time it takes to stop and explore it is the Alsatian village of Castroville, about half an hour's drive west of San Antonio on Highway 90. Castroville has one of the most exciting histories of any Texas settlement.

Its founder, Henri Castro, spent between \$100,000 and \$200,000 of his own money and overcame countless obstacles in order to colonize this community.

Henri Castro was born in the Department of Landes in southwestern France in July 1786 at a time when that country's finances were depleted, and its working class was near starvation. He was 3 years old when the terror of the French Revolution began, 7 when King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette were beheaded in Paris, and in his teens when Napoleon Bonaparte became ruler of France.

WIFE BROUGHT DOWRY.

But if Henri Castro lived in troublous times, he, nevertheless, became well educated and well-to-do. And this was in spite of the fact that his ancestors were Jews from Portugal.

In 1813, at the age of 27, he married a Paris woman with a dowry of 50,000 francs.

Castro migrated to the United States in 1827 and became a naturalized citizen; but in 1838, he returned to Paris, where he entered into partnership with LaFitte and Company Banking House. While with this company, he tried to negotiate a loan for the Republic of Texas.

Because of Castro's interest in the Republic, President Sam Houston appointed him consul general for Texas in Paris.

On Jan. 20, 1842, Henri Castro was back in Texas, at Austin, in conference with President Houston. Castro asked for and received a grant of land four miles west of the Medina River for colonization.

But since there was no stream on his land, Castro purchased 17 additional leagues of land between his grant and the river.

The contract provided that Castro was to establish 600 families or single men past 17 years of age within three years; however, the contract was later extended two more years. Each family was to receive 640 acres and each single man, 320 acres.

MET WITH BLOCKADE.

Castro found his task of recruiting settlers extremely difficult, because the French government was trying to colonize Algeria in North Africa. However, after considerable advertising, he recruited 114 men, women, and children from Alsace, on the eastern border of France directly across the Rhine from Germany.

These people set sail for Tex-

as in November 1842 while Castro remained in France to complete his recruiting.

The colonists found trouble awaiting them when they reached the shores of Texas. The Mexicans, not recognizing Texas' Independence, were blocking some of the harbors as well as raising disturbances within the Republic.

In July 1844 Castro joined his colonists in San Antonio, to find that their number had dwindled to 27. In September, this handful of pioneers loaded their belongings into ox-drawn wagons and went with Castro to claim their land and establish the town of Castroville.

They were a determined, industrious group. They overcame many hardships. While clearing their fields, planting their crops, and building their homes, they kept their guns handy as protection against Indian raids. During the drouth of 1848, when for 15 months there was no rain, these settlers ate bird eggs and rattlesnakes. Then an epidemic of cholera almost wiped out the colony.

SON CARRIED ON.

The town of Castroville was surveyed by John James and incorporated in 1850. It became the county seat of Medina County, and in 1853 the courthouse was built. A rock dam, gristmill, sawmill, cypress shingle mill, and cotton gin were built.

The first school was held in the courthouse.

By 1857, when the writer, Frederick L. Olmsted, visited Castroville, he reported: "The cottages are scattered prettily, and there are two churches." He added, "After struggling with some difficulties, it is now a decided success. The village itself contains about 600 inhabitants, and the farms of the neighborhood several hundred more."

The two churches of Castroville are the Lutheran, established Jan. 29, 1852, by Christian Oefinger, and the Catholic, founded in Sept. 1844 by Bishop Jean-Marie Odin.

During the War Between the States, Castroville prospered. This was due to its location on the route from San Antonio to Mexico, a convenient stopping place for the many freight wagons passing to and from these places.

In 1865, at the age of 79, Henri Castro, decided to make another journey to France. He headed south from Castroville through Laredo to Monterrey; but that was the end of his journey. He died at Monterrey and was buried at the foot of the Sierra Madre.

Surviving him were his widow, who died in Castroville Feb. 28, 1871, and a son, Lorenzo, who remained in the town his father colonized.

LOST RAILROAD.

In 1868, the French nuns opened a convent in Castroville, which they operated until 1896. It was later rebuilt into Moyer Military Academy for Boys.

The bypassing of the town by the Southern Pacific Railroad in

1880 because the citizens did not put up a bonus of \$100,000 was a great blow to Castroville. It was subsequently the cause of the town losing the county seat to Hondo in 1892.

However, the building of Highway 90 through Castroville was a boon to the town, which became a mecca for artists, photographers, antique hunters, architects and writers.

I first was attracted to this town quite by accident, when I stopped at a cafe for a cup of coffee. Inside the old building, with its bare floors and rudely constructed tables with benches for seats, the tantalizing smells of food cooking and the plates heaped with mouth-watering food being placed before the guests, were intriguing.

From the friendly, well-fed women operating the cafe, I learned something of the early settlers. Then I visited Miss Ruth Lawler and her brother, who live at beautiful old Landmark Inn, formerly Vance Hotel. I saw the old bath house formerly used by travelers staying at Vance Hotel. And I admired the antique furnishings of the homes a century old but still well preserved.

OLD CUSTOMS LIVE.

Many of these people still speak the Alsace language, and some have the same customs as their ancestors.

On Rogation Days and Fridays during Lent, the Catholics make pilgrimages up the steep, rocky Cross Hill — Mont Gentil — reciting the rosary and singing hymns as they go.

Children of Castroville hang up their stockings on Dec. 5, the eve of the feast of St. Nicholas.

St. Louis Day is celebrated each year on the Sunday nearest Aug. 25 with games, festivities, and a dinner of hot barbecue, French bread, cakes, and pies served on long tables under a grove of pecan trees at Koenig's Park, and ending with a big dance.

Years ago, immediately after a funeral a new grave was dug to be in readiness for the next.

Another old custom is that of the "Niue Yar Granz," New Year Ring. On New Year's Eve, the women bake pastry wreaths made of lightbread dough and decorated with sugar and spices, which they present to their parents or godparents.

Just before New Year's Day, every housewife gives her home a thorough cleaning to "get out the old year's dirt to make ready for the new."

They also serve black-eyed peas on New Year's Day "to be assured sufficient money in the twelvemonth ahead."

Amongst these Alsatians from France, there appeared, before the War Between the States, an Englishman by the name of L. L. White. He established a settlement for former slaves, and in the midst of this settlement he built himself a fine 2½ story home.

When Texas seceded from the United States, White fled to Mexico. But after the war, he returned to Castroville.

