



By Julie Catalano Photography courtesy of Castroville Area Chamber of Commerce, The Landmark Inn, Bradford Boehme

Castroville is a mere 27 miles from downtown San Antonio, but in history and heritage it's almost a trip back in time to an era featuring an unlikely combination of the Wild West and the Alsace region in France, when 19th-century residents seeking a better life could find it in a strange new land called Texas thanks to an ambitious entrepreneur named Henri Castro.



"It was an interesting time in Texas," says Bradford Boehme, historian, whose own family history coincides with that of his hometown — he has a number of great-great-great grandparents who were part of the original colony established on the banks of the Medina River on September 3, 1844. "It was during the Republic of Texas, between 1836-45, when Texas was a country in its own right. Land-rich but money-poor."

In fact, Texas was in serious financial trouble and looking for aid. The empresario (Spanish for entrepreneur) system was tailor made for banker Castro, French-born to a Jewish family of noble Portuguese descent. In 1842 he contracted with the Texan government to bring settlers to a million+ acres he received in a land grant in what would eventually become Medina County, named for the river.

He started recruiting in Paris without much luck. He fared better in the Alsace province of France near Germany. "They were mostly farmers who came to Texas with the promise of 640 acres per family," says Boehme. "That was a virtual kingdom from their perspective." Castro left out a few details in his pitch, like the fact that Mexico was still trying to reclaim Texas and the Comanche Indians were a force to be reckoned with.



TOP: CASTROVILLE'S HOUSTON SQUARE. ABOVE: HENRI CASTRO, CASTRO HOMESTEAD. BELOW: MEDINA COUNTY COURTHOUSE, NOW CASTROVILLE CITY HALL.

Still, free land and its endless possibilities beckoned. "These Europeans were fresh off the boat and soon became your stereotypical horse-riding, pistol-wielding Texans," says Boehme. "It's fascinating to know that our forebears adapted quickly to a wild environment as a matter of survival."

In the end, despite Comanches, Mexican raids, cholera and an inconsistent (and often punishing) climate, they didn't just

adapt — they thrived, growing into a prosperous town and commercial center that became the Medina County seat in 1848. Castro is credited with bringing to Texas more than 2,100 emigrants; only "Father of Texas" Stephen F. Austin brought more. Castro established the colonies of Castroville in 1844, Quihi and Vandenburg in 1846, and D'Hanis in 1847.



ABOVE & RIGHT: THE LANDMARK INN, THEN AND NOW. MIDDLE, LEFT TO RIGHT: JACOB HABY, JOSEPH BECK AND JOSEPH BURELL JR. WERE TEXAS RANGERS IN MEDINA COUNTY IN 1872-73.

A significant turning point in the town's history — and one that changed its destiny forever — took place in the early 1880s when Castroville was unable (or unwilling, depending on the version) to put up a \$100,000 bond for the Southern Pacific railroad for a stop in town. "When the railroad bypassed your town," says Boehme, "they made a point to seriously bypass it so as to cut you off from any benefit the railroad might produce." The track virtually circled the town on its way west, and no part of it was closer than five miles. The effect was devastating. By 1892, the county seat was moved to Hondo, which had exploded in growth because of the railroad. From then on, according to Boehme, Castroville became "a time capsule."

These days, Boehme does living history presentations portraying his great-great-grandfather Texas Ranger Jacob Haby, dressing in period costume (complete with Haby's original pack and guns), sporting a giant moustache, telling tales of the founding of Castroville and the trials and tribulations of life on the frontier. He speaks Alsatian and self-describes as "a student of history and tradition, so I gravitate towards it and want to raise my children in the same environment."

He even finds a silver lining in that long-ago fateful decision to shun the railroad. "We have about 100 original homes here that are being preserved and still used, and they are here only because they weren't demolished to build new buildings that would have accompanied any major growth." In other words, the town missed out on the money but the culture was preserved.

In fact, the Castroville Historic District contains some of the city's oldest sections, and the district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. The Chamber of Commerce website describes their self-guided Historic Walking Tour as their most popular attraction; a map with pictures of the properties provides historical information and description of the structures. Their distinc-

BELOW: ST. LOUIS CHURCH BUILT IN 1850. RIGHT: ST. LOUIS CHURCH TODAY.



tive architectural features — smooth stucco, sloping asymmetrical roofs, thick walls and German fachwerk-style supports of cedar and cypress planks — echo those of European country houses.

The Steinbach Haus is symbolic of the bond that exists to this day between “Little Alsace” and the original Alsace region. The house, originally built between 1618 and 1648, was disassembled in 1998, shipped from France to Castroville, and reassembled by Alsatian volunteers as a gift to the people of Medina County. It is now a museum and the town’s visitors center.

The picturesque Landmark Inn State Historic Site grew from a private home and dry goods store built in 1849 to a popular bed-and-breakfast-style hotel and gristmill now owned and operated by the Texas Historical Commission (www.visitlandmarkinn.com). A major event is the annual St. Louis Day celebration that commemorates the founding of the parish in 1844 and takes place on the church grounds; the current structure was built in the late 1860s (www.saintlouisday.com).



THE STEINBACH HAUS IN WAHLBACH, FRANCE. THE STEINBACH HAUS 2013 BY LARRY D. MOORE.



At the Castroville Public Library, an oral history project decades ago sponsored by the Castro Colonies Heritage Association/Living History Center yields priceless treasures: “They have a lot of wonderful audio storytelling from folks who aren’t with us anymore,” says Boehme. “These were the grandchildren of the original settlers, offering interesting insight on what is now seven generations back. In a historical context, though, it’s not really that long ago. They talk about all the old traditions that we still participate in.” ♦

For more information, www.castroville.com.



JOIN CASTROVILLE FOR A HISTORIC GOOD TIME

On September 10 at 6:00pm, the Hillside Boutique Hotel will host ‘Vintage Castroville,’ a celebration of Alsatian

wine, culture and cuisine. Chef David Hill will feature foods that nod to the city’s Alsatian heritage and wines will be selected by Mathieu Muckensturm, a native of Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace. Hillside owner Jana Winkler, a member of the Alsatian Pioneers Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, will share highlights from Castroville’s history. Reservations required. Spa and room packages are also available. (www.hillsidetexas.com).

A special meeting of the city council on Thursday, September 12, is planned for the grounds of the Landmark Inn State Historic Site, “with only one agenda item,” says David Grabitske, site manager. “To mark 175 years to the day when Henri Castro and the original pioneers gathered underneath a pecan tree here on the property on September 12, 1844, to write out their city charter.” Mayor Phyllis Santleben will read a proclamation expected from the governor. The public is welcome (www.castroville.gov).

On Saturday, September 14, the official Castroville Founders Day 175th

Celebration kicks off at 9:30am with an opening ceremony on September Square, “by the Alsatian Pioneers Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT),” says Priscilla Garrett, chair of the 175th Founders Day Celebration committee.

Additional sites — Steinbach Haus, Houston Square, Castroville Colonies Living History Center, the Lutheran Church, St. Louis Catholic Church and Landmark Inn — will feature various cultural activities from 10:00am-4:00pm. “A special free ‘Passport’ created for children through high school age can be obtained and stamped at designated ‘stops’ and, when completed, turned in at September Square by 4:00pm for a prize,” adds Garrett.

As for that long-ago pecan tree that witnessed history, it was made into a table upon its death in 1985 and will once again have a place in the sun. Hopefully. “On September 12, weather permitting, the table will be placed where that tree was,” says Grabitske, “and the city council will conduct its meeting around it.”