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Pursuit of History Paying Off

A Baptist school that sought to erase all traces of a notorious gambling joint is now re-creating the story, piece by piece

**By Anthony Spangler
Star-Telegram Staff Writer**

ARLINGTON - Before there was Las Vegas, there was Top O' the Hill Terrace.

The casino was *the* place in the nation to gamble in the 1930s and 1940s: Joe Louis, Howard Hughes, Bonnie and Clyde and maybe even John Wayne were among noted visitors.



HOWARD HUGHES



BONNIE & CLYDE



JOE LOUIS

"If you worked on top of that hill, you knew you should keep your mouth shut," said Jack Poe, 83, from his home in Lone Star. "I blocked it out of my mind for years because I was ashamed. It was the devil's playhouse."

As a teen-ager in the 1930s, Poe worked at the 46-acre hilltop casino in west Arlington, off Division Street. He was there during raids when alarms rang, gambling equipment slid behind trap walls and some patrons escaped through underground tunnels.

On Saturday, Poe will help the Arlington Historical Society unveil a state historic subject marker recognizing the hill's intriguing past. Unlike a historic landmark, no legal designation is required for a subject marker.

Remnants of the casino remain on 13 acres now occupied by Arlington Baptist College, whose founder J. Frank Norris fought to shut down the notorious gambling joint. In the 1940s, the gambling joint was sold and became a tearoom.

Texas Historical Commission spokeswoman Debbi Head said the site has a unique place in Texas heritage.

"It is an interesting twist how the two groups -- the casino and Baptist group -- came full circle," she said. "It is a site that should be remembered and preserved for future generations."

Over the years, leaders at Arlington Baptist College have been reluctant to embrace the shared history. Norris' successors who purchased the hilltop land and built over the gambling house refused to save anything associated with Top O' the Hill Terrace.

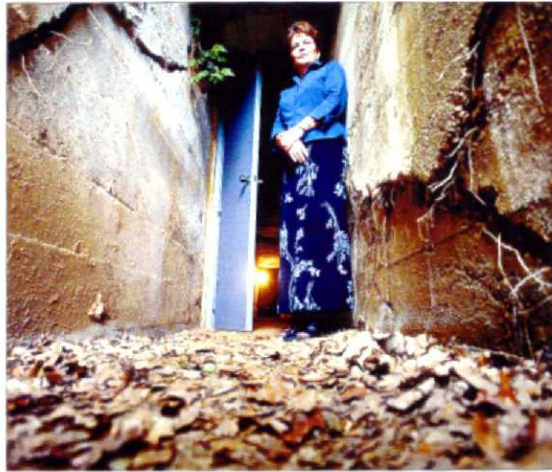
But in recent years, Vickie Bryant, the college's bookstore director and in-house historian, has worked diligently to piece together oral histories, artifacts and documents that portray the hilltop's storied past and the accomplishments of the college.

"Dr. Norris always said, 'One of these days we'll own the place,' " said Bryant, wife of the college's president, David Bryant. "We just want to tell the whole story of how our founder fought the battle and how God has won."

Two years ago, the college rediscovered and excavated a 75-foot tunnel that was used during gambling raids.

The 4-foot-wide by 10-foot-high concrete tunnel opens to a ridge on the west side of the hill. The walls are cracked. Steel reinforcing bars in the wall are exposed and rusted, and vines dangle over the tunnel's hillside opening, which faces the Fort Worth skyline.

A path and carved stone steps lead from the tunnel opening uphill to the tea garden.



Last summer, the college uncovered a stone archway and adjoining antechamber. Based on historical photos of the gambling hall and Poe's recollection, the room was used to hide gaming tables and slot machines during raids.

"When there was a raid, we would hide the gambling tables in the wall and go out the tunnel," Poe said. "They would already have drinks and food set up in the tea garden. Like there was nothing bad going on."

Guards at the gate house would trip an alarm when a raid was imminent. A sniper reportedly roamed the hillside. And patrons had to pass through several doors before reaching the gaming room.

Top O' the Hill finally cracked after a Texas Ranger executed the only successful raid on the casino in 1947. He sneaked in through an escape tunnel.

Capt. M.T. Gonzauillas, who was dubbed the "Lone Wolf" as a result of the raid, took 50 patrons and eight employees into custody. Fred Browning paid his misdemeanor fines and resumed operating days later.

But Browning and co-owner Benny "The Cowboy" Binion eventually buckled under continued pressure from Norris and authorities.

In 1949, Binion reportedly took a suitcase of cash from the hill's profits and started the Horseshoe Casino in Vegas. Browning died in 1953.

Four years after Norris' death, the Bible college, then called Bible Baptist Seminary, purchased the hilltop property. The college was built over the basement where Top O' the Hill had operated.

Many of the original carved-stone structures still stand: twin gatehouses, a crumbling stone wall that lines the driveway, several small buildings, a tiled swimming pool and the tea garden.

Inside the college administration building, Top O' the Hill memorabilia is displayed in glass cases beside Bibles and photos of the college's founders.

A historical collection started with a few poker chips, a prostitute's black velvet Neiman Marcus wrap and a spiked dog collar with a tag inscribed with "Fred Browning" and "Top O' The Hill Terrace."

The exhibit has grown as people have returned to the hill with tales and antiques.

A Bible belonging to Walker Moore, a former music teacher at the seminary when it moved to the hill, was donated to the collection last year. Inside the Bible was a Top O' the Hill scorecard with checkerboard grids and columns marked "we" and "they."

A small building, once used to stable Browning's prized stud horse, Royal Ford, serves as a museum. The horse's name is engraved on the building's stone wall. Outside the former stable, yellow lantana and purple bachelor buttons bloom in a stone drinking trough.

Browning's love of horses is said to be the inspiration for his gambling hall enterprise, which shared patrons with Arlington Downs racetrack.

Browning purchased Royal Ford from Arlington Downs owner W.T. Waggoner, an oilman, for \$110,000.

Backroom poker and craps games could be found in nearly any bar, but Top O' the Hill was known for its "straight" gaming and assurances of anonymity, Poe said.

"I had no idea who some of those important people were. Mr. Browning always made sure their names never became public, even after the raids," said Poe, the impoverished son of a watermelon farmer who came to Browning during the Depression.

Arlington historians have always known about Top O' the Hill Terrace and its questionable past.

"I think it has been a sleeping giant," said Martha Martin, an Arlington Historical Society board member. "It hasn't been recognized because we've always known it was there but didn't realize what was left or realize the whole historical significance of the place."

On Wednesday, Martin and Bryant drove to Dallas to meet with 90-year-old Wilhemina Bruton. The woman's father, Jack Jarvis, was a horse trainer at Top O' the Hill Terrace.

"Mrs. Bruton is donating a wood chest used by her father to store his horse gear," Bryant said. "She provided us with the first picture of Royal Ford and had kept his feed bucket. We just keep finding more things that are tied to the hill."



Tunnel tours

Tours of historic sites and exhibits at Arlington Baptist College, 3001 W. Division St., formerly Top O' the Hill Terrace, can be scheduled through the college's bookstore director, Vickie Bryant, at (817) 461-8741.

Visitors must call before 2 p.m., when the tours begin.

- For more about the Texas Historical Commission, go to www.thc.state.tx.us
- For more about Arlington Baptist College, go to www.abconline.edu

Source: Arlington Baptist College

Anthony Spangler, (817) 548-5412 aspangler@star-telegram.com

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