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SUB

Texas' presidential libraries vie to stay vital

By Dan Genz Tribune-Herald staff writer

Sunday, August 28, 2005

Eavesdropping on President Lyndon Baines Johnson's telephone conversations, Nicholas Evan Sarantakes compares his scholarly research to police surveillance.

"It's like a wiretap. It's that intimate," said Sarantakes, a 39-year-old Texas A&M University – Commerce associate professor of political science studying U.S. foreign relations at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum at the University of Texas in Austin.

"Sure, it's been 40 years and both the people talking are dead, but you're listening to the president of the United States on the phone," Sarantakes said with the hushed enthusiasm of a teenager describing illicit joy.

Thirty-four years after the library and museum opened, it still holds thousands of secrets, promising scholars many more years of work and new reasons to study. Of the 46 million pages of documents, museum director Betty Sue Flowers estimates about one-third, or more than 15 million pages, have yet to be reviewed by the public.

Just last week, the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston released a tape recording in which Kennedy discussed with aides the possibility of using nuclear weapons if China attacked India again in 1963.

But while Waco and Baylor University pursue their bid for President George W. Bush's presidential papers and library as both tourist attraction and economic engine, the two presidential libraries already in Texas continue to wrestle with what lures visitors and scholars alike.

Their challenge: remaining relevant yet diverse in their communities years after opening. Ironically, the programs and exhibits they embrace to accomplish this goal sometimes stray beyond what one might expect of a presidential library and museum.

One example is this summer's movie night series at the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum at Texas A&M University where James Dean's final film, Giant, attracted about 300 people. Free Coca-Cola and popcorn completed the offering.

Some films in the series might seem downright odd for a presidential library. For instance, the classic western Gunfight at the O.K. Corral is on the marquee. However, back during the 1955 filming of Giant, a robust saga about Texas' oil wealth, young George Bush was actually making his way in Texas' petroleum business.

The library also has a piece of the Berlin Wall, a slice of Air Force One and about 40 million pages of documents. Director Warren Finch, 45, says it's difficult to pick just one favorite item.

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He narrows it down to two letters and an old movie taken from different wars. The items connect Bush's dual legacy as a war hero and war president.

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The first is a moving telegram in which a shaken George H.W. Bush, then a 20-year-old Navy pilot, wrote his parents the day after his plane was shot down during World War II 61 years ago. The episode killed both members of his crew and forced him to eject into the Pacific.

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A grainy video of his rescue by an American submarine plays on a continuous loop next to the pilot's words.

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Forty-seven years and four months later, Bush, by now president, wrote a letter to his children on the night he ordered the nation to war against Iraq in 1991, explaining that he understood he was sending young Americans off to risk all they had for their country.

Unmatched in the museum for their raw personal power and the way they help build Bush's mystique, these relics may nonetheless face competition for attention in November. A museum brochure announces its "most ambitious exhibit yet" will explore the nation's love affair with trains.

Such temporary exhibits have become a major facet in presidential libraries, designed to bring back previous visitors while drawing new ones. Some visitors might view the link between these exhibits and modern presidents as tenuous at best, but they're vital if the museums are to thrive in Texas' already competitive tourism industry.

Finch ticks off reasons he believes trains are a good fit for the George Bush Presidential Library. The former president enjoys trains, took a long train trip out west before his 80th birthday in 2004, and even campaigned for president by passenger rail.

Plus, Finch says, the city hosting the Bush library, College Station, was named after the Aggie train stop and surrounding Brazos County boomed because of the Houston & Texas Central Railroad.

Besides, Finch says, trains connect with all generations of Americans, including history buffs, serious historians, model train collectors and children.

"We knew it would draw very well," he said, acknowledging the challenge of crafting compelling temporary exhibits for presidential museums. "That's what we're in the business of. If you do a temporary exhibit, there's really no point in doing one if people won't come."

Three out of every four visitors are from Texas, so attracting return visitors and giving people a reason to drive from the state's major population centers is an extra incentive, Finch said.

The same thing is working about 100 driving miles away in Austin where museum planners once thought Johnson's tumultuous five-year presidency would be enough to attract visitors by itself.

Leading the nation in a controversial war in Vietnam that has overtones today, passing civil rights reforms that helped end segregation, then ending a White House term so weak he didn't seek re-election, Johnson was supposed to be a main attraction forevermore.

"The museum did not have a space for temporary exhibits when it was built," said Flowers, the Johnson museum's executive director. "They thought you could just have a permanent exhibit on the president."

But in that all-important bid to stay relevant and, most importantly, give previous visitors new reasons to return, short-term exhibits such as its current display on popular culture of the 1960s have taken hold.

The exhibit, closing on Labor Day, begins with a video of a go-go dancer shaking to a Beatles anthem.

Music fades to fashion in the next room with a close-up of Twiggy, the reed-thin, 89-pound supermodel

who, the exhibit explains, helped change female beauty from the full-bodied Marilyn Monroe look of the 1950s.

Ahead is a model of what a living room looked like in the 1960s, including items donated by the museum's director of public relations. Video of a young Woody Allen aims for laughs in a comedy room, while a young Muhammad Ali proclaims his greatness in the boxing ring.

Ironically, much of the counterculture highlighted in the museum was linked with the anti-war fervor that dogged the Johnson administration, marred LBJ's accomplishments in the White House and fueled the presidential candidacies of Robert F. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy.

Yet the exhibit fulfills Johnson's wishes for his museum, including his hopes, voiced in 1971, that new generations of visitors would "get a clearer comprehension of what this nation tried to do in an eventful period of its history."

The exhibit also adds variety to the museum.

"We want people to come back," Flowers said, "so we have to offer something new."

Proof the approach is working comes from the spike in attendance three years ago when the museum took the unusual step of building an exhibit around the Lewis and Clark expedition, spokesman Robert Hicks said.

Flowers says she seeks out displays that connect in some way to Johnson's political career, citing a traveling exhibit on the Vietnam War for the fall and, for next year, a locally designed display about bringing electricity to rural areas – an LBJ priority during his years in Congress.

Each exhibit explains why Robert Owens, 50, of Oklahoma, drove up from a vacation in San Antonio just to visit the museum.

"It's just a good way to relive history," said Owens, whose generation was in its teens when controversy over the Vietnam War was at its height.

Standing near an exhibit on the civil rights movement, Johnson fan Beverly Gray, 63, of Austin, shows off the museum to out-of-town friends and celebrates Johnson because, she said, he "ended apartheid."

Old attractions, such as a vintage replica of the Oval Office where Johnson watched the nightly news on three televisions at the same time, remain popular. And there are the love letters, including one with a memorable line from Lady Bird Johnson entreating her politically savvy husband, "Please don't go into politics."

Capitalizing on Johnson's boisterous sense of humor is one of the most humanizing areas of the presidential library.

In a year when Laura Bush made media waves and amused the nation with her slightly risqué address about being a "desperate housewife," both Texas museums continue to go to great lengths to deliver their presidents' humor in innovative if slightly jarring ways.

Hicks, in his role as spokesman for the Johnson Library, takes special pleasure in introducing visitors and dignitaries to the "Animatronic L.B.J.," a lifesize robot complete with Johnson-uttered jokes and bon mots.

Leaning against a fence, wearing a cowboy hat and gesturing, the robotic Johnson tells a joke about his beloved Hill Country.

One concerns a doctor telling a man suffering from hearing loss that he's going to have to give up alcohol. Three months later, the patient returns unhealed.

"Well, did you quit drinking?" the doctor asks.

"No," the man replies as Johnson tells it. "I decided I liked what I was drinking more than I liked what I was hearing."

Hicks says the jokes were taken from tape recordings of LBJ and that on some of them you can hear laughter or applause from the audiences who heard the president spin his folksy yarns.

With a living president in an era of video skits, George Bush's approach pokes fun at his declining prominence after leaving the White House in 1993. At a golf course in a museum video, Bush laments how his playing partners won't allow him the gimme putts they gave him as president.

In another comic scene, Barbara Bush is stopped at the White House by the Secret Service while trying to visit her son.

Finch's favorite video bit features Mikhail Gorbachev. In it, the former Russian leader and Bush are negotiating through an interpreter when Gorbachev suddenly exclaims in Russian that he wants to talk to the real president.

The disparity between the exhibits shows the great advantage of the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum. Its president is not only alive but takes an active interest in his presidential library and its programs, often hosting world leaders and national figures, some of whom he sparred with in public life.

Museum officials say Bush, who lives in Houston, greatly enjoys his library and even keeps a residence nearby for special events. Students encountering the 81-year-old former president on campus sometimes find themselves quizzed good-naturedly about their majors.

"It's electric when a former president of the United States is in your building, mingling with your visitors," Finch said. "It just can't be beat. Walking around campus at Texas A&M, meeting the students, going to their classes, introducing programs, or inviting three or four distinguished leaders and having a roundtable discussion about leadership. You just can't beat having the president at your presidential library."

Asked how the LBJ museum continues to attract hundreds of visitors a day 36 years after Johnson left office and 32 years after his death – it's the second most popular presidential museum nationwide with nearly 299,000 visitors last year – Flowers says one key is the late president himself.

"We're lucky," she said of Johnson and his larger-than-life Lone Star persona. "We have a vibrant president."