

The Dating Scene in Fort Stockton

By Jeremy Gonzalez



Fort Stockton's Oldest House may not draw as many tourists as its famed giant roadrunner, Paisano Pete, but it has recently caught the attention of some Texas Tech students and researchers who want to set the historical record straight.

"The town lore is that the Oldest House is the oldest building in Fort Stockton, but that hasn't actually been confirmed," explained Dr. Tamra Walter, an associate professor of archaeology at Texas Tech University.

The adobe ruins that constitute the Oldest House are located at the corner of W. Sherer and S. Nelson in a residential neighborhood near the south edge of town. Convention holds that it was built between 1855 and 1860, and that it was the private quarters of J.D. Holiday, the civilian quartermaster in old Camp Stockton. The problem, according to Walter, is that the available historical records don't show just how old the Oldest



An archeologist sifts through the caliche at the Oldest House.

House is, so the mystery of its true age is being uncovered through archeological methods.

"Our goal here," she says, "is to find information about activities that happened outside the buildings, and also determine the

function of some of these interior rooms. We came to collect data from both inside and outside of the house. Obviously, this was a house that was used again and again and for many different purposes. So what we want to do is get down to the earliest occupation of



Documenting the dig



Beneath the floors

this house, so we can answer the questions of how old is it really and can we tie this to the early Camp Stockton?”

The transformation from myth to myth-busting didn't happen overnight. The person most responsible for it is Ross Harper, the director of the Annie Riggs Memorial Museum and Historic Fort Stockton. Though he typically shies away from the limelight, he has a knack for turning ideas into reality. And it was his diligence – the constant phone calls, the persuasive pitches – that ultimately brought the team from Texas Tech down to the Trans-Pecos to set up shop in October.

First to the scene was Alex Hernandez. After earning a bachelor's degree in history (minoring in military history), he went on to become a graduate student in anthropology at Texas Tech specializing in historic era sociology. He kicked off the archaeological research for his master's thesis on the Oldest House. The rest of the team soon followed him to Fort Stockton to sift through the caliche and to discover the area's secrets.

“We found part of an old wooden floor,” revealed Walter. “We were surprised to find parts of that intact wooden floor just outside of a structure. I think the wood floor came later; I believe this originally would have had a dirt floor that was packed down. We've recorded that layer, and so far, we're finding evidence of what we think was the most recent occupation. We're excited to investigate beneath this floor, because that's where we hope to find information about the military occupation or the settler — if this was indeed his house.”

But archeology – almost by definition – moves slow. It will take some time for the team to discover how old the Oldest House is: The archeologists discovered quite a few artifacts but have since left to clean them up and analyze their import. They are expected to come back for a few more digs.

Until then, the Oldest House has earned the right to retain its title, however tenuous it may be. If it proves untrue, we should take comfort in the idea that the archeologists are on the verge of new discoveries. If not, there's always Paisano Pete. ■