

History, Architecture, and Restoration
Bippert-Kueck Home
505 Houston Street
Castroville, Texas

Owned and Restored by
Louis C. And Carole S. Romano

Carole S. Romano
January 31, 1997

Acknowledgements

Many people helped make the Bippert-Kueck restoration a reality. They deserve, not only our thanks and appreciation, but should be honored as well.

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Louis C. and Carole S. Romano

History and Architecture

History of the Bippert-Kueck Home 505 Houston Street, Castroville, Texas

Castroville, Medina County, Texas was named for the founder, French banker Henri Castro, born in Southern France of Portuguese descent, who received an empresarios grant from the Republic of Texas on February 15, 1842. Castro returned to France looking for six hundred families willing to immigrate to Texas. It proved difficult, until he found tenant farmers in the Alsace region of France.

One hundred forty four people, sailed on the ship "Elbro" from Le Havre, France on November 2, 1842 for Galveston, Texas. They landed on January of 1843 and went by ox cart to San Antonio, where they waited for Henri Castro and the other Colonists. Finally, in September of 1844, Henri Castro and the immigrant colony traveled west to Castroville, their journey took almost a week. After crossing the Medina River, a mass was held in thanks for their safe arrival. That area is known as September Square in Castroville.

Between the years 1844-47, over 2,000 immigrants of Belgian, German, and French descent joined the original Alsatian colonists of 1844 in Medina County.

At the present, there are over ninety original structures remaining in Castroville, Texas as a reminder of the early pioneers and 505 Houston Street is one of them.

1799-1847

Jacques Bippert born on March 30, 1799 at Mittelbachwihr (now Riquewihr) in the south Reichenwies, Alsace, France where the Bippert family had lived for more than 400 years. He married a distant relative, Marie Salome, on January 1, 1826. Their two children Jacques 1827 and Marie Salome 1832 were quite young when their mother died on September 11, 1834.

A dowry of "641 francs and 90 Centimes" is recorded at Kaysenburg, France when Marie Magdalene Lett became the bride and second wife of Jacques Bippert on September 8, 1835. Five of their children were born in France: Johannes 7-18-1836; Maude 12-24-1838 (she is omitted from MCH book, but is included in unpublished Bippert family history); Caroline 2-20-1841; Frederic 9-23-1843; and Adolph David 8-20-1845. The last two

children were born in Texas: Henri 1847 and Emil 1849. (Bippert family history does not mention Henri.)

In Antwerp, Belgium on February 26, 1846, Jacques and Magdalene Bippert signed a contract with Henri Castro, Texas Empresario, to immigrate with their family. (Jacques known as Jacob in Texas and Magdolene became Magdalena, will be referred to by their Texas names.)

Jacob Bippert was given 640 acres in Medina County, Texas and "bound to take lands build a house, cultivate at least fifteen acres of land and maintain these lands in cultivation for three years from establishment and to abstain from selling or giving arms to the Indians". Henri Castro retained one half of the land granted "in Consideration of trouble and costs expended." Only three hundred twenty acres was given to the Jacob Bippert family. Son Jacob came with his father, as did children from the second marriage, but daughter Marie Magdalene remained with her paternal grandmother. In 1852, she married Michael Zoeller who had served seven years in the French Army and fought in the 1848 revolution. The next year, they joined her father in Castroville in December of 1853. In 1859, the Zoellers moved to San Antonio.

1847-1869

Medina County records show that Jacob Bippert received Lot 2, Block 4, Range 10 from Henri Castro, for the sum of one dollar, on August 15, 1847. The same day, for his stonework on the first Catholic Church in Castroville, Father C.M. Dubuis gave him Lot 1, Block 4, Range 10. Father Dubuis later became the first Catholic Bishop of Texas.

The original one room home built by Jacob Bippert, C. 1847, was seven and one half feet wide, by twenty one feet long, with fourteen-eighteen inch thick limestone walls. Both exterior and interior walls were plastered. The limestone rock wall construction was started by digging three to four feet into the ground, and continuing approximately eleven feet above ground. The roof was steep in front, sloping asymetrically in back, with little overhang. Roof may have been thatched first and later shingled. The first floor probably was dirt, but by 1990, it was cement and modern lumber. A sheetrock ceiling had been added. Original pine ceiling rafters and sheathing are still in place. Bark from first cuts off trees is still on sheathing.

It is assumed that the original front door is now the rear door in hallway added by H. Kueck, C. 1869. Both front and back doors had a french window on either side. Only front windows remain as the doors of Cabinets in the dining room. The corner fireplace was plastered over in the 1930's, as original Bippert House became both a bath and later a laundry room. All doors and windows were pine.

Behind the house is a hand dug, rock lined well, three feet in diameter, thirty feet deep, with two and half feet of water in the bottom.

1869-1882

On February 1, 1869, Jacob and Magdalena Bippert sold their home, for one hundred and fifty dollars to Henry J. Kueck (Keueck), a 1866 immigrant from Germany, and his wife Catherina. The Kuecks made additions to the house, using the same limestone and plaster materials as the original.

Two rooms and a hallway were added. One room is in front of the Bippert House with the hallway down the side. The other room is equal in size to the Bippert House and room added in front of it.

Both rooms have fireplaces with original pine mantels. Smaller room had a modern repair made to the opening and hearth greatly reducing its size. The other fireplace still has original plaster and arch across the top. All exterior walls were limestone, plastered over, except the two interior pine walls joining the hall.

Those windows remaining were double hung, six over six, pegged and made of wood.

The only original flooring left is pine floor added to room in front of Bippert House. Hall and larger room had floors replaced by modern lumber, were deteriorating by 1990, under a covering of newspaper (dated 1927) and linoleum. Hall ceiling is narrow wooden, bead board, but the two rooms had canvas-linen attached to the rafters. The covering, deteriorated and weighted down by accumulated dirt, was hanging in shreds by 1990.

Two early wooden 1900s additions were termite riddled. The one on the left side of Bippert House, had a shower that caused damage to the fireplace wall. The addition, in back of Kueck large room, leaned on the

house, threatening structural damage to roof. There also were several large, open holes in the roof that allowed water to pour in during rains.

The Kuecks, on September 6, 1882, sold the home to Catherina Kerust for eleven hundred dollars.

Restoration Project

Restoration Project Bippert-Kueck House

1990

505 Houston Street, as one of our sons said, was the definition of a complete catastrophe! When we purchased the home on August 7, 1990, it had not been lived in, on a permanent basis, since 1979. Vagrants and vandals had left papers, beds and pallets of old blankets and rags in the corners, beer cans, wine bottles and other trash, one to three feet high, filled each room.

The many layered composition roof, complete with large holes and a T.V. antennae, leaked. Both interior and exterior plaster was cracked and crumbling. Floors were rotten and or showed termite channels. Doors, knobs and hardware were missing. Light bulbs hung from a cord in the ceilings. The original front door, from Kueck addition, had been replaced with a modern one and the screen door was torn. Vines covering the entire door and frame, kept it from opening. Since there were no keys, we entered through the "vagrants' door" in the wooden addition, as real door was on the ground.

Not only the house, but the property, also showed years of neglect. An overgrowth of the vines and weeds made green pyramids out of the cypress water tank (with a hole in the bottom), the outhouse, wash house, barbeque pit, dead and dying trees. All the fencing was down, as were some of the outbuildings. The deteriorated barn still standing, along with a metal warehouse and garage completed the dismal picture.

In the debris, we found a picture of Sainte Therese of Lisieux, had her reframed and she became our house sainte. When Father Mike Holleron, of St. Louis Church, came to bless our house, on September 2, 1990, he blessed her, too. The property is now called Ferme Sainte Therese in her honor.

Goals

Restoration goals of Bippert-Kueck house were: complete restoration on exterior and interior of home; clean overgrowth, trash and debris from fields and yard; remove metal warehouse, with loading dock, and three underground fuel storage tanks; build an addition for modern living, in the same architectural style, as original home; replicate old barn for use as a garage; and landscape with native Texas and xeriscape plants.

August 1990 - March 1992

The massive cleanup, on the house and fields, began within three days of purchase, continuing until March 1992, with the intent to secure house from elements and vandals, research its history, analyze and inventory the buildings, as well as plan the restoration. We drew on experience from our other restorations and previous trips to Europe. One of the delights was appreciating architecture and french rural architecture is our favorite.

Corrugated metal sheeting patched the holes in the roof, while plywood was placed over the broken or missing windows and doors. Finally, we had a key to the house - the padlock on the front door.

As the trash, newspaper and linoleum covering was removed it became easier to decide removal priorities. The drooping ceiling covers in the Kueck addition and the bathroom fixtures of the Bippert house were first interior projects. TV antennae, on the roof, also came down. Rough grading was done around the house, not only for drainage, but to clear fields of dead trees, fallen fences and other trash.

In November, rye grass was sown and by December the fields were turning green. The green grass inspired us to begin gardening by planting our Christmas tree, an afghanistan pine and a birthday Redbud tree from Ray and Lady, our son and daughter-in-law. Tree pruning, that began in February, was delayed by rain until March. Three pecans in terrible shape, one walnut and four large mesquite were saved by pruning and spraying. Several dead ones were removed. Hackberries were pruned also, as we needed trees.

Other than a new water meter and one yard faucet, there were no other utilities, bathroom plumbing or kitchen facilities, until October of 1993. A 1914 garage was moved from the street side to a new location and converted to a stable. A new complete bathroom was installed reusing the corner sink from the house.

Cleaning the trash out from under the warehouse and loading dock was a hard job. In digging out, we found strips of antique and twisted copper. We were told it probably was the old roof from the St.

Louis Church steeple. It was made into eight light fixtures, with a hand punched Texas Star design, to be used when house was restored.

March was a busy month with the partition removed from large Kueck room, as well as partition and sheetrock ceiling in the Bippert house. The wood was saved for later use and became the cleated doors of the kitchen pantry and the three laundry closet doors.

When Bippert house fireplace was uncovered, a huge stone in the middle of the opening, was backfilled with dirt holding moisture.

The running termites were sprayed on out house, wash house, and chicken coop. Buildings were photographed, measured, then removed. Best of riddled wood was saved to be reused.

Rocks were stacked, cactus on corner and in front yard were weeded and trimmed. We picked up after tree trimming crew and cleaned out 1914 garage.

We did all clean up and removals ourselves, except for grading of fields and bathroom fixtures. All the work was done on weekends. From March 1991 - March 1992, we continued gardening efforts of weeding and mowing, along with planning the restoration and new additions. From my simple drawings to Louis' precise final plans took months.

March 1992 - May 3, 1995

Major restoration began on Bippert-Kueck original house in March. Steve Persyn, an engineer, advised and prepared plans for foundations inside home and new addition, as well as, beam in large Kueck room.

A permit for removal of the two wooden additions, leaning on Bippert house and Kueck additions, was secured. After the two additions were removed, the roof was sealed with tar paper and plastic.

At the same time, the underground fuel tanks were registered with the State of Texas and removed according to their guidelines.

The entire property was fenced, using cedar posts same as

existing fencing, but with field fencing instead of barbed wire.

Roof

Roof was repaired with existing shingles keeping the original roofline height and ceiling the same as early Bippert-Kueck construction. On the interior, shingles and rafters are exposed on sloped lower end.

Our new addition was tied to the historic structure by a glassed gallery, using lumber saved from wooden additions. An early Texas rafter and shingle roof was also used in the new construction.

Floors

Deteriorated wood floors in Bippert house and Kueck addition, were removed and dirt dug out by hand for an interior slab. The soil was treated and waterproofed, before the pour, to end the termite damage. New wood floor of Georgia pine, same width as original, was installed on screeds over the slab in the large Kueck addition. All electrical wiring to wall plugs was run in a conduit under the wood floor. Limestone rock flooring was used in the hall and Bippert house, as in earlier Castroville homes. The only original flooring is in the smaller Kueck room. Extraordinary care was taken, during plaster removal and replastering, to protect it and keep floor dry. Winterthur, DuPont museum in Delaware, recommended cleaning with soap and water, then waxing with Butcher wax. Floor was so dirty, it took three washings, all by hand, as the wood was too fragile for machines or even mops, then hand waxed, as well. Some baseboards in this room had to be replaced, but sanding sealer helped them blend with the old painted ones.

Walls and ceilings

All interior and exterior walls were originally limestone and covered with lime plaster. All cracked and crumbling plaster, both inside and out, was removed, rock repairs made and then replastered with lime plaster. The ceiling between the joists were plastered and left

the natural color. All walls were painted, the exterior original color was replicated.

Doors, windows and shutters

Original french windows, from front of Bippert house, were used as a model for all new doors and windows. Since existing windows were either missing or deteriorated, all were replaced. French doors were also milled for front of house, as existing ones were single, modern and in terrible condition. The new doors and windows are cypress and have a wash of paint and sanding sealer to protect, but also show grain. Some of the outside door and window frames needed repair due to termite or water damage. This was done with old lumber and using the same router bead found throughout the trim. The interior doors, window frames and sills were covered with sanding sealer to save old paint and protect the wood. Shutters with broken or missing pieces were repaired by making the paddles or frames on the job as were all cleated doors.

Fireplaces

All three chimneys were cleaned prior to repair of rock and replastering. Large Kueck room's fireplace has original plaster and arch. Hearth was removed and numbered before slab excavation, then replaced. Sanding sealer put on mantel, saved the faux bois paint. Smaller Kueck room had modern repair, of portland cement based plaster, which was removed from opening and hearth. After rock repair and tuck pointing, it was not re-plastered. Mantel paint was also saved by a coat of sanding sealer. Bippert fireplace re-plastered both outside and inside except for the hearth, and the metal flue pipe on the exterior was removed from the chimney.

Electrical, heating and air-conditioning

Electrical outlets were kept to a minimum. Two floor outlets were put in Bippert house, leaving walls undisturbed. Candles are only source of light used in this room and smaller Kueck room.

Many of the heating/air-conditioning outlets are disguised in rafters in large Kueck room and Bippert house. The ductwork runs across Bippert-Kueck roof and is hidden by new gallery roof. Hall wood ceiling, lowered six inches, accomodates ductwork for Kueck rooms. A security system was installed as inconspicuously as possible.

Landscaping

Like many immigrants, we also transported and transplanted favorite plants and flowers from our home at 228 Primera Dr., Olmos Park, where we gardened for twenty seven years to 306 W. Kings Highway and then on to 842 Estes Ave.. Those treasured camillias, snowflakes, violets, fern, daffodils, lillies, agapanthus, bearded and spuria iris joined native Texas and xeriscape plants in Castroville.

Since 1990, twelve live oaks (large one, a birthday gift to Louis from the children), fifty six mountain laurels, five afghanistan pines (all Christmas trees-three from San Antonio homes), six crepe myrtles and four redbuds (Ray, Lady and Lee's birthday gift to me) have been planted.

Hedges, of fifty-seven red tipped photinia, were planted as a screen from driveway, stable and barn. Other shrubs include: nineteen ceniza; twelve oleanders and twenty-five antique mutabilis roses (ten were my birthday present from the children).

Six coral honeysuckle, four trumpet and eight confederate jasmine vines, along with Xeriscape plants lantana, Mexican salvia, oregano and coreopsis attract hummingbirds and butterflies.

One's mettle certainly is tested planting a garden during a drought, requiring hand watering. Most of my watering was between 8:00 p.m. and 11:30 p.m., as it was cooler and more beneficial to the plants.

Last thoughts

All of the original goals of restoration have been realized, yet landscaping and maintenance will be ongoing. Plans for restoring the cypress water tank and Bippert well are in the near future. Hopefully, a much needed potting shed-greenhouse will also be built and the

playhouse to be restored for the fourth time.

Much of the wood saved from the older structures was re-used, as were bath fixtures. Rust was removed from the bottom of the cast iron, clawfooted tub with an electric wire brush, repainted and installed in new guest bath. Bead board was re-used for wainscoting in guest bath and in new kitchen for cabinets and doors. All interior and exterior repairs on Bippert-Kueck house were made with the old wood. Antique door knobs are still being bought to replace the missing.

The integrity and physical appearance was restored to the historic structure. If our new addition was removed, the Bippert-Kueck house is intact, with no alteration to the shape, size, height and with same type building materials used.

My vision for old house restorations would never be completed without Louis' engineering degree and experience. His constant supervision helped solve all restoration problems and moved the job forward. With his skill, the Bippert-Kueck house is ready to stand for the next one hundred and fifty years.

Carole S. Romano
January 31, 1997

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