

Are you from Sandtown? Rediscovering a vanished piece of the city

By Terri Jo Ryan, Tribune-Herald staff writer

Sandtown, a place that exists only in the hearts and minds of its former inhabitants and their descendants, was brought back to life for an evening through the recollections of some 100 people from the now-defunct neighborhood who gathered Tuesday night for a program by the Waco History Project.

Families with names like Fuentes, Ochoa, Sanchez, Martinez, Vasquez, Ramos, Bravo, Serrano, Torres and Campos were the folks who populated a gritty urban area from 1905 into the 1960s, until the federal Urban Renewal Project wiped clean the area bounded roughly by the Brazos River, Second Street, Jackson Avenue and Interstate 35.

And several of their descendants swapped stories in the parish hall of Sacred Heart Catholic Church on Tuesday, at the invitation of Robert Gamboa and other board members and friends of the Waco History Project. The project is a collaborative effort among several agencies, institutions and individuals to connect people throughout the community by telling the stories of Waco's diverse past.

Gamboa, director of development for Texas State Technical College, as well as a former president of the Waco Chapter of the League for United Latin American Citizens, spent his childhood in Sandtown, so named because of its proximity to the Brazos River.

From grocery stores and auto garages, barbershops and beer joints, an Assembly of God sanctuary to a swinging nightspot and gambling hall called "The Blue Moon," the memories rolled out from a crowd who needed very little goading to get started with the storytelling.

One man recalled watching his neighbors go fishing by casting a line out their bedroom window — they lived that close to the water's edge. One woman said she remembered how 70 families shared a single water faucet under a tree for all their needs. A man told of buying kerosene in bottles, the only way to light the house or heat food at home.

Another woman laughed at the nickname of her street: "La via de las tripas," or "Guts Way," so called because it was the location of a slaughterhouse, meatpacking plant, cowhide tannery and a cemetery.

Many families kept pigs in their back yards, and at least one kept a cow in the front yard. Another woman recalled how much her family struggled to stay afloat economically, even though the rent was only \$7 per month on their home.

Society put them there, and poverty kept them there, Gamboa noted. For many of these immigrant families the story of many first generation Americans, he added as soon as they approached affluence, they moved out of the old neighborhood into other areas of Waco. Some of the sturdier homes were re-located to other neighborhoods and given brick facades, he recalled.

Gamboa said he was pleased to see people hunting through family photos for evidence of Sandtown in their personal past.

"We can document through the families" what may be difficult to uncover in writing, he said.

He also took delight in the appearance of Lenny Englander, whose family owned Sunbright Paper Co. in the heart of Sandtown from 1926 to 1978. Englander elicited roars of laughter reminiscing about Cisto Martinez, a truck driver who seemed to lose his vehicle in the river with some frequency because he'd forget to "park" it with a brick under the tire to keep it from rolling.

"I don't know how many times we had to pull him out of the river," Englander said.

Thomas L. Charlton, director of the Texas Collection at Baylor University, had news for the audience who thought Sandtown had disappeared into the annals of time. Charlton said the Texas Collection is in possession of photographs and records of Sandtown via archives from the Waco Urban Renewal Project, the 20 year, \$125 million renovation of the city's urban core begun in 1958 to deal with the problem of inner-city blight.

Federal requirements of the funding called for photographing and recording each property to be removed, he said. Although many records were damaged in a basement flood years ago, almost 80 percent of the records are intact. They have not been processed or indexed yet, but Charlton invited Sandtown's heirs to make appointments to search the files and other archival materials to help them re-create the virtually unknown chapter of local history.