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Tracking Down History

By Shirley Jinkins
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

ARLINGTON - Vickie Bryant didn't realize that a life of intrigue lay ahead when her husband, David, became Arlington Baptist College's president in 1993.

"He said, 'Think you can run the bookstore?' and I said, 'Boring,' " Bryant recalled. Before long, her job became a search for hidden gambling dens along with old church photos in a historical good-versus-evil morality tale.

The Arlington Baptist College grounds at 3001 W. Division St. used to be home to a gaming casino called Top O' the Hill Terrace that attracted gangsters during the 1930s and 1940s.

"I knew it used to be a casino, but all these years we didn't know a whole lot about it," Bryant said.

Her research began with the college's founder, J. Frank Norris of Fort Worth, who died in 1952 at age 75. Norris was a colorful, fiery minister who battled the influences of Top O' the Hill and downtown Fort Worth's Hell's Half Acre district, home to bars, brothels and gaming parlors.

The more facts Bryant uncovered about the college's history, the more she discovered about Top O' the Hill.

At first, Bryant said she believed that it was inappropriate for a pastor's wife to be digging into the story of Top O' the Hill.

"But back in the '30s and '40s, Dr. Norris fought this place with everything he had," she said. "This way, people can see what God's done with the property."

She visits antique stores, cemeteries, the Salvation Army and even dump sites to find artifacts of the college's history. For Top O' the Hill history, often she only has to dig around the grounds.

"When I started researching, I had two poker chips, a letterhead and a dog collar," Bryant said. The meager college history collection she inherited was only a tenth of its current size, she said.

Phyllis Jackson of Arlington, a missionary with World Baptist Fellowship, has accompanied Bryant on historical searches.

"She's very focused, and she knows what she's going to look at," Jackson said. "She also knows what's not worth looking at."

Bryant does background research along with operating the bookstore and giving campus tours.

"When I'm off on weekends, I can't wait to get back in here on Monday to work," Bryant said.

Fielder House Museum's Geraldine Mills said she admires Bryant's persistence in collecting artifacts from the college and Top O' the Hill.

"She ties all that history together, and you're able to see the good-versus-evil struggle that there was," Mills said.

Profile

Vickie Bryant, 53

Occupation: Bookstore and heritage collection manager, Arlington Baptist College

Experience: 25 years serving churches in Wichita Falls and Crane with her pastor husband; 10 years of researching Arlington Baptist College's history for the bookstore's heritage displays and scrapbooks. Native of Dayton, Ohio.

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