

OLD TIMERS RECALL LA VILLITA BACK 75 YEARS

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By Fred Mosbach

While much is being said and written about La Villita, the former village on Villita Street which is being remodeled with the aid of Uncle Sam digging out of a depression, little or nothing is being said about the substantial citizens who had made their homes on this short narrow thoroughfare at one time or another during the past 75 years, some of whom are still here to recall scenes and incidents of those days that they remember.

One of these is Mrs. Julius Erckener, daughter of the late Sidney S. Womble, after whom Womble Alley is named. Womble Alley extended from the river south to East Nueva Street, crossing Villita Street in the middle of the block between South Alamo and South Presa Streets. The Womble home was at the east end of Nacional Street, midway between Villita and Nueva Streets. Here Mrs. Kate N. Womble conducted a boarding house, and among her boarders, Mrs. Erckener recalls, was Louis Sien, a cornice maker, with Leroux & Cosgrove.

"Mother used to set one of the best tables in San Antonio and her trade included the best people in town," said Mrs. Erckener. Mrs. Erckener, now 75, was then a young lady, and she had a brother, William (Bill Womble,) who was well known among the boys of his age and a member of the Little Joker Baseball Club, playing in San Antonio's first City League organized by Sam Chappell and Frank Bushick in 1888.

Mrs. Erckener recalled when St. John's Lutheran Church was built on Nueva Street, which preceded the present structure, her brother Billie offering a prayer for his safety," said Mrs. Erckener. This church became known as "the rooster church" and was seldom referred to by any other name, as old-timers will testify. This building was torn down to make way for the widening of Nueva Street and the present handsome edifice was erected in its place. "I often wonder what became of that rooster" said Mrs. Erckener.

"Every home in that neighborhood, mostly Germans, had its own well from which we got our drinking water," said

Mrs. Erckener, "and for washing purposes we got our water from the river, hauled up in barrels for 25 cents each." These homes were built of chalk rock on the German style, each with a gable roof which extended out in front to serve as a porch. Many of these are still to be seen in various parts of the city. Nearly every family owned its home and constituted a group of substantial taxpayers.

One of the early residents of Villita Street was E. A. Florian, a native of Poland, a highly educated man graduated from Warsaw University, exiled from his native country, who came to the United States in 1832 and to Texas in 1851. He started an insurance agency in San Antonio and in the early '50s in partnership with John C. French, established the first bank in San Antonio on the present site of the country courthouse, operating under the firm name of French & Florian. Later this bank moved across the street into the French Building when this was completed on the present site of the detective and health headquarters, which was San Antonio's first office building. This bank continued until the beginning of the Civil War. After the close of the war it was succeeded by the San Antonio National Bank, organized by George W. Brackenridge.

Florian built his home on the south side of Villita Street, where it still stands, the third house from the corner where the McAlister store was the building of which also still stand in remodeled form. Between the McAllister store and the Florian home D. Ralph L. Graves, then county physician, built his home, which still stands in its original form. This was later occupied by John Bosshardt and family.

In later years the German Methodist Church was built on Villita Street, adjoining the Graves home. Subsequently a Negro congregation occupied this church and built a seminary on the adjoining property on the corner, which extended south along Womble Alley. Previously, however, Mrs. Edina Geiser, a fortuneteller, had her home on the corner in chalk rock house. She had a large clientele, including some of San Antonio's best citizens, and many a businessman sought her advice before closing a deal. A large tin sign, "Intelligence Office," was above the front door. The old church building still stands, but is vacant and desolate, the windowpanes broken, a state of ruin.

With the remodeling of La Villita the name of Womble

Alley was changed to King Philip V and the name of Nacional Street is also to be changed. Mrs. Erckener said; "I am going through that old place some of these days to see what all these changes look like." The only house in that neighborhood that bore any semblance to Mexican habitation stood on the northeast corner of Nueva and South Presa Street. It was built of cedar posts, erected upright and held together with rawhide. The interstices were filled with mud, which was used as stucco and the house was kept in a whitewashed condition until it burned down a few years ago. No nails were used in building the framework of this house, the rafters for the roof being cedar posts tied together with rawhide, and the house originally had a thatched roof.

On the southwest corner of Villita Street and Womble Alley Frank Scheuermann had a shoemaker shop and also his home, and adjoining this was the home of Charles Bardenwerper, bookkeeper for Ed Kotula & Co. Then came the home of G. A. Duerler, who had a candy factory in the rear. Duerler was chief of the fire department for many years. Adjoining the Duerler property was the home of Herman Schulz, hardware merchant, which was on the southwest corner of Villita and South Presa streets. On the southwest corner was the old Hummel home, where the late Charles Hummel, former city auditor, was born. All of these old homes are gone.

On the opposite corner, where the powerhouse now is, Mrs. Randall had a dressmaking establishment, and adjoining this was the two-story home of John Lemnitzer, who had a turning and carving shop there and made a salve which was said to have wonderful healing qualities. Next was the home of Max Karkauer, who was with Goldfrank, Frank & Co., as traveling salesman.

On the northeast corner of Villita Street and Womble alley was the General Cos place in a little rock house, which still stands, and where the articles were signed capitulating to the Texans who under Ben Milam and Johnson took San Antonio, Dec. 9, 1835. This property was later acquired by the Fourtrell family. Adjoining on the east in a story-and-a-half rock house, which still stands. Mrs. Christine Lips had a boarding house, and adjoining this was the home of Ramon Beincourt, whose father sent him to Paris for an education.

In a two-story house on the northwest corner of Villita and South Alamo Street, which still stands, belonging to the Henry W. Bitter estate and built about 1850, Sidney Womble had a saloon and upstairs was a gambling house. Later Mrs. Ann T. Erskine had a boarding house there and subsequently Marcos Struve had a saloon there. On the opposite corner F. W. McAllister, son of Judge Samuel W. McAllister, who was county judge when the present county courthouse was built, had a grocery store. On the southeast corner, where South Street runs into South Alamo, was the Muench Hall, one of the early amusement places in San Antonio, and here the Alamo Rifles under Captain G. W. Runner, with N. J. Petrich, first lieutenant, and M. H. Redwood and Armand Krish, second lieutenants had their armory. This was San Antonio's first militia company, organized March 10, 1874, a leftover from the Old Guard to preserve law and order during the reconstruction days following the close of the Civil War.

Across the street from Muench Hall, on the northeast corner, in a little rock house, Mrs. Frances Hanzal had a grocery store, which was popular because of the fine coffee cake (Kaffee Kuchen) she used to handle. Later this house was torn down to make way for a three-story brick building occupied by the Sterling Hotel. Subsequently this building was torn down because of the high taxes and the site was converted into a used car lot, and for a filling station.

On the corner of Nacional Street and Womble Alley was the home of Emil Kuehn, former property clerk at the central police station, and near the corner of South Presa Street was the home of August Biesenbach. Among others who lived on Villita Street were Charles Elmendorf, Charles F. Kroeger, Charles Listich, Eugene Staffel, Judge Peter Shields, Rafael Diaz, Hart Mussey, Richard Cawley, Frank M. Carroll, Mrs. Christina Kielmann and John Gillespie. Of these Kuehn is the only survivor.

That's the story of La Villita as those who had lived there during the past 75 years knew it.