

SWINGIN' SALONES

Endangered Mexican American Dance Halls Hold Noteworthy History

Tucked behind rolling hills in a grassy pasture just west of Floresville is a modest structure barely visible from FM 536. Drivers who catch a glimpse of the low-slung building might mistake it for a barn or storage shed. They wouldn't suspect it once raised a community's collective spirit with vivacious music, passionate dancing, and memories that endured for decades.

This popular *salón* (dance hall) was known as Yndo Park, a family-oriented facility that hosted dances and celebrations. Like hundreds of other *salónes* in the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Texas Tropical Trail and Independence Trail Regions, it peaked in popularity during the 1940s and '50s. Others fell into disrepair or, in many cases, were razed from the landscape.

Fortunately, several high-profile Mexican American dance halls are still operating in South Texas (see sidebar, p. 9), offering heritage tourists a glimpse of a colorful past that once thrived throughout the region. Step inside one of these buildings on a Saturday night, and it's easy to conjure up a simpler time when dancing, music, and socializing inspired people to endure another work week in anticipation of the dance halls' lively weekend fiestas.



Yndo Park (top) and El Monterey dance halls southeast of San Antonio thrived in the 1950s.

Floresville natives Fred Gonzales and Jesse Perez, who both currently serve as officials with the Floresville Economic Development

Corporation, recall spending many memorable weekends listening to *conjunto* bands and attempting new dance styles at Yndo Park and other halls in neighboring communities. Gonzales has particularly fond memories of the youthful energy and customs associated with the dances and *salónes*.

"All of these places had wide-open dance floors with benches around the perimeter—that's where the girls would sit, usually with their mothers," he says. "The men would stand outside all huddled together and eventually move their way inside to try to catch the eye of a young woman. You can only imagine the fun in getting someone to dance with you or, on the other hand, the embarrassment of rejection."

Perez nods in agreement, adding that although he did not share Gonzales' reputable dancing skills, he had an intense appreciation for the music. Perez explains that the two main styles of music at this time—*conjunto* and *orquesta*—impacted the approach to dancing.

Conjunto, the primary style at rural dance halls, encompassed the region's multicultural spectrum,

with German and Czech influences in the accordion-based polkas and waltzes, Mexican-inspired *bajo sextos* (12-string guitars), European-based string instruments, and Spanish-influenced Bolero, slow-tempo traditions. *Orquestas* were slightly more formal, with the notable addition of horns incorporated from the big band sounds introduced to many Mexican American soldiers during their European experiences in World War II.

“These dances were a lot of fun for the whole community,” Gonzales recalls. “We’re a happy people—we like music, and some of us, myself included, really love to dance. Obviously we had to do these things somewhere, so dance halls started popping up all over to accommodate these activities.”

According to Gonzales and Perez, the area’s original gatherings, known as farm dances, were held outdoors on ranches near Floresville. Community members would find a level patch of land and sweep everything off it to

create a makeshift dance floor. The bands consisted of local residents who enjoyed playing music, typically including a fiddle, stand-up bass, and guitar.

“Even those practices would draw a crowd—people would come out and burn piles of grass and straw to keep the mosquitoes away,” Perez says. “Later, if a spot became a regular gathering place, they’d build a platform for dancing if they couldn’t afford to construct an entire dance hall.”

Floresville’s music scene was especially robust, with shows by popular acts such as Conjunto Corona, Ruco Villareal, Los Caminantes (featuring a teenaged Flaco Jimenez), and Los Aguilares. Gonzales and Perez cite more than a dozen Mexican American dance halls that once thrived in the area, including La Agupacion Nacional, El Jacalito, Gonzales Salón, Pan American Dance Hall, El Ranchito, and La Plataforma. In the nearby community of Kenedy, the *salón*



South Texas Dance Card

Several of the historic Mexican American dance halls in the THC’s Texas Tropical Trail and Independence Trail Regions remain open for dances and community events. On Saturday nights, these *salónes* come alive with the sounds of traditional *conjunto* music or modern variations of the style. Dancing is always an important accompaniment.

Texas Dance Hall Preservation, Inc. co-founder Steve Dean recommends several South Texas *salónes* for travelers who want to experience this colorful Mexican American cultural tradition. Although many of the following are closed for regular business (but still worth visiting for an exterior tour), they represent a diverse sampling of significant historical dance halls in the region:

Alice

La Villita

3050 Old Kingsville Rd.

According to Dean, this is “the mother of all *conjunto* halls.” La Villita is associated with bands on Alice’s Ideal Records, which recorded notable acts (Beto Villa, Narciso Martinez, Tony de la Rosa) after small labels closed during World War II to conserve shellac and other record-related materials.

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Above photo courtesy Texas Dance Hall Preservation, Inc.

Floresville natives (from left) Jesse Perez and Fred Gonzales recall dancing at the local salónes; they are now trying to preserve them.



Corpus Christi

Galvan Ballroom

1632 Agnes St.

Rafael Galvan, Sr., a respected businessman, civic leader, and Corpus Christi's first Mexican-American police officer, constructed and opened the Galvan Ballroom in 1950. It became a popular dance hall, particularly for the more-upscale *orquesta* and jazz acts.

Victoria

Club Westerner

1005 W. Constitution St.

361.575.9109

www.clubwesterner.com

Known in its early days (1940s–50s) for hosting *orquesta* bands, the Westerner became associated with popular *conjunto* bands in the 1960s and continues to stage Mexican American bands such as Little Joe y La Familia most weekends.

El Monterey hosted high-profile touring acts such as Little Joe y La Familia, Alfonso Ramos, and Isidro Lopez.

“This hall was pretty famous back in the day—it was the popular place for Mexican people to get together every Saturday night,” says Carlos Zuniga, who built the facility with his father and grandfather in 1949. “The music here was different than other places. It was a more high-class spot with *orquestas*, not *conjunto*. The bands had big horn sections, and the music would just blow you away.”

As he surveys the now-neglected property, Zuniga remembers Monterey's prime years (1950s and '60s) with a smile, recalling events that drew up to 400 attendees, turning away men who violated the dress code by not wearing collared shirts, and paying a then-unknown Little Joe y La Familia \$175 to play a show (Zuniga notes Little Joe would later ask \$12,000 per appearance).

“This place was a gold mine for me—it was the only place to be on Saturday nights,” Zuniga says, adding that in 1969 he sold the hall to the American G.I. Forum.

Salónes like the Monterey and Benito Juarez Hall in adjacent Karnes City also drew families and visitors

for cultural celebrations. *Fiestas Patrias* (annual patriotic holidays such as Cinco de Mayo and 16 de Septiembre) were major events at these facilities, drawing hundreds of attendees and featuring elaborate decorations and colorful programs.

“Everyone would get all gussied up for the *Fiestas Patrias*,” Perez recalls. “The dance halls here were not unlike the traditional Mexican plazas, which served as community gathering places back in the olden days.”

By the 1960s, however, cultural shifts trended away from the dance halls, as the younger population became more mobile and people remained in their homes with the increased availability of television. Many residents moved to cities for jobs, leaving the dance halls to be transformed to bingo parlors, community event centers, or often abandoned.

“Things started changing pretty rapidly by the end of the '60s, but there was a lot of that going on—it's just the nature of society and culture,” Gonzales says. “Even though many of these dance halls are gone or in disrepair, there are still some great stories out there. We're hopeful that the younger generations will appreciate that part of their heritage and make the effort to keep these places alive.”



(From left) Benito Juarez Hall in Karnes City; the former Farmer's Place dance hall near Floresville.

Preservación de Salones

Ensuring the continued livelihood of Mexican American *salones* is increasingly becoming a priority for Texas Dance Hall Preservation, Inc., a Houston-based nonprofit organization dedicated to saving the state's historic halls and their cultural attributes. According to group co-founder Steve Dean, these dance halls are often underappreciated by Texans and are considered highly endangered by preservationists.

"These venues tend to go with the flow of the music base, so the historic Mexican American dance halls are being left behind as younger people turn their backs on them and go to the bigger cities for newer, brighter, air-conditioned clubs," Dean explains. "So many of the wonderful small places in rural areas across South Texas are being forgotten and neglected."

Dean acknowledges that the Mexican American facilities tend to be overshadowed by the higher-profile German dance halls of Central Texas. He claims this inequity is often tied to economic issues, such as limited funding in Mexican American communities during initial construction and for ongoing maintenance in subsequent decades.

"Architecturally, they're not as grand as the German halls, but they have a strong cultural identity that's very significant to our state's history," he says.

Dean, who is working on a book documenting Texas' historic dance halls, is concerned that members of the generation involved with the origins of the *salones* are passing away before their memories are recorded for posterity. He hopes Spanish-speaking community members make the effort to research and record the stories and facts associated with these culturally significant structures.

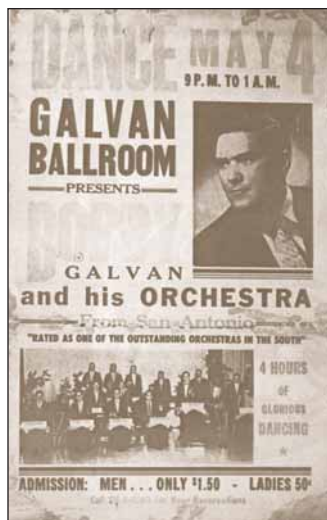
"I'm somewhat shocked and dismayed that there isn't more official research on this subject," Dean says. "We need to get a Latin American studies professor to take this on as a major research topic for a comprehensive book so we don't lose any more of this history."

On a positive note, Dean is encouraged by several emerging trends that could help keep Mexican American dance halls in the public consciousness. For example, he notes that festivals in some Mexican American communities are increasingly appealing to a wider audience, thereby exposing the traditions associated with the *salones* to other cultural groups. Also,

several historic halls are hosting younger bands, allowing a new generation to enjoy dancing on the same floors their ancestors once graced half a century ago. ★

Article and photos by Andy Rhodes, managing editor of The Medallion.

On the cover: The historic La Villita dance hall in San Benito still hosts events.



Posters like this one for Corpus Christi's Galvan Ballroom announced dancing events. Photo courtesy Texas Dance Hall Preservation, Inc.

Other notable South Texas dance halls:

Corpus Christi
El Teraza Ballroom
1108 Leopard St.

Karnes City
Benito Juarez Hall
410 W. Buchel Ave.

Laredo
Casa Blanca Ballroom
5302 East Saunders St.
956.724.9800

San Antonio
Blanco Ballroom
3719 Blanco Rd.
210.732.3510

San Benito
La Villita
200 block of W. Robertson St.



Museums featuring conjunto heritage:

San Benito
Texas Conjunto Music Hall of Fame and Museum
210 E. Heywood St.
956.245.1666
www.texasconjuntomusic.org

Alice
The Tejano R.O.O.T.S. Museum
213 N. Wright St.
361.668.6666
www.tejanorootshalloffame.org

San Antonio
Museo Alameda
101 North Santa Rosa St.
210.299.4300
www.thealameda.org

To help preserve Mexican American dance halls across the state, share your stories and photos at www.texasdancehall.org.