

## **A Call to Action: Cedar Creek Cemetery in Bastrop, Texas**

Located in Bastrop County, Texas, Cedar Creek, a small unincorporated rural town, lies off Highway 21. Cedar Creek used to be part of the Old Camino Real also known as the Kings highway where many people traveled through.<sup>1</sup> Timothy Reed, master's student of history at the University of Texas at Arlington notes, "El Camino Real de los Tejas was a series of roads founded by Spanish colonizers in Texas that followed previously established Native American trails."<sup>2</sup> The original path crossed adjacent to Pat Cunningham's property. She believed it was the perfect place to retire to after living in Missouri most of her life. While gardening along her property in March 2021, she discovered white iris flowers along a path that led deeper into the overgrown woods, where she found grave markers and crosses with Spanish surnames etched in stone. Cunningham took pictures and went to the Bastrop Historical Museum for help.<sup>3</sup> The Bastrop County Historical Society (BCHS) collects archival documents and photos that help preserve community histories and aids researchers within the county.

In April, Cunningham read in the newspaper that a new development of mixed-used homes would break ground near her property and cemetery. Cunningham raced to stall the developers from razing the Old Latinx Cedar Creek Cemetery. The builders only spoke Spanish and did not understand Cunningham, so she waved them down and showed them the tombstones. Construction stopped and Cunningham devoted time to securing the cemetery's boundary with pink tape. Since then, the developers have kept their distance and set up a fence to protect the site from any damage. However, Cunningham did not stop there. She filed a notice of the existence of an abandoned cemetery and submitted it to the Bastrop County clerk. With help from Latinos in Heritage Conservation (LHC), Cunningham applied for historical designation in March 2023 and is currently waiting for an answer from the Texas Historical Commission (THC).<sup>4</sup>

Why should we care about the people of the past? What can we learn from those communities? According to the Texas Historical Commission, "Cemeteries can reveal

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Ross Reed, "El Camino Real, From Old Trails to Modern Highways 1890-1945" (master's thesis, University of Texas Arlington, December 2020), 2.

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Kysar, "Carol's Choices," *Bastrop Museum and Visitor Center of the Bastrop County Historical Society* (Summer 2022), 1.

<sup>4</sup>Pat Cunningham, interviewed by Christella Maldonado, July 13, 2023, Cedar Creek, Bastrop, TX , transcript, Latinos in Heritage Conservation.

information about historic events, religions, lifestyles, and genealogy.”<sup>5</sup> Currently, the THC has only recorded 14,000 cemeteries in Texas.<sup>6</sup> Communities across Texas honor their loved ones typically tending to the burial grounds, but as time goes by, the grounds can become neglected and abandoned. As new developments continue to seep into rural areas in Texas, the more likely construction workers and builders will encounter unincorporated cemeteries. (Unincorporated is a common term used alongside abandoned cemeteries). Currently, no laws protect the historic Texan graveyards. The story of Cedar Creek Cemetery is a call to action to preserve the past.

### **What happens when no one cares?**

An overarching theme of the Latinx Preservation Advocacy Toolkit is the loss of heritage between generations. Mel Escobar, Spring 2023 GIS (Geographic Information System) LHC fellow, highlights abandoned [Mexican cemeteries in Texas](#) which were preserved by community members. When no one cares or tends to historic cemeteries, they become forgotten, abandoned, and overgrown. Escobar notes that cemeteries are sacred spaces to honor our loved ones and remember their legacies. It is important to protect and preserve these cultural spaces because they link us to our near past and reveal histories not found in traditional archives.<sup>7</sup>

### **How can we protect historic/cultural cemeteries?**

LHC’s Latinx Preservation Advocacy Toolkit demystifies historic preservation and makes it accessible to anyone who wants to protect places of historic and cultural importance. Certain sections of the Toolkit are directed towards community members and other sections are directed toward youth. There are many people and organizations within Texas working to preserve important historic and cultural spaces, but it is important that the next generation of preservationists/community activists continue to protect and advocate for Latinx spaces. Historic preservation has often followed many White Supremist and elitist practices and methods. As defined by the National Education Association, White Supremacy is “a form of racism centered upon the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds and that

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<sup>5</sup> “Cemetery Preservation,” Texas Historical Commission, <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/cemetery-preservation>, accessed August 7, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> “Cemetery Preservation,” Texas Historical Commission, <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/cemetery-preservation>, accessed August 7, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Mel Escobar, “Preserving Mexican Cemeteries in Texas,” <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/225d31de132d4c8db38ccec69493cfe1>.

whites should politically, economically, and socially dominate non-whites.”<sup>8</sup> This has limited the field’s reach and deterred community members from being involved. However, anyone can be involved in preserving a historic site, place, or cultural landscape. To participate, you do not need to have a college education or be a preservationist. Throughout the Toolkit, you will be given tools to support your advocacy efforts. If you are interested in becoming a professional preservationist, there are degree programs for you.

As Cunningham demonstrated, everyone can make a difference, big or small. When asked what prompted her to save the cemetery from developers she responded, “The bulldozers. The tombstones. That was someone's family.”<sup>9</sup> If you learn of an unmarked or unincorporated historic cemetery, ask for help, go to your historic preservation office or local museum, and gather community support. As Cunningham continued to research her property’s history, she met Debbie Wahrmond who is the Cemetery Chair for the Bastrop County Historical Commission, reminds us that, “their [people of the past] history is intertwined with yours.”<sup>10</sup> Debbie’s husband, Jeff Wahrmond, though not an expert in the field, found a way to still make an impact by learning how to clean and repair monuments and headstones by attending local workshops and training. Now Jeff dedicates his free time to conserving them.<sup>11</sup> If you are interested in learning about cemetery conservation reach out to your local historical society or the state historical commissions and inquiry about workshops or seminars relating to conservation and preservation practices.

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<sup>8</sup> National Education Association, “White Supremacy Cultural Resources” <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/white-supremacy-culture-resources>. Accessed August 16, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Pat Cunningham oral history, Cedar Creek.

<sup>10</sup> Debbie Wahrmond, interviewed by Christella Maldonado, July 13, 2023, Cedar Creek, Bastrop, Texas, transcript, Latinos in Heritage Conservation.

<sup>11</sup> Jeff Wahrmond, interviewed by Christella Maldonado, July 13, 2023, Cedar Creek, Bastrop, TX, transcript, Latinos in Heritage Conservation.

**Cosme N. Hinojoza**



Image of Cosme N. Hinojoza's Headstone <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Image courtesy of Pat Cunningham.

Cosme N. Hinojoza is one of many interred in the unincorporated Old Latinx Cedar Creek Mexican cemetery. Born in 1852 in Mier Tamaulipas, Mexico, Hinojosa grew up near the U.S. Mexico border. By 1874, he married Teresa Perez in Mexico before looking to *El Norte* for work and a better life, however, it is unknown what officially prompted the Hinojosa family to immigrate to Texas. By 1880, Hinojosa appeared in the US Federal Census with two daughters and a son in Duval, Texas, near present day Nuevo Laredo, Texas.<sup>13</sup> Teresa tended to their home and her children, while Cosme worked on the farm as a shepherd.<sup>14</sup> At the age of 59, Teresa passed away in Webb, Texas (about 80 miles from Duval) in January 1914 after battling tuberculosis for two years.<sup>15</sup>

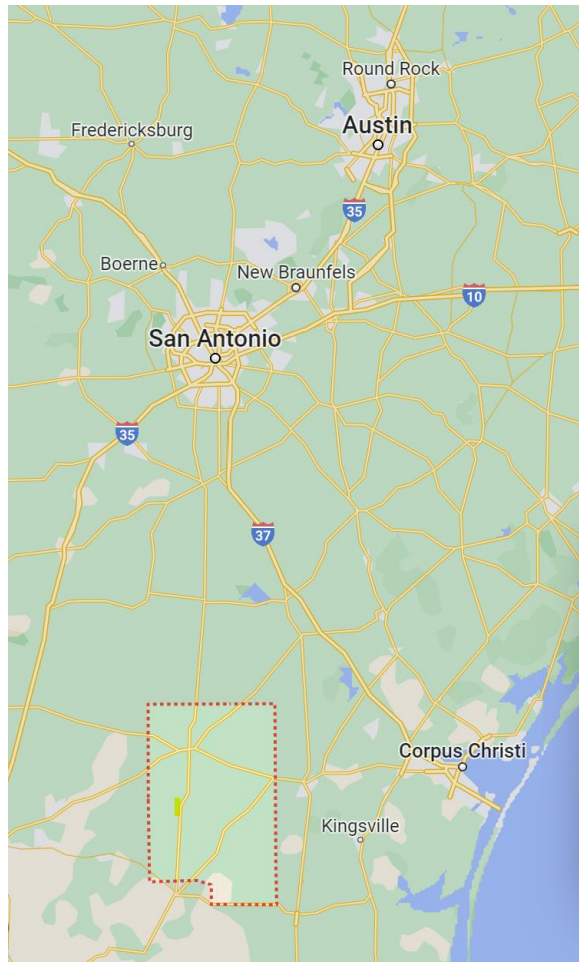
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<sup>13</sup> Year: 1880; Census Place: *Precinct 2, Duval, Texas*; Roll: 1300; Page: 251D; Enumeration District: 050 Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *1880 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010. 1880 U.S. Census Index provided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints © Copyright 1999 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved. All use is subject to the limited use license and other terms and conditions applicable to this site.

Original data: Tenth Census of the United States, 1880. (NARA microfilm publication T9, 1,454 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>14</sup> "United States Census, 1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MFNQ-2FZ> : 15 January 2022), Cosme Hinojosa, Justice Precinct 2, Duval, Texas, United States; citing enumeration district , sheet , NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.), FHL microfilm.

<sup>15</sup> Texas Department of State Health Services; Austin Texas, USA; *Texas Death Certificates, 1903–1982*.



Courtesy of Google Maps

On April 9, 1921, Cosme passed away (likely from old age), in Bastrop County roughly 200 miles away from Duval.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps, Cosme and his family traveled along the Old Camino Real. The image shows his headstone which has remained intact and legible. However, his full life story and that of his family remains a mystery. *Why did they move to Duval, Texas? What prompted them to move to the United States? Why is Hinojoza buried in Bastrop when records showed he lived in Duval most of his life?* When it comes to historical research, we must embrace the fact that we will never know everything about the past. While the past will always hold some mysteries, more research is needed to understand the lives of the Mexican people

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<sup>16</sup> "Find A Grave Index," database, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6NL8-W31D> : 12 September 2022), Cosme Hinojoza, ; Burial, Cedar Creek, Bastrop, Texas, United States of America, Cedar Creek Latin Mexican Cemetery; citing record ID 243107314, *Find a Grave*, <http://www.findagrave.com>; Year: 1920; Census Place: *Justice Precinct 3, Bastrop, Texas*; Roll: T625\_1774; Page: 12B; Enumeration District: 23.

buried in this abandoned cemetery. It is culturally significant and important that we keep the stories alive or else we risk facing erasure of our cultural knowledge and traditions.

As you take in the story of the Ceder Creek Cemetery, we ask you to consider in what ways do you keep cultural traditions alive in your family?

**Lesson Plans:**