

A River Through Time

REVEALING HISTORY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA



The Ice House Museum

www.icehousemuseum.org

Silsbee, Texas

The Ice House Museum embraces a multidisciplinary approach to exhibits, including the use of media and technology to engage our audiences and enhance their experiences. Our most common approach to reach virtual audiences is our Facebook page. It is not enough for us to simply present information, but it is our desire to reach into the experiences and lives of our patrons to evolve our exhibits into rich and authentic experiences. We have found social media to be a perfect vehicle for interaction and sharing of knowledge to not only enhance the audience's experience, but to make history more complete.

During the spring of 2022 we created an exhibit called **"1820 Flatboat on The Neches River"**. Created through a Texas Humanities Grant, we built a life-sized 1820 cypress flat boat in our main gallery. In 1829, Benjamin Franklin Richardson floated the Neches River by flatboat from Jasper to what is now known as Evadale to become one of the first pioneers to settle and operate a ferry crossing in the dense and dangerous "Big Thicket".

It is our priority to make our museum a "living museum", or a museum that is relevant, accessible and meaningful to the people living today. By using our Facebook page, we are not only able to make the exhibit interesting, but intimate in that it represents the real people who left still-visible marks on our land and our memories.

These “marks” are multi-generational, and to make the history relevant it is necessary to peel back the generations one at a time. Benjamin Richardson’s ferry crossing was constructed at a river crossing on an existing ancient road. Later, a railroad trestle crossed the river next to the ferry. A century later in 1930, a bridge was built to replace the ferry, connected to a raised wooden road that traversed the river bottom making it still passable during high water. Today the bridge is half collapsed into the Neches River in a very remote location, and the ruins of the elevated road still hang in pieces in the wilds of the Neches River Bottom. The railroad bridge is still used; however, it stands on the original swing mechanism that was constructed to allow steamboat passage in the earliest days of coexistence with the railroad.

In an extended Facebook conversation that lasted from May to October 2022, participants embraced their history with much more enthusiasm and understanding than they would have had by simply visiting the flatboat exhibit in the museum. More importantly, the people enhanced our exhibit by adding snippets of information passed down to them from their families. Additionally, some post followers shared their expertise in the railroad, in bridge engineering, of the Neches River and The Big Thicket, and of people who remembered the bridge before it collapsed. We even had a post follower who worked for TxDOT, who researched their information and provided us with a never-before- seen early photo of the ferry site! We believe that this is the most important part of a living museum. We captured and recorded MUCH more history than the museum originally had through the Facebook conversation.

This conversation was shared as many as 650 times in several posts, including video, photography (vintage and new), drone footage, and oral and written history. The Facebook post was picked up by local media who follow us, and they published the story in newspapers and on a Morning News Program. This resulted in tens of thousands of people actively engaged in the story over 5 months. Many of the people that visited the museum to see the 1820 Flatboat Exhibit came from a distance because they had been following it on Facebook and wanted to see it in person. What began as a study of the flat boat as a method of travel in the 1800’s, evolved through Facebook to include a study of the culture, of ferry crossings, of the railroad, of swing bridges, of elevated roads, of the treachery of wooden bridges, of the old Spanish Road, and of the location of the home site and surveying markers of Benjamin Richardson.

But most importantly, thousands of people were engaged and excited about history, and additional history was retrieved and recorded. All of this was due to the enormous reach of social media and the media.