

# THE BRONCO

The Newsletter of Blackwell School Alliance

Summer 2016



## Blackwell School Oral History Project GROWS!

The Blackwell School Alliance (BSA) is set to greatly expand our oral history collection this fall with a new partnership. You may remember that in 2014 and 2015, New York-based artist Lisa Bateman conducted more than 30 interviews with former Blackwell School students and recorded their stories to better understand the history of the Blackwell School. Now she has applied for—and received—another grant from Humanities Texas to grow our oral history collection.

Ms. Bateman connected us with Dr. Yolanda Leyva and the Oral History Institute at the University of Texas at El Paso. Dr. Leyva and her colleagues have agreed to work with the BSA to record interviews with 50 more alumni in the next year. Plus, they will properly catalog and archive our collection and make our interviews available on their website as The Blackwell School Collection.

In addition to the Humanities Texas grant, we expect additional funding from a non-profit charitable organization who has supported us in the past. If this additional funding comes through, we can buy equipment to support doing better quality interviews. And we would like to host a visit by Dr. Leyva and her team to Marfa to learn more about the Blackwell School firsthand.

Now we need Blackwell exes to volunteer to be interviewed. *See page 5...*

## What Exactly IS Oral History?

Everyone has a story to tell. We organize our memories and experiences into stories. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences—conducted through a recorded interview. Everyday memories of everyday people have historical importance. Oral historians gather these memories and stories and place them into an accurate historical context, storing them appropriately for use by scholars—today and into the future. Oral history projects are often organized around a shared heritage, event, or experience—in this case, the Blackwell School.

Oral history allows for the recording of perspectives of people who might not otherwise appear in the historical records. Certainly the history of the Blackwell School cannot be told without the voices of those directly involved—students, faculty and staff, neighbors, and community members. Newspaper articles, speeches, and government documents may reveal useful information, but those kinds of sources often neglect more personal and private experiences. Through oral history, we can learn about the hopes, feelings, aspirations, disappointments, family histories, and personal memories of the people who were there.

### *Blackwell Memories*

Audry Sofge Mimms, a Blackwell School fourth grade teacher in 1934, wrote, "At this time, it was during the dust bowl days; I can remember putting wet newspapers in the class room windows so we could get a breath of fresh air."

What do YOU remember?

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## Letter from Gretel Enck

*Why would an Anglo woman in her 40s who only moved to Marfa a little over a year ago want to get involved with the Blackwell School?* I've been asked that question a few times, and the answer isn't complicated: I am inspired by the story of former students getting together to save a piece of their history that also happens to be a significant piece of American history.

OK, the answer is a bit longer than that. I believe in the power of stories. I like to write in my free time, both non-fiction essays and fiction. I also have experience in providing ways for people to tell their own stories—both through working at other historic sites and through my work with orphan children in the Peace Corps in Romania. Claiming our voices, taking back our voices, is a powerful act. And the stories of the Blackwell School are an important piece of Marfa history. Plus, I like to organize and plan stuff. And if that weren't enough, the people involved with the Blackwell School are wonderful. So that's a bit of my motivation to say yes to being the President of the Blackwell School Alliance.

You may also be curious to know what I hope to do as President. My first goal is to engage our Board in a conversation about the purpose and goals of the Blackwell School Alliance. We were founded to save this beautiful and historic 1880s building—the original school. We also articulated early on that we wanted to be a center of Hispanic culture and history for the Marfa community. These goals are still in the forefront of our mission, and we continue to

work toward them. In addition, I hope you will all agree that the stories (*stories*—do you see a theme?) are equally critical to our mission. Every person involved in the Blackwell School—students, teachers, families, neighbors—had his or her own experience. The mosaic of stories **IS** the history of the Blackwell School. The building is the precious vessel that contains the stories that brings the history to life.

Other projects that can develop from the gathering of stories include curriculum-based lesson plans for local schools to use to teach about the Blackwell School (including field trips), enhanced exhibits at Blackwell that share these stories with visitors, and critical primary source material for researchers now and into the future. We are starting new partnerships to get help from experts in all of these endeavors. We can't do this alone, nor do we have to.

And a final note: I am regularly amazed by how much work has been done to save the Blackwell School. The work that Joe Cabezuela and all of the Board members and supporters have accomplished in the past ten years is motivating—that we have this building, that it is stable and functional, that it is filled with photographs and memorabilia and memories, that it is recognized by the State of Texas as worthy of our preservation, and that our community values our efforts—these did not happen without a lot of work. So thanks to all of you for doing more than caring, for putting your care into action. It mattered and it matters still. I'm thrilled to be a part of this.

## Open Hours at the Blackwell School

The Blackwell School continues to be open to the public every Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. We screen *Children of Giant* every Saturday at 1:00 p.m.

## Marfa Lights Weekend is Fast Approaching

We hope you have plans to be in Marfa the first weekend of September to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Marfa Lights Festival. This year looks better than ever with the headlining musical act being Tejano singer and accordionist **Michael Salgado**. Salgado plays Saturday night, and the whole weekend features fantastic musical acts, food booths, arts and crafts vendors, the Saturday morning parade—AND BEER!

The Blackwell School Alliance once again will hold the only TABC license for beer sales at the festival. So come see us to say hello and get your beer (more than 15 kinds—plus water, t-shirts, and other specialty merchandise). We will also have a hospitality tent where Blackwell exes can enjoy a seat, shade, and the company of friends.

The Marfa Lights Festival gets underway Friday, September 2, and ends Sunday, September 4—Labor Day Weekend. The festival is hosted by the Marfa Chamber of Commerce. Musical performances include rising Texas country

artist Cameran Nelson on Friday night, the fabulous Resonators from Presidio before Salgado on Saturday evening, regional bands, and local favorites Primo Carrasco and David Beebe to close out the weekend on Sunday afternoon.

The festival takes place at the Presidio County Courthouse in downtown Marfa, and all the entertainment is free.

In addition, the Marfa Shorthorns will host the Sanderson Eagles in football action at Martin Field the evening of Friday, September 2.

If that weren't enough, the Blackwell School will be open to the public both Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Please stop in.

Don't miss the most fun weekend of the year in Marfa. And don't miss the opportunity to support the Blackwell School Alliance at our beer tent. Kind of a win-win, right? See you soon!

<http://marfachamber.org/menu/>



“Marfa is known for an unexplained phenomenon that takes place after sunset, when mysterious lights occasionally appear in the desert east of town. While the lights are viewable year-round, the festival named for them only appears once each year—Labor Day weekend.”

*Texas Highways*

## Spring Open House and a Fond Farewell

Our Spring Open House on Saturday, May 7, provided the opportunity to recognize retiring BSA President Joe Cabezuela for his years of service to the organization. Joe will remain a Board member, but he decided it was time to resign the Presidency. In his nine years as President, Joe has overseen the founding of the BSA; the acquisition of the historic, original school building; the designation of the building as a Texas State Historic Landmark; and many improvements to the building. He leaves behind some very big shoes to fill.

The dust storms held off until after the party at the Blackwell School back on that Saturday in May, and community members were able to enjoy the Spring Open House and fundraiser with cheeseburgers for sale, live music, and the raffle of a state-of-the-art 60" TV.

The name of the lucky winner of the television was Ava Chavez of Marfa.

Many people toured the school that day and viewed a presentation of photographs of Blackwell students and activities. One former student was able to provide some names to go with faces in the photographs. Although the Blackwell School is open to the public every Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., the Open House brought together former students to reminisce and share stories.

The Blackwell School Alliance thanks Jose Alvarado and Hispanic Veterans Display of Dallas for donating the Sharp Aquos 60" television for the raffle, Porters Thriftway for donating the delicious burgers and buns for the cheeseburger sale, our musicians Primo Carrasco and David Beebe, and all the volunteers who helped make the event possible.

**Mario Rivera (left, Vice President of the Blackwell School Alliance) presents Joe Cabezuela with a plaque of appreciation. In part, the plaque reads, "In appreciation for your dedicated leadership and ongoing service in preserving the legacy of the Blackwell School. Your valued contributions make a difference to the community of Marfa."**



## We Need Your Membership

You surely have read in the pages of this newsletter about the fundraising, donations, and grants we receive that enable us to do projects: oral history, building restoration, and more. We are blessed to get money to do these things.

Yet we still need you! Membership dues cover the operational costs needed to run the Blackwell School and the Alliance—expenses like our utility payments, website services, the printing and mailing of this newsletter, office supplies, and the cost of materials in creating new exhibits.

The Blackwell School Alliance is a completely volunteer operated organization, including the volunteers who staff open hours each week. All money

collected from members is used to further the mission of our organization.

The membership year runs from July 1 to June 30. Many of you have renewed your membership, and we thank you. We are so glad you are a part of our team. If you haven't renewed yet, or if you would like to join, do it today!

Membership isn't just about the money—although that is important. It is also your vote of confidence that you believe in the mission of the Blackwell School Alliance and you believe that the Blackwell School should be preserved.

25 bucks isn't much, folks. But it means the world to us. Thank you.

**Membership is \$25 yearly**

**Please mail a check to:**  
*The Blackwell School Alliance*  
**PO Box 417**  
**Marfa, TX 79843**

**OR**

**Pay on our website at**  
<http://www.blackwellschool.org/#!/support/c6kj>  
**Scroll down to the *Donate* button below the t-shirts**



## Tell Us Your Story

### Blackwell Exes, Friends, and Neighbors...

As you read on the front page, the Blackwell School Alliance has recently entered into a partnership with UTEP to expand and make available to students and scholars our Oral History Archive. Oral History is the recorded interviews with people who were part of a shared experience—in this case, a connection to the Blackwell School.

Everyone has a story to tell. Please tell yours.

Sign up to be interviewed in El Paso in October and November or sign up to be interviewed in Marfa October through January.

Contact Gretel Enck to make an appointment at [gretel.enck@zoho.com](mailto:gretel.enck@zoho.com) or 432.295.3359. Learn more about the Oral History Project at [www.blackwellschool.org/#!/oral-history/kmlqi](http://www.blackwellschool.org/#!/oral-history/kmlqi)

*Your Story Matters!*



# The Lost History of the Blackwell School

*By Lonn Taylor*

A few Saturdays ago I attended the Blackwell School Alliance Spring Open House and had a chance to say goodbye to Joe Cabezuela, one of the alliance's founders and its president for the past nine years. Cabezuela, who graduated from Blackwell in 1960, five years before the school closed, has been the main man behind the preservation of the old school building, overseeing its acquisition from the Marfa Independent School District after it was abandoned, securing its designation as a Texas Historic Landmark, and obtaining funds and donations that have resulted in many improvements to the aging adobe building. Cabezuela is moving to El Paso, but he will continue to serve on the alliance board.

Blackwell served as the elementary school for the Hispanic population of Marfa from 1889 until 1965. While Texas law did not require the segregation of Mexican-American school children in the way that it did African-American children, most Texas school districts established separate elementary schools for Mexican-Americans, reflecting the prejudices of the last century. In Marfa, where in 1920, 74 percent of the population was Hispanic, that school was Blackwell. There was no separate Hispanic high school because it was assumed that no Mexican-American children would continue to high school, even though a young man named Juan de la Cruz Machuca became the first Hispanic to graduate from Marfa High School in 1911, and by the 1960s nearly all Blackwell students went on to Marfa High. Blackwell was closed in January 1965 when a new elementary school was opened and Marfa's schools were finally integrated.

The building that the alliance has preserved was apparently built in the 1880s as a Methodist church. Old photographs of it show a Romanesque front door and a bell tower, and teachers who taught there in the 1920s referred to it as "the cathedral." According to a memoir written by Carmen Mendias in 1940, the first classes were taught there on weekdays in 1889 by a Mr. Taft, while church services were held in the building on Sundays. By 1908 the building had become a Marfa public school with two teachers, and by 1947 the campus had grown to include four buildings and 17 classrooms, with 16 teachers and 600 students. Blackwell School was a significant Marfa institution.

In spite of its importance to the community, researching the history of Blackwell School is a Herculean task and a historian's nightmare. The early records of the Marfa Independent School District have been destroyed or lost, and there is no entry at all for Blackwell School in the index of Cecilia Thompson's two-volume *History of Marfa and Presidio County*, published in 1985 and considered to be the bible of Presidio County history.

Joe Cabezuela and Richard Williams of the Marfa and Presidio County Museum have done a heroic job of assembling newspaper clippings about the school, and those and the memories of students are about all anyone has to go on at present.

Some of the most valuable newspaper clippings are a series of articles that ran in the *Big Bend Sentinel* in the late 1980s under the heading "Blackwell School Memoirs," evidently the outgrowth of the reunions organized by the Blackwell Ex-Students Association. The memoirs were contributed by both

**Lonon Taylor is a retired historian and curator who lives in Fort Davis. These days he writes a weekly column called *The Rambling Boy* for the *Big Bend Sentinel* focused on aspects of Texas history that he finds interesting and timely.**

**Recently he wrote two articles about the Blackwell School. We thought the readers of this newsletter would be interested, and Mr. Taylor readily agreed to let us reprint them. Contained on these two pages is the first article, published on June 2, 2016.**

**The second article, published on July 21, 2016, speculates on the significant contents of a Blackwell School museum if the story of the school were told in the context of the wider history of Spanish-speaking people in Marfa.**

**You can read that article at <http://bigbendnow.com/2016/07/the-rambling-boy-120/>**

former students and former teachers, and they have absolute gems of information scattered through them. John Fortner described the school building as he first saw it in 1914, a three-room adobe house with a belfry, a coalhouse, and two outside toilets. The main building was divided into one long room in front and two smaller classrooms in back, each with its own outside entrance. This is the earliest description of the building that I have been able to find. Myrtle Barnett Shepard recalled teaching at Blackwell from 1919 to 1921, when she and the principal shared responsibility for 100 students, some of whom were older than she was. She was paid \$60 a month. Quintin Williams mentioned a principal in the late 1940s who was known to the students as Cara de Tecolote, Owl Face. Betty Newsome, who taught at Blackwell in the late 1950s, remembered that her girl students played jacks at recess and taught her games with them called Tortilla and Tarantula, while she taught them Around the World and Sky Rocket. Many memoir writers recalled that corporal punishment for infringement of school rules was applied from the fourth grade on, the instrument being a paddle that was called “the board of education,” a common term in schools all over the country when corporal punishment was the norm.

In the absence of documents, the Blackwell School Association has launched a unique oral history project to try to capture memories of the school and incorporate them into a public presentation. Lisa Bateman, a New York artist and a faculty member at Pratt Institute, has made four trips to Marfa and conducted 35 interviews with former students. Her goal is to incorporate the words of the interviews into what she describes as “a site-specific audio art installation” that will be installed in the school building. She has successfully

completed a similar project at a former African-American schoolhouse in North Carolina. While Bateman realizes that oral history is as much about memory as it is about history – she told me that she has recorded so many versions of one incident that she thinks it may have happened several times – her interviews will provide invaluable clues to historians who may be trying to piece the history of Blackwell and Marfa’s Hispanic community together.

Joe Cabezuela’s successor as president of the Blackwell School Alliance is Gretel Enck, an energetic woman who moved to Marfa last year from Colorado and is employed by the National Park Service at Fort Davis National Historic Site. Enck brings to her new position many years of experience with the Park Service, including five years at Manzanar National Historic Site in California, where Japanese-Americans were interned during World War II. Those years, she says, were her inspiration for wanting to be involved with issues of civil rights and social justice, issues that are relevant to Blackwell’s segregated past.

Thousands of tourists come to Marfa every year, drawn by the town’s reputation as an artistic mecca. They stay a few days, sample the restaurants, the galleries, and the Chinati Foundation, and leave without any sense that Marfa has a thriving Hispanic community that has been part of the town since the 1880s and has a story to tell. With Enck’s guidance, and the help of all of the people who have dedicated their time and talent to maintaining Blackwell over the years, Blackwell School could become the place to tell that story. It is definitely worth telling, and it is a story our visitors need to hear.



“The Board of Education”—  
part of the collection at the  
Blackwell School.



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