

The Historic Rock Fences of Blanco County

By Laura Knott

The 125-year old rock fences of the Texas Hill Country are an important component of the historic agricultural landscape of the area, yet a lack of understanding of their importance in contributing to the narrative of local place is threatening their very existence as a historic resource. The economic pressures in this troubled agricultural region of Texas have led to either the removal of fences for sale by the ton, reuse of the rocks for other projects, or simple lack of maintenance, leading to collapse and loss of integrity.

Changes in the economy since World War II have made it difficult to make a living as a farmer or rancher in the Hill Country, so communities have been exploring heritage tourism as a possible solution to economic woes. Therefore, it is becoming important that all historic resources be identified, researched, and plans to preserve or restore these resources be implemented. Although historic buildings are being identified and preserved with the help of federal and state agencies, cultural landscape resources, such as historic rock fences, have not yet been widely recognized as an important component of the historic fabric of the region.

In the Hill Country, although these fences are popularly known as “German fences,” attributed to the 19th century German immigrants to the area, there is no such type fence found in the European origin regions of these immigrants. In fact, the fence types found in the area appear to be of British origin, indicating probable influence by Anglo-American Upland South immigrants in the area, who, although not known to build many fences themselves, preferring the open range, brought their British fencing technology with them from Tennessee, Kentucky, and northern Alabama and Georgia. One of my research questions is related to how this fence technology was transmitted by the Anglo farmers and ranches to the Germans, if not by example.

This question of the origins of these fences and an exploration of related preservation issues is the basis of research for my master’s thesis in Historic Preservation at the University of Texas. In order to focus and intensify my investigation, I am concentrating on Blanco County, on the eastern edge of the Texas Hill Country. Blanco County was home to both German and Anglo-American immigrants and may prove to be an important point of the transmission of this fencing technology between the two groups. The research work includes a “windshield survey” of the rock fences found along county roads, as well as more detailed surveys of fence complexes on a few local ranches. Survey information will be supported and expanded by deed research and other investigations of county history.

Regarding preservation issues, I will be looking to outside examples for ideas on initiatives that might educate and train the local population in preserving or restoring their rock fences. Many states, especially in New England, have initiated legislation which penalizes the removal of historic rock fences in the public right-of-way, especially for road-widening projects. In Kentucky, not only has legislation been put in place, but the Dry Stone Conservancy has been organized to both educate the public and train interested persons in the preservation and restoration of their local rock fences. As a result, I plan to develop written guides to the history of preservation of these rock fences for local distribution.