

BOOKS

REVIEW

Gayle Brennan Spencer's research into the Coker Settlement started at Coker Cemetery.



Express-News file photo

Story of Coker Settlement also story of Texas



Courtesy Clarence Gerfers Jr.

Opening in 1904, the two-story schoolhouse next to the Coker Cemetery was referred to as “the largest country schoolhouse” in the county. This Coker School building was destroyed by fire in November 1924.

By Ed Conroy
CONTRIBUTOR

Gayle Brennan Spencer has an extraordinary talent for unearthing and telling fascinating stories from the most random, everyday sources imaginable.

The San Antonio author put that talent to good use over a decade ago when local attorney Banks Smith, trustee of the Voelker family estate, gave her the handbag of the late Minnie Tomerlin Voelker, who married local dairyman Max Voelker, and suggested she write the Voelker family history.

Researching the provenance of the contents of that handbag led Spencer on a multiyear journey that resulted in her fascinating 2010 book “Last Farm Standing on Buttermilk Hill: Voelker Roots Run Deep in Hardberger Park.”

The book’s publication coincided with the opening of Hardberger Park, which the city of San Antonio developed on the former Voelker farm’s grazing lands, providing much-needed public parkland north of Loop 410.

One of the communities Spencer highlights in that book was the Coker Settlement, also known as the

Coker Community, which happened, like the Voelker Farm, to be in a very central part of San Antonio’s North Side.

The settlement was founded by South Carolina native John Coker in 1841 on 1,920 acres of land along Salado Creek, granted to him by the state of Texas for his distinguished service at the Battle of San Jacinto. Many of its inhabitants, like the Voelkers, became dairy farmers, and they played significant roles in the development of that part of town for almost a century.

At the request of the Coker Cemetery Association, which represents many of the original families, Spencer has now turned her attention to chronicling the historical, institutional and familial dynamics of the members of the Coker Community, this time beginning with the Coker Cemetery itself.

The resulting work, “Haunting the Graveyard: Unearthing the Story of the Coker Settlement,” is a collection of many well-told tales together with wonderful archival photos of the early settlers, their children, animals, homes, cars and farm buildings.

Spencer has done a masterful job of sifting through a mass of cemetery and other



‘Haunting the Graveyard: Unearthing the Story of the Coker Settlement’

By Gayle Brennan Spencer
Coker Cemetery Association
496 pages, \$45

records, finding the threads of family stories, which she has woven together with great care. They reflect the triumphs and travails of the early settlers and their descendants in what was without doubt, at first, a very tough territory.

As Spencer warns the reader, not all the tales are inspiring; many are drawn from local and regional newspapers – most notably coverage of the trial of John

Coker for allegedly murdering a much younger man, John Johnson, over a dispute about their animals at a watering hole.

There are balancing chapters, though, that cover the establishment of the first Coker School and the Coker Community Church, now Coker United Methodist Church. Spencer candidly points out that Methodism and other Protestant denominations were not always welcome in early Texas and that the farmers themselves were not always easily persuaded to attend church.

What makes this book of exceptional interest for anyone with a deep love for and interest in Texas history is the way Spencer relates the family sagas of the early settlers within the larger dynamics of settlement and colonization in early Mexican Texas and after the Texas Revolution.

We learn in detail of the great challenges faced by empresarios Stephen F. Austin, Henri Castro, Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels and John O. Meusebach. We learn as well of the settlers who were Mormons and their challenges in the face of intense prejudice in much of what was then the United States.

Most of all, we learn of the

interrelatedness of all the families who made up the Coker Settlement, who overcame their cultural and national differences to become, in their own way, Texans and, in time, San Antonians. Spencer deserves considerable credit for the extraordinary amount of detail she provides about the lives of so many settlers, whom she lists at the end of each chapter.

Theirs is a very poignant history, for in time the Great Depression and new sanitation regulations did much to decimate the local dairy industry. Land that was once dotted with dairy farms and their hardworking owners was sold and cleared for tract home developments, schools, the new San Antonio International Airport and malls – and the early settlers were forgotten.

Thanks to Spencer, though, their stories are now well recovered and hopefully will live on for generations to come.

Gayle Brennan Spencer will discuss and sign copies of “Haunting the Graveyard” at 5 p.m. Sept. 10 at The Twig Bookshop at the Pearl.

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