

Secret histories

Artist Ann Wallace leaves a trail of clues to the LaVaca Street neighborhood's past

BY ELAINE WOLFF
ewolff@sacurrent.com

Walking the LaVaca Street neighborhood that flanks South Presa just south of downtown, it's readily apparent the neighborhood is experiencing a revival. Developer Steve Yndo has rehabilitated the gray art deco building near the Pig Stand that now houses the Bower Gallery. Taco Haven reopened last year after a complete makeover, and improvements are underway at three of the small triangular green spaces, called pocket parks, that provide respite for bus riders and bikers on the stretch between South Alamo and Conrad.

Property values in the area have inched steadily upward since the Victoria Courts public housing project on Durango was demolished to make way for a new mixed-use development that will hopefully create a more fluid transition between this historic area — the oldest continually inhabited neighborhood in the city — and downtown. The construction of HemisFair Plaza for the 1968 World's Fair, and the Courts, came at a price: the demolition of dozens of blocks of old communities, including historic Black and Polish settlements, and the interruption of the once-steady flow of residents into downtown for work and pleasure.

Now, before that history is fully recovered, another wave of change is underway, distancing us ever farther from the roots of the city. Local artist Anne Wallace, though, is working hard to leave clues to those long-gone people

and places that might inspire further research, or, at the very least, enhance our experience and appreciation of this pedestrian-friendly area. As part of the city's design enhancement program for the Southtown Improvements initiative, Wallace is stamping enigmatic recollections into the sidewalks of the pocket parks. "We came from Lockhart to San Antonio in an old Model-T truck ... We moved into the Baptist Settlement, Callaghan Avenue," reads one square; another recalls an era of barefoot children when "The soles of our feet were always purple from stepping on ripe mulberries,"; yet another temptingly says only, "Lima beans, carrots, turnips." The text will be accompanied by five photo engravings that are representative of key communities and eras in the neighborhood, such as an early 1900s image of the original Mount Zion Baptist Church, which is still holding services on the East Side.

"When I travel that's what I'm looking for," says Wallace, a Galveston native who moved to San Antonio in 1995, "an acknowledgment and celebration of all those voices," what she calls the "multiple layers of space, time, [and] history."

In LaVaca, those layers include the original native settlers, who spoke Coahuilteco, the Spanish missionaries, European settlers such as Germans, Poles, and Jews, black freedmen, and Chinese. To pay tribute to these diverse popula-

tions, many of whose stories are lost to us, each pocket park contains a stamp with a key word rendered in Coahuilteco, English, Spanish, German, Polish, and a Chinese character. A patch of sidewalk on the triangle at Callaghan, San Arturo, and Presa reads: "xaxasal, mi corazon, my heart, mein herz, (moj) serce," and includes the Chinese character for heart.

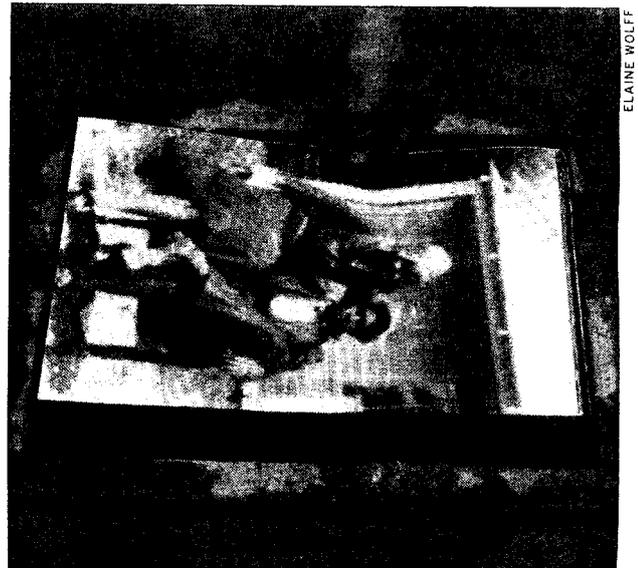
To piece together her scattered clues, Wallace called on many members of the community, from professor Michael Chen at St. Mary's University to Ramon Vasquez y Sanchez at Centro Cultural Aztlan, who keeps a glossary of the Coahuilteco language. She also sought advice about narrative and voice from writers such as Norma Cantú, Sandra Cisneros, and members of the Stanush clan (whose family is from the old neighborhood). "The key criterion that came out of that," says Wallace, "is, 'You don't change any words.'"

The words that Wallace is faithfully rendering in longlasting concrete come from hours of oral histories she has collected from residents of the area. Many of her subjects are in their seventies, old enough to recall playing in the streets and shopping at the area vendors before HemisFair changed the neighborhood forever. "One big thing about the neighborhood was the parishes," reads another stamp, "the pealing of the church bells. Father was a bell pealer."

RECEPTION:
CARLOS CORTES (PARK BENCH) & ANNE WALLACE, PRESA STREET POCKET PARKS
10am-noon Saturday, July 10
Free
Corner of Callaghan, San Arturo, and Presa streets
207-4418



MARK GREENBERG



ELAINE WOLFF

From the hundreds of pages of recollections, Wallace selected excerpts that can reveal the secret history of the area's evolution if a curious reader follows up, for instance at the Institute of Texan Cultures where Wallace conducted some of her extensive research. "I wanted to pick stories that imply some of that history and change without overtly lecturing," she says.

"I would like to think of this as having some kind of relationship to [human rights work]," she adds. Wallace spent several years on the Mexico-U.S. border interviewing political asylum seekers during the height of the Central American wars. She lived near Guanajuato, Mexico for six years (and was eventually deported). "It was really great to live outside my culture and see my own culture through other eyes. I think that's really invaluable."

The inspiration for imprinting recollections in the actual pathways came from the old makers' marks that can still be found on cement sidewalks throughout the U.S., such as a favorite of hers: Modern Concrete Co. We make good sidewalks. "I've always loved those," she says. "I've always wondered who those people were." To create the unique stamps — more than 50 in all — Wallace worked with Pronto Sandblasting locally, and with a Fort Worth company, Intaglio Graphics, which used a new French process to engrave the photo images on separate blocks of concrete that will be inserted in place when the sidewalks have cured.

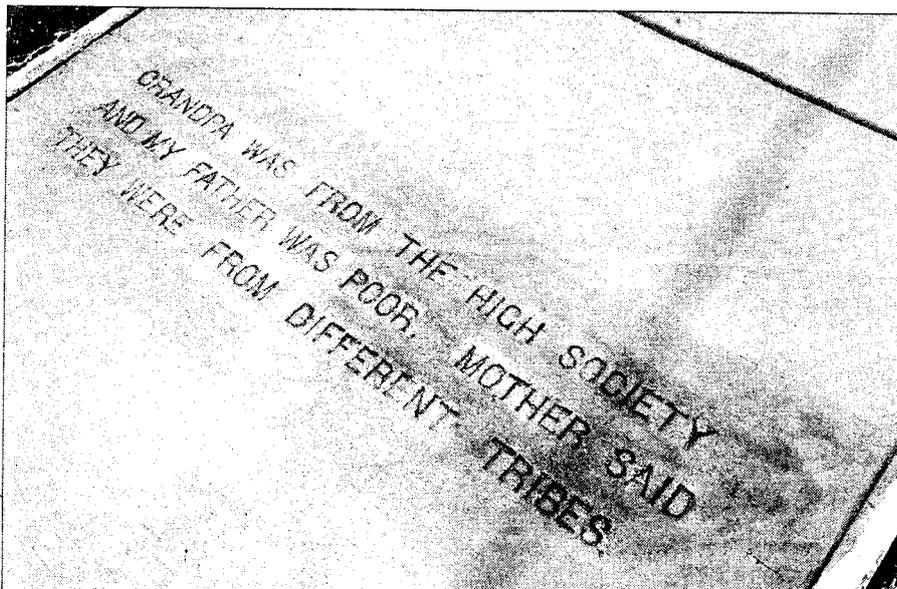
On a suffocatingly sunny and humid day sandwiched between the recent rainstorms, Wallace supervised a crew of men who brushed large plywood-backed stamps with oil and carefully pressed them into the setting concrete. One of them reads: "When my husband passed away, I used to go to Fort Sam everyday and she said, 'Mijita, lya!, no lo dejas descansar. Dejala descansar.'"

It's easy to imagine this woman's long, hot trek on foot and streetcar from this spot where VIA now stops.

Another stamp recalls, "The ice station on Pereida and Presa had fresh fish." One of the photo images that will be placed at the Florida, Labor, and Presa pocket park is of the inside of the Garden Fruit Store, which occupied the storefront where Rosario's serves food and salsa. This prompts Wallace to point out that, since the Handy Andy between South St. Mary's and Presa closed, "We don't even have a grocery store now."

Wallace's work as an artist is of a piece with her Presa Street project (a second installment of which will run along Florida Street), which often traces the history of the natural world and the human imprint on it. She has shown "spines" of trees, slicing rings and arranging them along the floor in the pattern of a felled tree, a technique she hopes to incorporate in her proposed design enhancement project for a garden plaza at Brackenridge Park. A recent video shown during the Southwest School of Art & Craft's H2O group show this spring paid tribute to a river that runs through her family's ranch land and is now threatened by development and the growing scarcity of fresh water.

The Presa Street project has yielded reams of material, much of which won't make it into either the pocket parks or Florida Street projects. Wallace laments, "I got some great stories about a bar that pre-dated Bar America that was a pretty rough place," whose clientele included "women who carried guns." She hopes that the stamps will encourage more residents to come forward with their memories, and inspire someone to build a comprehensive oral history of the area before it's too late. ●



MARK GREENBERG