Windedale: Texas' Williamsburg

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Texas’ roots may not stretch back to 1776, but Texans can find at Winedale an integral part of their own heritage in place of the Bicentennial.

In 1834, homesteaders Will and John Townsend claimed 1,107 acres of land between the Brazos and Colorado Rivers of Texas, where Will built a one-room house and loft. That house, which was later known as the Winedale Inn, is today an unusual and historic component of the University of Texas System.

Winedale, located four miles east of Round Top, Texas in the heart of Stephen F. Austin’s colony, has expanded from the original house to a unique indoor and outdoor museum consisting of six restored buildings, nature trails, birding stations and picnic areas on a 190-acre site.

Miss Ima Hogg bought the Winedale properties in 1933 and was the driving force behind its restoration. She envisioned Winedale as a center for the study of ethnic groups who first settled the state. After donating the buildings with an endowment fund for maintenance to the University of Texas in 1967, she was able to see her dream realized.

The buildings were carefully restored under the supervision of Texas Parks and Wildlife restoration architect Wayne Bell. The furniture, stoneware and wall and ceiling paintings are products of the Texas craft culture. All wood used in the revised buildings came from the property where the original timber had been cut. Even the plants and landscaping were selected to represent the period when the buildings were first used.

The Townsend brothers were the first owners of the Winedale property and were responsible for the original building. In 1840, Captain John York, an Indian fighter and leader of a cavalry legion in the Texas Revolution, became the new owner. York was evidently too busy with his other duties to play a big role in the development of Winedale, but the third owner, Sam Lewis, did.

Lewis doubled the size of the original building and turned it into a gracious home. After expanding the building, he and his wife began taking in travelers from stagecoaches, giving Winedale its reputation as an inn. It was then known as Sam Lewis’ Stopping Place. The surrounding village got the name of Winedale when the German farmers began raising grapes and pressing wine. The Lewis home was eventually called Winedale Inn.

Lewis had a slave plantation at Winedale until 1865, and his family farmed the area until the 1900s.

The Joseph Wagners, a German family, bought the inn and 109 acres in 1882. Their presence accounts for the inn’s combination of English and German features. When Wagner died in 1899, Joseph Wagner Jr. inherited the home and the surrounding land.

Wagner lived alone in the house and operated a combination drygoods and hardware store nearby. The inn deteriorated over the years through neglect until Wagner’s death in 1961. Mrs. Hamel G. Ledbetter bought the property and sold it to Ima Hogg in 1963.

In addition to the Winedale Inn, the property now includes five other restored buildings: a four-square barn, which was part of the Lewis farm buildings before 1869; a barn which has been made into a 280-seat theatre; a typical

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Texas dog-run dwelling house of the 1850s, moved from just south of Round Top and known as Hazel's Lone Oak; the Lauderdale House; and the McGregor-Grimm House.

The Lauderdale House was built in 1858 by James S. Lauderdale and is a typical Texas planter's home of the mid-1850's. Lauderdale settled near Long Point in Washington County, about 20 miles from Winedale, with his family and 54 slaves. The Civil War destroyed the slave-based economy, but the family continued to live in the house. The rest of the house's history is incomplete. In 1965, however, it was threatened with flooding and moved to Winedale and restored for use as a dormitory and conference center.

The McGregor-Grimm House is the most recent addition to Winedale. The two-story Greek-revival house was moved there in 1968 and after extensive restoration work was opened to the public May 3, 1975. The home was originally built in 1861 by Gregor McGregor on a site about 15 miles from Winedale. The downstairs parlor, hall and dining room were elaborately painted with decorative wall and ceiling designs, and many of these are still present. Ima Hogg purchased the home from the Charles Grimm heirs in 1968 and presented it to Winedale.

In recent years, Miss Hogg's concept of Winedale as a study center has become a reality, with more than 30 groups having used the facility as a meeting place. Only non-profit groups are allowed and up to 30 adults can be housed for the night. Groups studying at Winedale stay in the Lauderdale House and eat the good country cooking of Angelene Zwernemann and Marilyn Wagner, two of the special conference staff. They are a probable reason for the popularity of Winedale as a meeting place.

The Winedale Preservation Workshop dealing with architectural restoration meets there every year and each spring a festival marks Winedale's anniversary. Representatives from museums have also met and studied there. Among the University of Texas groups to meet at Winedale, the Shakespearean and Elizabethan classes under Dr. James Ayres seem to be the best established. On several occasions since 1970, Winedale has become the semester-long home for the classes, which study the plays and sometimes produce scenes for the public in the theatre barn. Dr. Ayres and 21 students spent the second summer session of 1975 there and produced plays in August.

For the first time, a semester-length class in restoration architecture was taught at Winedale in the 1975 first summer session. The class was organized by the University School of Architecture and 16 students lived and studied there for four weeks.

The Texas Union has also sponsored trips to Winedale and the Cactus yearbook has held fall workshop sessions there for the past two years.

Plans for Winedale include two more complexes of buildings that will show how rural Texans lived at different economic levels in the 1850s. Volunteer workers hope to make the restored facilities functional as well as historically accurate. Their plans include raising chickens and ducks, making lye soap and cooking festive meals in the style of the 1850s using only antique utensals and the farmhouse fireplace.

At a time when Americans in general are looking back to their early beginnings, Texans may take pleasure in looking at the places and events that make up their own heritage. Winedale is such a place.