

Some history of Angelina County

The Donovans' log house

By ELLEN TEMPLE

Dick and Bonnie Donovan of Diboll own something that's priceless! It's not a diamond or an oilwell; it's a log house. And it has survived beautifully, in the same spot, continuously inhabited for over a hundred years.

The house is located in Angelina County on Shawnee Creek along the eastern edge of Shawnee Prairie. According to Dick, who's done a lot of research on his house, the area was the home of Shawnee Indians until 1839 when they were defeated by the Republic of Texas in the "Cherokee War" and driven into Oklahoma. That prairie area is fertile farm country, and old timers have told Dick that deer, turkey, bear and panther abounded in the surrounding forests.

The house was built in the early 1860's while Texas was still largely unsettled. It had been a state only since 1845. Dick points out that: "The Texas frontier at this time ran southward along a line from Wichita Falls through Abilene, San Angelo, San Antonio to Brownsville. Behind this line the savage Comanche were still lords of the Plains and cities such as Lubbock and Amarillo weren't even dreamed of."

There was no Lufkin, no Huntington or Diboll in the 1860's, and Homer was the Angelina County Seat. The log house is on the road (now Farm Road 1818) that farmers from the fertile Shawnee Prairie area used to haul their produce to the trade center at Zavalla. Drivers making that trip must have occasionally stopped to rest and visit with folks living in the log house.

Originally the house consisted of a front porch and two small rooms joined by an opening called a "dog trot". There was only one window so as to conserve heat in the winter. The roof was made of cypress shingles. Cooking was probably done in the mud fireplace in the room on the right.

Except for plantation homes, most East Texas houses at the time were built of logs. The Donovan house is probably unique though in that its walls are of large pine logs that are split in half. The flat part of the logs face inside with the rounded log side visible to the outside.

The hand hewn porch beam is about 40 feet long. Hewing is the skill needed in order to make support beams. By hewing, the rounded sides of a log are made flat by a man wielding an ax or an adze. You can see the ax marks on that 40-foot hand-hewn porch beam.

According to a newspaper article, there were at least three generations of Jones who lived in the house. Grandfather Jones divided a huge block of land among his children when he died. A son, Hamp Jones, inherited the house with his land, and when he died, the land was divided among his four children. Suel Jones and his wife Mitchell inherited 160 acres with the log house. The house where Suel had been born. They moved in during the 1940's and there raised their daughter JoNell Jones Freeman with whom Dick went to school in Zavalla.

By that time the dog trot had probably already been boarded in to make an extra room, and two lean to's, one of which served as a kitchen, had been added to the back.

Suel Jones made some changes to make

the place comfortable, but he preserved all of the old log structure. He replaced the cypress shingles with a tin roof, added more windows to the one that existed, and hired Billy Mott of Zavalla to replace the old mud chimney with a brick one. Although they sheetrocked the inside walls, they left the outside just as it had always been.

Dick Donovan had admired the old log house for a long time. When Mrs. Jones died, he offered to buy it but Suel said, "No." When Suel's health got bad, he continued to live in the house although he spent part of his time in a nursing home. Dick and Bonnie would occasionally stop at the farm and ask Mr. Jones if he'd changed his mind about selling and he always declined. The last time that they asked he replied shortly, "I told you I'd let you know." He was tired of their inquiries so they stopped asking.

Their persistent interest paid off though because Dick relates that one cold, bright February day, he answered a knock at his front door in Diboll, and there stood Suel Jones, all bundled up. He said, "Do you still want to buy that place." Startled, Dick answered, "Yes sir." "Give me the money," said Mr. Jones. "Right now!" Dick persuaded him to give him three days to gather the title information and to get the money together.

And the old log house passed to another generation.

The Donovans have also tried to maintain the house's integrity while still making it comfortable to live in. The first thing they had to do was to try to level the house. The wooden blocks were rotten and had to be replaced with concrete ones. And they added plumbing. Up until that time inhabitants got water from an underground cistern that was dug about 80 years ago.

The Donovans stripped the sheetrock from the "dog trot" room walls thereby exposing the rounded logs. Their carpenter Maurice Atkinson appreciates the old house. He replaced the tin on the roof with old instead of shiny new tin which would have looked out of place.

And instead of replacing pole rafters with milled lumber, he went into the woods and cut the four poles just like the original builders had done. Mr. Atkinson and the Donovans have a lot of respect for the craftsmanship that it took to build the house.

The Donovans and daughter Gina spend as much time as possible at their 38 acre farm where they run horses and cattle. Bobcats and deer live in the woods, wild sour "possum" grapes entwine trees, and wolves howl at night.

And they love their log house. Since the front porch faces north and blocked "dog trot" can't let the south breeze through, the coolest place to sit is out back under the huge pecan tree. And it's nice to be there, to listen to the crickets and enjoy the sweet air.

That the Donovans can make that old log house liveable is quite a tribute to the men who built it. Only great skill could have hand fashioned a house to endure more than 100 years. That the Donovans recognize the worth of that house is a tribute to them.

A lot of people would have torn it down; the Donovans knew they had a treasure!



Dick Donovan stands on porch of his log house



Donovan and a crosscut saw that dates back awhile



Logs are notched neatly into place at corners

Arthur Brooks Photography

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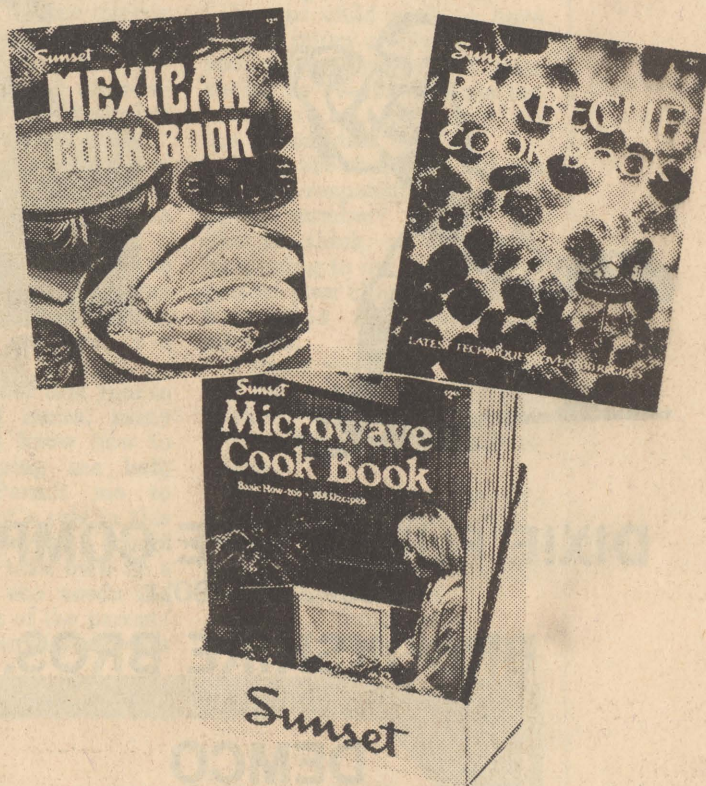
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