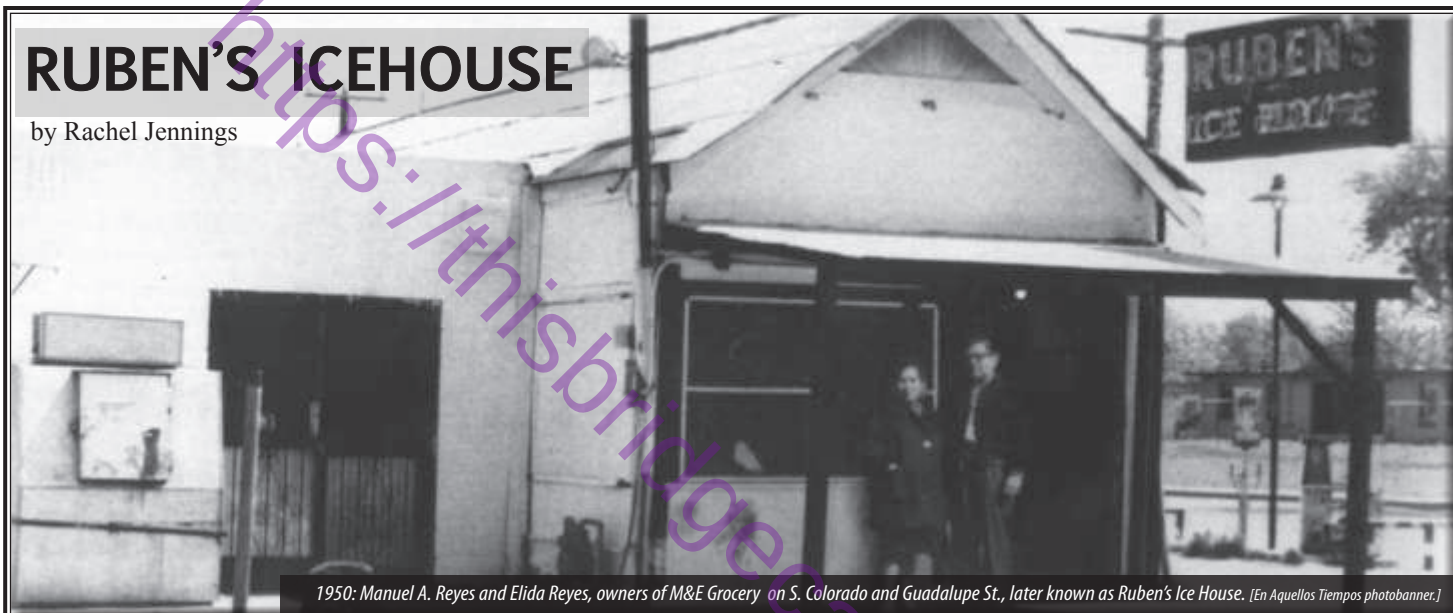


RUBEN'S ICEHOUSE

by Rachel Jennings



1950: Manuel A. Reyes and Elida Reyes, owners of M&E Grocery on S. Colorado and Guadalupe St., later known as Ruben's Ice House. [En Aquellos Tiempos photobanner.]

Preserving the Past Without Freezing It

"Whereas a convenience store is a place for people to enter and leave in a frenzied rush, an icehouse is a community institution, a place where people can gather, talk, and perhaps play games."

The Casa de Cuentos at 816 S. Colorado St. serves to help Westside residents preserve their deep cultural roots and memories as part of the Esperanza Center's Arte es Vida programming. At the Casa, community members share their personal and familial stories as well as their musical and cultural traditions with one another. In this spirit, it is fitting that we learn the specific history of what is currently next door at 820 S. Colorado St., formerly owned by the Reyes family and the longterm site of Ruben's Icehouse, a place where people could buy ice, drinks, and food and is now part of El Rinconcito de Esperanza (see pg. 21 of this issue of Voz). Admittedly, I have found learning about this history to be challenging. Originally, for example, the address for Ruben's Icehouse was listed as 820 S. Colorado St. but it has been listed under other numbers as well. Without knowing this small detail, one would find peeling back the layers of history to be impossible. For many generations, however, the property at 820 S. Colorado St. was of major personal and social significance to many Westside residents.

Ruben's Icehouse is first listed in the City Directory of San Antonio in the year 1960. By 1960, of course, icehouses as a place to buy ice were already passé, since people could cool their food in refrigerators and freezers. Since they first came into being in the 1920s, icehouses in South Texas gradually transformed from simply places to purchase blocks of ice to

The freezer door visible on the outside of the S. Presa Icehouse authenticates some of the oldest icehouses that offered block or crushed ice in the past with drive through convenience. Many of the freezers are still functional and are now used for cooling beer, soda and other items.



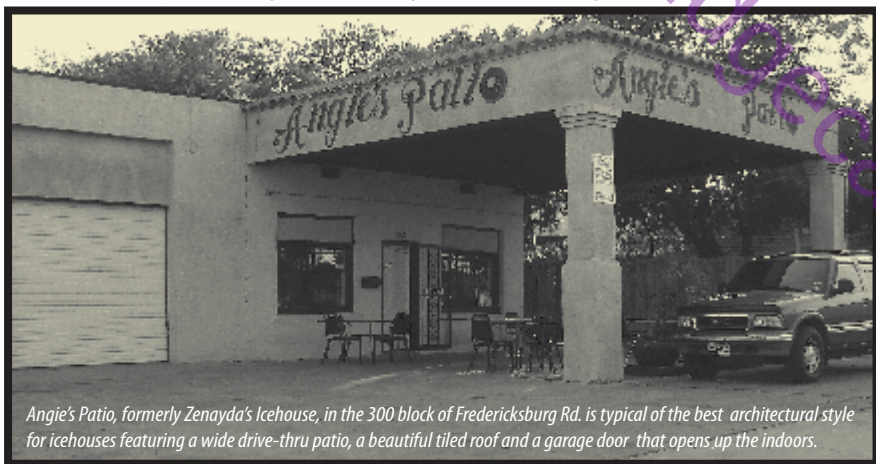
establishments that were the precursors of modern convenience stores. Like many corner tienditas, there were usually no gas pumps, but customers could buy food, soft drinks, and beer. Icehouses, though, were gathering places, more than just stores. Many icehouses, in fact, catered to those who wanted a place to drink beer at a slow, quiet pace. These icehouses often provided outside tables, much as would a biergarten, another Texas mainstay. When the Reyes family designated their store an "icehouse," they did so with a sense of tradition and an awareness of what differentiates an "icehouse" from a 7-11. Whereas a convenience store is a place for people to enter and leave in a frenzied rush, an icehouse is a community institution, a place where people can gather, talk, and perhaps play games. Ruben's Icehouse served the people of the Westside for most of the next four decades.

What, however, was present at 820 S. Colorado St. before Ruben's Icehouse? The first listing for that address that I could locate was in the 1915 San Antonio City Directory. The site is listed as the homestead of S. and Rita Villareal. The next year, 1916, Patronillo Aguirre is listed as a renter, and the following year, mention is again made of a homestead belonging to S. and Patricia Villarreal (this time with two r's). One can make few assumptions based upon a few skeletal entries in a city directory. Were the Villarreals ever actually residents at the house or were they simply the owners? Is Rita the same person as Patricia? I suspect so, since the makers of the city directory may simply have misunderstood the pronunciation of the name Patricia. Again, though, it is impossible to know for sure. In 1918, an E. Flores was listed as the next renter.

What does this information tell us? I am



Kike's Icehouse fits into a narrow strip of land that runs along the railroad tracks crossing the intersection of Steves Ave and Roosevelt. It has handpainted lettering around the building as well as an R.C. Cola sign announcing its name.



Angie's Patio, formerly Zenayda's Icehouse, in the 300 block of Fredericksburg Rd. is typical of the best architectural style for icehouses featuring a wide drive-thru patio, a beautiful tiled roof and a garage door that opens up the indoors.

Learning about icehouses and small tienditas prepares us to resist gentrification.

Patsy's Icehouse at 2602 S. Flores is reminiscent of a tiendita with picnic tables in front. It comes alive at night with Chicana/o youth hanging to the rhythms of punk music played live. It is also often the site of community fundraisers and other youth oriented events.



not a historian, but I do get the sense of a community in dramatic flux due to poverty, displacement, or perhaps migration due to the Mexican Revolution. The property at 820 S. Colorado St. continued to be listed under many different names for the next forty years. Just as we must avoid accepting negative, debasing stereotypes of communities, we must similarly avoid romanticizing a community's history. Many of us have come to think of the Westside as a place of tradition, continuity, and generational stability. This conception is true in relation to certain institutions and many families, especially by the mid-twentieth century. At the same time, poverty, migration, and unstable mobility were a reality for many Mexican American families on the Westside throughout much of the last century.

In addition to individual renters and owners of the property, I also identified other purposes for 820 S. Colorado St. In 1927, for example, one finds the site listed as the location for Pentecostes Mexican Church. The fact that the building was briefly a church may not seem so important to many readers of *La Voz*. Personally, I am intrigued by this information, since it underscores the longterm presence of Protestants on the Westside (Carmen Tafolla's family, for example) and the general religious diversity of the community. While Protestant proselytizing has been controversial for many Catholic residents of the Westside, Mexican-American Protestantism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to stereotype and caricature. A movement which emerged in the early twentieth century among African Americans and working-class whites in both urban and rural settings, Pentecostalism from the time of its first origins has had an important place in Mexican American culture. Finally, in the 1950s, 820 S. Colorado St. was the location for the CBH Café, presumably named for its owner, Catarino Hernandez. Its function as a café should not be surprising in the years leading up to 1960s, when it was finally converted to an icehouse. The continuity of Ruben's Icehouse as a Westside institution after 1960 is a major achievement. After almost half a century of constantly changing residents and functions, the structure

at 820 S. Colorado St. contributed to the social cohesiveness and cultural fabric of the Westside when it remained Ruben's Icehouse for the next four decades.

Why should we learn the history of Ruben's Icehouse or of icehouses generally? In contrast with churches, schools, labor unions, or community centers, they seem to have a very mundane purpose. Neither educating us nor apparently serving our spiritual needs, the ostensible purpose of icehouses is simply to sell ice, beer, and food. This understanding of them is extremely shallow, however. Such a shortsighted perspective endangers the continued existence of the many icehouses with which San Antonio and South Texas are still blessed. We need to show our support for these small businesses that provide an intergenerational continuity to our communities and a slow-paced, human, noncorporate means of socializing as we purchase our drinks and food.

Learning about icehouses and small tienditas prepares us to resist gentrification. When developers offer to buy our homes and community businesses so they can sell those properties to wealthy residents or companies, we often assume that we are not actually losing much. Let's not wait until we have lost our homes and communities to resist gentrification. As Tom Denyer has pointed out in "Folk Culture and Urban Political Economy: The Ice Houses of San Antonio," icehouses have been devalued by the promoters of tourism, who prefer more exotic fare for tourists to gawk at, and have also been ignored by academics, who are dismissive of what Denyer refers to as San Antonio's "icehouse subculture." Others' failure to appreciate San Antonio's cultural richness should not be our excuse for historical amnesia.

In addition to gentrification and official neglect, another danger in not learning our history is the emergence of negative or distorting stereotypes. As a non-native Texan, I well



Fred's Icehouse at S. Presa and Ada is a bright blue color. Constructed with concrete blocks it features an outdoor patio with picnic tables and a drive-thru window. The sign offers beer and pool.



Connie's Icehouse at VFW Drive and S. Presa can easily be missed but local folks obviously patronize it. Set next to the railroad tracks, the sign at the door announced an upcoming birthday party and a Betty Boop figure at the entrance holds up a sign with the icehouse's name. Connie's also has a curb service window.

remember my first sightings of icehouses in Austin. Icehouses were quite often in poor neighborhoods populated by people of color—the neighborhoods that had been overlooked by chainstores and major corporations. Men who were clearly alcoholic and homeless often gathered at these icehouses, and I made the assumption that icehouses were an oppressive, exploitative institution designed to seduce impoverished men with cheap beer and wine. I rarely saw women and children enter these stores. Later, I realized how embarrassingly wrong my impressions were. As Grace Rosales recounts in her memories of icehouses (p. 14), segregation based on gender can be a problem in certain icehouses but not the way I imagined. Most icehouses are not strictly for men and in fact are clean, family-oriented establishments with a record of service to their communities. I was not alone in my misconceptions, however. Even native Texans vary in their perceptions of icehouses—some people perceive them to be identical with taverns or convenience stores. Thus, all Texans—not just newcomers—need to become more familiar with their own cultural traditions.

More than any other region in the country, South Texas has maintained the tradition of neighborhood icehouses. These icehouses were present in African American, Mexican American, and Anglo communities of all kinds. Each Texan culture influenced the evolution of the icehouse, thus making the icehouse a uniquely Texan phenomenon.

Editor's note: Special thanks to Dr. Keta Miranda, Rachel Jennings, Grace Rosales and Buena Gente who took time to talk to us in making this section on icehouses possible. To read more on Ruben's Icehouse, go to p. 22 for recent developments.



The Texas Latino Icehouse at S. Zarzamora and Laredo, next to the Guadalupe Lumber Company is close to the fruit and vegetable terminal. The freezer door blends into the rest of the front facade painted white. Texas flag colors for the sign above include a neon Texas state on it. Picnic tables are on both sides of the building.



(Top) S. Presa Icehouse has a 40 year history having been handed down from mother to daughter. The ancient freezer door is still used to cool boxes of drinks. Roxanne (the owner) told us it used to be Kotara's. Taco plate fundraisers are sometimes held to help individuals. The sliding windows are used for curb service. Faded lettering offers crushed or block ice.

(Left) The S. Presa Icehouse like many these days contains a jukebox, tables, ample room for dancing, games and neon lighting inside. {Icehouse photos by : Gloria A. Ramirez}



The Sanchez Icehouse just east of and adjoining the I-35 bridge off of Guadalupe St. brims with people on weekends who come to down buckets of ice cold beer and dance to DJs spinning Tejano, Country, Chicano Soul and Cumbia. Motorcycles line the street and young and old gather under a sign that states, "Where Friends Meet Friends/Donde Amigos Encuentran Amigos."