

A New Lease on Life

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Gallagher Headquarters Ranch house restored; gated community planned

The historic Gallagher Headquarters Ranch in western Bexar County is getting a new lease on life, thanks to a San Antonio architect and his family.

Christopher Hill and other members of his family purchased the ranch in several transactions over the past few months to restore the 164-year old hacienda-style house on the site and make the rest of the property into an environmentally friendly development.

The headquarters ranch is a portion of the 10,000-acre spread established by Irish civil engineer Peter Gallagher in 1833. Descendants of the McNutt family, who bought the ranch in 1927 retain 6,600 acres.

The rest of the ranch – the part now known as the Gallagher Headquarters Ranch, because it encompasses the original ranch house – was bought by the Hill family from the Hawn, Scanio and Rooke families of Corpus Christi, who held the land looking for an environmentally sensitive buyer.

They found Chris Hill.

The Hill family has dedicated a 731-acre easement on the property to The Nature Conservancy of Texas. The lands around Government Canyon are known to contain golden-cheeked warblers and other endangered songbirds. The easement also will protect a junction of the Edwards Aquifer Recharge Zone and a contributing watershed.

The 830 acres adjoining Government Canyon will be developed into lots from three to 10 acres in a gated community, Hill said. Each lot will come with restrictions that each property owner maintain at least half of the acreage in its native state.

The lots will be previewed for potential buyers in about three months and will be made available for sale in six months, Hill said.

Another 1,000 acres will be sold in large tracts for small ranches no smaller than 40 acres, he said.

When Texas 211 was extended through the ranchland, about 200 acres went for right of way. Hill said the acreage fronting the highway will not be developed commercially and will be maintained as a “perpetual greenbelt.”

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Although the residential development and large tract subdivision will eventually allow Hill to recoup the investment in the property, the restoration and revival of the house will be a labor of love for the architect.

The headquarters ranch house, which once quartered the troops of Mexican President Santa Anna and entertained Princess Grace and Will Rogers, will be restored to its former glory over the next few years, according to the new owner.

“We want to make the house alive again,” Hill said. “This is something we think will happen slowly.”

The house features a massive living room with two fireplaces and 19 bedrooms – each with its own bathroom and fireplace. Hill expects to begin the restoration and furnishing one room at a time.

“We’re going to leave it as rustic as conceivable,” Hill said of the furnishings. Some of the furnishings will come from a home Hill recently sold in Santa Fe, N.M.

Outdoor work will include cleaning out the trees and bringing back the gardens that once graced the grounds.

The hacienda will then be leased out for corporate retreats and special functions. Hill wants to bring horses back to the extensive stables for guests and use a small lake on the property for other guest activities.

Plans also include providing viewing blinds for bird-watchers and wildlife observers. Deer and wild turkey abound on the ranch, he said.

The range of wildlife and the importance of the area to the Edwards Aquifer prompted the Hills to establish the Elizabeth P. Hill Preserve on the ranch in memory of their mother.

“I think it’s a wonderful situation here,” said James King, director of land protection for The Nature Conservancy of Texas. “It is a significant contribution that Chris (Hill) made.

While the organization will have the ability to protect and observe the wildlife and water, “the conservancy doesn’t have the burden of being the landowner,” King said. Tax credits are available for preserving the land in its native state.

Nature Conservancy spokeswoman Niki McDaniel said the group often works with private landowners who “gain ownership of the conservation ideals.”

No grazing of domestic livestock will be allowed in the easement, King said. The easement acreage can be subdivided in to two parts of no smaller than 40 percent, and only one home can be built on each of those parts. Existing roads can be maintained, but new roads will not be allowed until an environmental impact study is completed.

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The canyon lands of Government Canyon “provide habitat for a lot of other rare plants and animals,” King said.

He also believes Pastuera Springs on the property will yield interesting finds. “I think we’re going to find some unique stuff there,” King said of wildlife in the springs.

The next step is to set up points to take photo and observation points around the easement. Over time, a methodical study will allow The Nature Conservancy to take inventory of all the plants and animals in the area and make a list of all the birds found on the ranch, King said.

Ranch house has served as backdrop for history that shaped Alamo City

In recent years, the Gallagher Headquarters Ranch has made occasional guest appearances on television or the big screen. The setting of the old hacienda has been a location backdrop for the soap opera “General Hospital” and motion pictures.

But the limestone-walled ranch house, built 23 miles from San Antonio before the siege of the Alamo, also has served as the backdrop for much of the history that shaped the Alamo City.

Peter Gallagher, an Irish civil engineer who helped build the first docks in Galveston, came to San Antonio as an emissary of Mexican President Santa Ana in 1833. He was charged with finding a site for a military supply depot for the Mexican army, which was attempting to keep Anglo settlers with no allegiance to Mexico out of Texas.

When he found the oak-lined valley formed by the San Geronimo River, he put down roots in what was still a territory of Mexico. On a grant from the Mexican government, Gallagher took 10,000 acres to establish a cattle ranch and build a fort. Historical articles on the ranch report that he used 250 peones, poor Mexican workers, to build the fort.

The original house, one of three buildings now at the headquarters, has two-foot-thick walls of stone and rifle slits for defense against the Comanche, Kickapoo and Lipan tribes hostile to the interlopers. The family survived repeated attacks in the early years.

Gallagher was employed by the Mexican government, but never took citizenship. When the smoke cleared between the Texians and Santa Anna’s army, Gallagher became a mover and shaker in the newly created Texas Republic.

The rancher lived on the spread until after the Civil War, when he moved to San Antonio. As a prominent businessman in the city, Gallagher built the original Menger Hotel by the Alamo, many of the buildings at Fort Sam Houston’s Quadrangle and a San Antonio home on land where a portion of Rivercenter mall now sits.

The limestone used in the building was quarried from the canyon that ran through Gallagher’s ranch. The canyon was dubbed “Government Canyon,” because so much of the limestone was going into government buildings.

Gallagher’s ranch house served as a stop for another venture of the Irishman – stagecoach line over the Old Spanish Trail between San Antonio and Bandera.

A legend that will not die has it that Mexican bandit gangs, who frequented the trail in those days, abandoned a treasure trove of loot on the ranch. None has been found.

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Although it is hard to tell fact from fiction when it comes to treasure tales, a man who owned the ranch with his brother in the late 1800's allegedly found a large horde of stashed loot in one of the many caves in the rugged canyon lands.

The excited rancher marked the spot with his shirt and went for his brother to get a wagon and team of mules to haul the treasure. As the duo made their way to the site, however, a loaded shotgun in the back of the bouncing wagon went off and killed the brother who had found the treasure.

Even after years of searching, the surviving sibling never found the cave marked by the brother's shirt.

The ranch had many owners after Gallagher moved to San Antonio.

In 1927, a San Antonio bank attorney who had picked up the mortgage in 1915, sold the ranch to mining engineer and geologist Vachel H. McNutt and wife Amy Shelton McNutt.

The McNutt millions came from his discovery of the first commercial potash in the Western Hemisphere. The fortune was built further with the acquisition of several ranches in the Southwest, as well as oil and gas wells.

The ranch became the first dude ranch in the state under the supervision of Amy McNutt known as "Mrs. Mac."

In the late 1930's and well into the 20th Century, the ranch was a hot spot for everyone from Hollywood stars to European royalty. Among those entertained at the ranch by Amy McNutt were the dancing girls of the Ziegfeld follies, humorist Will Rogers, aviator Eddie Stinson and TV news pioneer Edward R. Murrow.

One story passed down through the generations tells of the visit of Britain's Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco to the ranch. The royalty was treated to a blowout that featured a drunken band and rowdy South Texas ranchers. One rancher pounded Prince Rainier's chest repeatedly, saying, "You, prince; me, Aztec prince."

Amy McNutt lived on the ranch into her early 90s. The philanthropist was known for her gifts to education and the Southwest Craft Center structures and gardens.

Her descendants still own most of the 10,000-acre Gallagher Ranch. About 3,300 acres were purchased by the Hill family of San Antonio. The Hills are developing the portion of the ranch known as the Gallagher Headquarters Ranch.

In recent years, the headquarters has served as a film location for San Antonio resident John Schneider's short-lived Aaron Spelling series "Heaven Help Us."