

Treasures Hiding In Plain Sight

You live in Irving because you moved here for an opportunity at a better life; you landed a job here, or knew someone that recommended the area or found it geographically convenient. All of these are common reasons folks move to this area today and have been since the mid 1800's.

Once a great forest of Post Oak, Black-Jack Oak and Pecan trees adjoined rolling prairies. Water from the tributaries of the Trinity River, along with mild winters, made Irving a perfect place to hunt, fish and find shelter. Because of the dense forests and the Trinity River, one could not easily move about unless one followed established trails and river fords. Trails were established to go from water to hunting grounds and back. Explorers and settlers used these trails to travel between trading posts, communities, forts and to points west; five major trails crisscrossed Irving, Texas. The five most popular trails between the forks of the Trinity River were: Bird's Fort Trail, 1841; Grapevine Spring Trail, 1843; Eagle Ford Trail, 1847; Birdville Trail, 1847; California Trail, 1849.

This is the story of Eagle Ford Trail / Shady Grove Trail and Park. Since the ford's location was home to eagles and there was an eagle's nest nearby, it took the name Eagle Ford. Crossing the West Fork of the Trinity River close to the intersection of Loop 12 and Singleton Boulevard, one could travel from Dallas, crossing the Trinity at Bryan's Crossing to La Reunion and the community of Eagle Ford, across the West Fork of the Trinity at Eagle Ford to the early Irving communities known at the time as Kit, Shady Grove and Sowers. Later a bridge was built. Only one piling stands today to mark the spot. Historians tell us Bonnie and Clyde used this bridge because it was a favorite route between Irving and Dallas, but let's go back to the early days.

The Eagle Ford Trail became known as the Shady Grove Trail when Louis Caster deeded one acre for a church, graveyard and school to establish the community of Shady Grove in 1877. Named for a grove of post oaks, that exist today, the settlement was the center of social life for pioneer families in the area. The central point of the community is at the intersection of modern Hardrock Road and Shady Grove Road just west of Irving's city limits and the new State Highway 161.

Pictures of the historic and modern points of interest along this route are: Old Eagle Ford bridge piling at West Fork of the Trinity River, Trail from the ford intersecting a trail to Mountain Creek Preserve via the Campion Trail System, Historic Plaza in Shady Grove Trail Park, Shady Grove Cemetery, Texas Historical Marker at the Shady Grove Cemetery and Resting place and grave stone of Louis Henry and Ruth Jane Caster.

Shady Grove Trail Park lies squarely on the original Eagle Ford Trail and its observed trailhead is marked by two arches with stars that also define what is known as History Plaza. Dedicated on November 19, 1998, Shady Grove Trail Park was created from an abandoned sand and gravel quarry and dumping ground. Since the 13 acre site was partially in a 100 year floodplain developers rejected it, even though the site was the largest undeveloped space in a densely populated portion of the South Irving. After failing to sell the property, Bluebonnet Savings, in 1993, donated the site to the City of Irving.

City Staff and the surrounding neighborhood sprang into action and produced a master plan to create a fantastic neighborhood park. The Parks and Recreation Department, headed by Gene Moulden aided by landscape architect Terry Read, and many others set off to realize the community's vision which included a special feature called History Plaza that focused on the history of the trails hiding in plain sight and a playground in honor of Jennifer Yeakley, a student of nearby Townley Elementary School who passed away at the age of eight from a rare form of Leukemia. The park also features a large athletic field that is used often for pick-up soccer games, a basketball court, a half mile walk, jog or bike trail around the park and three pavilions that can be reserved for events from the Parks Department for ten dollars an hour.

History Plaza is a focal point as visitors enter the park; History Plaza was designed to fit into the theme of the park and Texas as a State, and to provide a history lesson on the significance of the area for future generations. Jim Dunkley, Irving trails historian, created the six story boards and likens the plaza as "a trail head ... and entryway into an adventure into history. Also, a beautiful early trails map is presented that was created in a cooperative effort by many, including: Earl Ayles, Jim Dunkley, George R. Edwin, Pete Fernandez and Joseph Rice.

This park has won several prestigious awards including the "Old Red" award, named in honor of the county's Old Red Courthouse. This award is given to a large restoration project or individuals who have shown a long-term dedication to the preservation of history.

Shady Grove Trail Park, like Butchart Gardens in Victoria, British Columbia, was created out of an old abandoned quarry and dumping ground; and brought to life through the vision, determination and dedication of a few citizens. The history of the park and the trails are treasures hiding in plain sight.