

HISTORY & FOLKLORE

The Lasting Importance of Geraldine Humphreys

The lasting importance of Geraldine Humphreys must be noted since she is the original benefactor and namesake of the Humphreys Cultural Center. My mother described her this way:

Geraldine D. Humphreys, a name on a Foundation, donor of the beautiful new Cultural Complex, but what of the woman herself? Too few people remember her or, in fact, ever really knew her.

A gift, of a necessity, is a projection of the person who gives it, and without this knowledge it becomes less of the true giver and more of the current dispenser. This is a tragedy in itself, for Geraldine Humphreys deserves recognition for her generosity, and she deserves to be remembered for herself "each man in his own season."

Mrs. Humphreys died in 1961, but she who had been a semi-recluse for most of her later years, became even more of one after the death of her only and adored daughter, Kalita.

When in 1954, a tragic plane crash took the lives of Kalita and Joe Burson, it marked a "retirement of spirit" for this strong-willed woman.

Mrs. Humphreys' dominant personality bore the firm stamp of her pioneer ancestors. She was not one to brook nonsense, disagreement, or triviality. She was a basic person who loved art, beauty, travel, nature especially, and sometimes tolerated the more agreeable of her fellow man.

She had wit herself and firm integrity, bearing little tolerance for those who did not also possess those qualities. She was an original and she reared her daughter to be an individual in her own right; a great achievement for a strong character.

Whole generations of school children, now grown to adulthood, remember passing the tangle that was Seven Pines to and from school. The more intrepid walked on the narrow dirt lane next to the wildwood underbrush. Those that took dares darted furtively inside to catch a glimpse of the "witch." This annoyed and amused her. Although she did not care for trespassers, her wry sense of humour appreciated the turn of children's imaginative fancies.

Large iron gates, beautifully wrought pillars like a fragment of the Parthenon laid down improbably in the heart of Liberty, cement posts, all inundated by trees whose seeds had once more grown into trees interlacing in a maze – this was Seven Pine before the razing for construction of the new edifice to culture.

Dogwood, redbud, haw, azaleas and camellias grown into giants grew in thickets with only irregular paths (once more formal) where she walked in peace and isolation. Liberty was a retreat, a resting place, but she always called Galveston her other home.

Born Camilla Geraldine Davis, in the city of Galveston on June 16, 1876, to Camilla Gertrude Hardin and George W. Davis (son of John I. Davis and Sarah Green of Huntsville), she began life as the daughter of a prominent Galveston lawyer,

later moving to Dallas at the age of five.

She had two sisters, Frank Christi and George Agatha and two brothers, George Wirt (later to become one of the state's wealthiest men) and Percy.

Mrs. Humphreys was a striking figure in her youth and quite active in Dallas' social affairs.

She studied art, both in this country and later briefly abroad and was fond of travel in Europe.

She met and married her husband, Col. Humphreys, relatively late in life, moved to Galveston with him in 1925 where he served many years as Collector of Customs.

Her house there was quite large and rambling, but uniquely her own. She was a brilliant woman and felt no need to conform to ordinary "little minds."

Liberty and Seven Pines, was a place visited, with whim dictating their comings and goings. Two houses were maintained in Seven Pines as their dwelling. One, known as the "club house," was later used as a dining and recreation house and still later used by her daughter, Kalita, and son-in-law, as one of their Liberty area homes (the other being in Hardin).

After her marriage she became interested in history and organized the Daughters of the Republic of Texas in Liberty. The Daughters of the American Revolution was another patriotic organization she was interested in for some time during this period before, as she grew older, seclusion, with her birds and beautiful camellias, became more pleasant than crowds of people.

Always essentially, she was a basic person with artificial trappings having very little meaning to her. She was devoted to her daughter, Kalita, and somewhat intolerant of the theatre that took her far away to New York, removed from her mother's life.

However, in spite of this, she was proud of her daughter's artistic achievements and after her death, desirous to leave a theatre as an edifice in memory of her daughter (named Kalita Humphreys Theatre – situated in the Dallas Theatre Center) and talked seriously many times of her intention to leave a theatre, as her daughter and son-in-law had begun to build, in Liberty in her memory.

Mrs. Humphreys and her antecedents, the Hardin's, were as typical of Liberty pioneers as any I can think of. Their past is interesting and contingent to Liberty. Their wealth, much of it amassed here, (with a small portion now reverting to the city and area it was derived from), if it is to be enjoyed – should be understood and remembered with admiration. Mrs. Humphreys expected to live to be 112 and she had good reason to think she might as a recorded "family history" notes. The structure built resulting from Mrs. Humphreys' beneficence, the Cultural Complex, seems much like the Hardins – strong, resolute and part of their surroundings. A fitting gesture, a lasting memory.

– Richard Nolan Pickett, Sr.



From Illustrated Press of Liberty County, Thursday, July 20, 1967 –
The picturesque Humphreys' homes in Liberty are being torn down in Liberty to make way for new construction.

Seven Pines Estate: A Legacy of Family, Culture and Community

Today I would like to take you on a journey through time – to a place deeply rooted in Texas history and rich with stories of courage, resilience, and culture. That place is our very own Seven Pines.

Seven Pines is more than just a historic site. It is a symbol of generations – of one family's legacy – of a community's growth – and of how history can shape the future.

The story begins with the Hardin family, one of the earliest and most influential families in Southeast Texas. At the center of that story is Benjamin Franklin Hardin, known as Frank. A man whose life mirrored the very beginnings of Texas itself.

Born in 1803 in Tennessee, Frank Hardin came to Texas in 1826, when this land was still part of Mexico. He and his brother, Blackburn, settled deep in the woods along the Trinity River in the Atascosito District, what we now know as Liberty County. Over time, he became a surveyor, soldier, and public servant. He fought in many key battles of the Texas Revolution, including the Battle of San Jacinto – the decisive moment that secured Texas independence. Hardin's contributions did not stop there. He served as a legislator, helped shape early Texas government, and even played a role in the creation of Hardin County – named in honor of his family.

But beyond politics and war, Hardin built something more lasting – a home.

In 1839, he and his wife Cynthia O'Brien established a residence in town. This newly-founded town was named Villa de La Santissima Trinidad de la Libertad, later shortened to Liberty. This home would later become known as Seven Pines, and it became the heart of the Hardin family for four generations.

The name Seven Pines itself carries meaning and legacy. In 1828, Frank and Blackburn sent their slave, Rankin, back to Tennessee to fetch the remaining family members to Texas. This family group of 15, including their parents Swan and

Jerusha Hardin, travelled to Texas in two covered wagons drawn by oxen. When Swan told Jerusha, who was short in stature, that they were to join her sons in Texas, she replied "I have counted up my husband, sons, and son-in-law, and it makes seven. I will be happy as long as I am surrounded by my seven pines."

Seven Pines in 1914. Geraldine held Seven Pines as her family's second home. She lived primarily with her husband and daughter, Kalita, in Galveston. Kalita had a successful career in theater. She was a prominent actress in the Galveston Little Theatre. She was also active in theater productions in Dallas, Houston,

Valley Players, both she and her husband were killed in a plane crash while traveling to New York from Texas. She was only 38 years old. Her death was a profound loss – but her legacy did not end there. In fact, it inspired something even more lasting.

Geraldine Humphreys would outlive her daughter by seven years, dying at Seven Pines in 1961. The land known as the Seven Pines estate was donated to the city of Liberty in 1969. The Humphreys Cultural Center was established on the grounds of Seven Pines, ensuring that Kalita's love for theater and the arts would live on. Today, that center houses the Valley Players theater, continuing the work that Kalita began.

So, when we look at Seven Pines today, we see more than a historic location.

We see the journey of a pioneer family.

We see the courage of a man who helped build Texas.

We see generations preserving their heritage.

We see a daughter who turned land into a cultural gift.

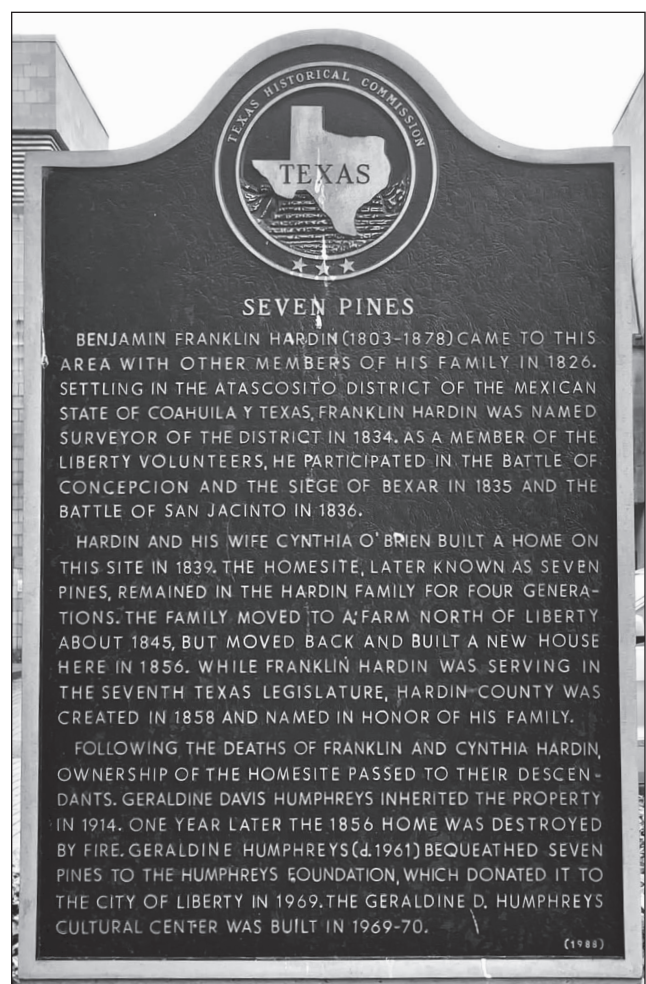
And we see a young woman whose passion for theater continues to inspire a community decades after her passing.

Seven Pines stands as a bridge – between past and present, between history and culture, between memory and legacy.

It reminds us that places matter – but it is the people, their stories, and their contributions that give those places meaning.

And in our Liberty, Seven Pines continues to do exactly that.

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In the early days of the Hardin family settling in the back woods along the Trinity River, the Indians were still a strong presence in the area. A Coushatta chief named Kalita was particularly admired by Frank Hardin because he was able to control his braves. During the Texas Revolution, Frank had helped to convince Chief Kalita to stay neutral. To solidify their friendship, Frank told Chief Kalita that he would name his first child after him. As luck would have it, the first child of Frank and Cynthia would be a girl child. She was named Kalita, and this name would become part of the Hardin family lineage, passed down through generations as a meaningful and symbolic name. Almost every family of Hardin descendants included a girl child named Kalita.

Eventually, the property passed into the hands of a descendant, Geraldine Davis Humphreys, who inherited

Virginia, and New York.

Throughout her life, Kalita's connection to Liberty remained strong. After marrying actor and director Joe Burson, the couple returned to Liberty in the early 1950s. Together, they co-founded a community theater group in 1953 known as the Valley Players.

Tragically, the life of Kalita Humphreys Burson was cut short. In 1954, just one year after founding the



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