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Hardberger Park, medical research are family's legacy

By Zeke MacCormack  
STAFF WRITER

Before bikers, joggers and birders began enjoying the expansive patch of wilderness in northern San Antonio now known as Phil Hardberger Park, it hosted the homestead and businesses of Minnie and Max H. Voelcker.

The hard-working, childless couple operated a successful dairy farm for two decades on hundreds of acres along Salado Creek. In 1947, with the dairy industry moving toward larger, mechanized farms, they switched to raising cattle there.

Minnie Voelcker, a strong and independent woman who died in 2000, carried on the ranching operations alone after her husband of 53 years died in 1980.

They never strayed far from their shared birthplace, The Coker Community, a settlement established in 1841 by Texan Army vet John Coker on Bexar County land that was awarded to him for distinguished service five years earlier in battling Mexican troops at San Jacinto.

"In the early days of the settlement, numerous hardships were endured, including attacks by marauding Indians," says a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department account that notes life was even rougher for women there whose spouses were absent due to fighting for the Confederacy during the Civil War. "Accessing water was another hardship. When nearby creeks ran dry, the only available water was at San Pedro Springs in San Antonio, a half day's wagon ride distant."

Max followed in the footsteps of his father, Louis Voelcker, who was among the many dairy farmers in the frontier community in the latter half of the 19th century. That concentration of milk purveyors earned the area the nickname "Buttermilk Hill."

Despite the financial triumphs of Max and Minnie Voelcker in dairying, ranching and also real estate, they were extremely frugal, living modestly and forgoing modern conveniences such as air conditioning in their home or vehicles.

"The couple could afford to buy anything they wanted, but bought almost nothing. They did not lust after material things; they just enjoyed simple country living," Gayle Brennan Spencer wrote in her 2010 book on the Voelcker family, "Last Farm Standing on Buttermilk Hill."

Despite taking a parsimonious approach to spending on themselves, the Voelckers' enduring legacy is one of generous philanthropy in the San Antonio area.

Their property stood out as a green oasis of woods and meadows as new roads, homes and commercial developments increasingly encircled the family homestead in the late 1900s.

Minnie Voelcker resist-

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

VOELCKER FARMSTEAD STILL ENHANCES CITY



Photos by John Davenport / San Antonio Express-News

The dairy barn at the old Voelcker Farm at Phil Hardberger Park has been restored.



A restored Aermotor windmill remains on the old dairy farm. A butterfly garden and a vegetable garden at the Voelcker Farmstead are used for educational programs.

ed numerous overtures to part with her 500-acre ranch bordered by Blanco Road on the east, Lockhill Selma to the west and Salado Creek to the north.

"Minnie was asked to sell her land many, many times but she refused to do so," said Banks Smith, a San Antonio attorney who represented Minnie Voelcker starting in 1987. "She did not know what she would do if she sold it. She felt the land was the most valuable thing she had."

Smith recalled Minnie Voelcker, who lived to age 96, as being passionate about helping needy kids and finding cures for ailments such as cancer, which claimed her husband at age 82.

In the 1990s she established the Max and Minnie Tomerlin Voelcker Fund, which through her estate now provides financial support for medical research, the medical care of disabled children at Christus Santa Rosa Children's Hospital and for the operation of Boysville Inc.

"Since its inception 10 years ago, the Voelcker Fund has given more than \$33 million to research institutions here," said Smith, a trustee of the fund that also commissioned Brennan Spencer's book. "She would be extremely proud of the work of the Voelcker Fund in funding medical research in San Antonio."

Among the programs it underwrites is the Voelcker Biomedical Research Academy at the



Minnie and Max Voelcker first ran a dairy farm and then a cattle operation on Max's family land.

University of Texas Health Science Center.

Now in its ninth year, it provides academic and professional development mentoring to 60 area high school students for seven weeks each summer.

"We call it the biomedical pipeline," said Irene Chapa, the academy's director, who hopes it serves as a model for similar programs at other institutions nationwide.

Chapa applauded the Voelckers' investment in their hometown, saying, "The academy is a stellar example of their interest in supporting their community, both through the pursuit of scientific knowledge and support of the youth."

Banks is confident that Minnie Voelcker also would be pleased to know that the land she cherished wasn't converted into subdivisions or strip centers after her death.

Rather, the City of San Antonio acquired 31 acres there for future parkland

for \$48 million in separate deals, in 2006 and 2007.

"She would have been thrilled to know that it became a park, that the land was saved and that her old house was saved," said Smith. "I don't think she ever thought it was possible to preserve it."

Phil Hardberger Park, which has entrances off NW Military Highway and Blanco Road, opened in two stages, in 2010 and 2011, offering an array of trails and natural attractions that include oaks in excess of 200 years old.

The recreation site presently is bisected by Wurzbach Parkway, but a \$23 million land bridge is planned for construction over the parkway to allow wildlife and visitors to traverse the entire park.

Hardberger, a former chief justice of the Fourth Court of Appeals who was San Antonio mayor from 2005-09, credited the Voelckers' foresight for making his namesake park a reality.

"It really was a double gift in a sense," he said. "One, that the property was preserved in such a state that the city and public can always enjoy it, that it hadn't been despoiled. And two, that the money brought in from the sale of it goes to support medical research."

Besides \$13 million in city funds approved for the land bridge by local voters last month in a bond election, a \$10 million contribution for it has been pledged by The Phil Hardberger Park Conservancy.

The conservancy's office is located in one of the surviving structures at the Voelcker Farmstead, a 3-acre site in the park's northwest corner that in 2014 was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

"The farmstead is associated with the rise of the family dairy industry in Bexar County, the introduction of refrigeration and mechanization, and the eventual demise of the small family dairy resulting from post-World War II transformations of the industry," says a description in register records.

The oldest structure there is a stone dwelling that's believed to date to 1870 — long before the Voelckers bought the land — where Max Voelcker lived before marrying Minnie Tomerlin, and inherited upon the death of his father.

The stone building was recently refurbished, as was the nearby barn, where the Voelckers'

Online:

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herds of up to 100 cows were milked each morning when the dairy was in operation.

Minnie Tomerlin reportedly refused to reside in the primitive stone house as Mrs. Voelcker, so her betrothed in 1927 built them a nearby bungalow. It now houses the site's caretaker, Dale Chumbley.

Chumbley was a stockyard worker in San Antonio who first became involved with the Voelcker ranch in the 1990s when asked to round up cattle roaming there, a task that evolved into an extended work commitment.

He said he rarely saw Minnie Voelcker, who was under round-the-clock care of aides by that point. But he heard about her from caretakers who — lacking their ward's fortitude — were unhappy with the lack of air conditioning in the bungalow.

"They would tell me some stories about her like, she'd say, 'If you're hot, open the window.' and 'If you're cold, shut the window.'," recalled Chumbley, who became resident caretaker after Minnie Voelcker died. "They had no air conditioning for the longest time. Eventually, they did put some in because the people who were caring for her needed it."

The old farm site is visible from nearby park trails, but off limits to the public for now except for educational programs there and for Dairy Day at Voelcker Homestead each fall, one of several programs organized with help from the conservancy.

Butterflies can be studied at close quarters in a butterfly garden there, while vegetables are grown and harvested each spring and fall at the nearby children's garden.

"Part of what we want to do is also protect the history of the land," said Denise Gross, conservancy spokeswoman. "There's not many places in San Antonio where you can still experience the community's agrarian roots."

zeke@express-news.net  
COMING FRIDAY: The Alamo was also re-imagined in 1994 project.