

Belton Bridge Center Construction  
by Dave Gose

I started playing duplicate bridge again at Unit 380 around 1995. The bridge game was played in a modified residence on what is now Valley Drive. It was pretty cramped quarters, but served. The Unit had a building fund with around \$10,000 in it, but there was not much interest in using it until early in 1998, when Patsy Hackler, one of the game owners, became deranged enough to start pushing for a new location. She roped two of the regulars, Ben and Marilyn Longwell into looking for a suitable structure to house the new unit. They located an abandoned Pick Quick, located at 1214 E. Madrid, which might work.

Patsy asked me if I would consider honchoing renovation of the building. She knew that I had once built a house and that I was an engineer by training. I wound up agreeing to help with the project.

I considered obtaining a contractor's license, but the newer requirements were beyond me. The basic modification required to make the building a bridge center was pretty evident, driven by the original design. Namely, gut out the interior, bring the rest rooms up to code, and leave a lot of room for bridge tables. I drew up plans and checked out codes. Then I submitted the plans to the city. They were, of course, rejected.

It was then that I realized that there were two hurdles that were beyond my capabilities; we needed a real, live architect to draw the plans and we had to have someone with a contractor's license to run the contractors. The first problem was solved by hiring an architect to do the plans. He was a new architect and we certainly got our moneys worth from him. Clark Meyers not only was able to take care of the technical details, but added some much needed ideas to my basic plans. We were able to persuade Steve Newby (who had designed the original building) and Dennis Burns (a registered professional engineer) to assist. Then we were able to get through the city's bureaucracy. A licensed contractor, Steve Reynolds, was hired to supervise the job, using volunteer labor of bridge players and square dancers where possible.

In October of 1998 before construction began, we had a giant garage sale in the building. We raised \$2,041 on the sale and construction began in January of 1999. There were four to six workers there who showed up daily with more on weekends. Many of these workers were spouses of bridge players, plus the many square dancers who worked mostly at night. The first job was to strip the interior. This involved removing all partitions, except for the rear bathroom. The contractor extended the front and installed the plumbing for the front bathrooms.

Around this time, Billie Eddington convinced the square dancers to install all floors. This turned out to be a major task, since the main floor is now a regulation gym oak floor with shock absorbing underlayment. Barry Stout, Liz's son, supervised the oak flooring installation. Jerry Hawkins, with the help of Michael Lewis, installed the electrical wiring. Watching the volunteers work was incredible. It is one of the highlights of my life to witness the thousands of man hours given by the bridge players and square dancers. I would guess that over 85% of the bridge players capable of helping were there for at least several days. Many contributed hundreds of hours. Spouses were very notable. That effort has made our unit one of the more successful in the U. S., I believe. That spirit continues today, as we have a very congenial and supportive unit.

At last, on June 13, 1999, the bridge center was dedicated. Bridge volunteers donated several thousand hours for demolition, framing, electrical, sheet,,rocking, painting and detailing. The \$11,000 worth of wood plus the labor for the oak floor was donated by local square dancing clubs. The work involved in making this bridge center what it is today has been a wonderful experience for all of us.

The Bridge Center is currently used for playing duplicate bridge and square dancing and by a local stamp club. It may be rented on a selective basis for dancing and receptions. Sectional bridge tournaments were held at the Bridge Center until one event required 44 tables . After that Michelle's Dance Academy across the street was added and then the sectional events were moved to K.C.Hall. In 2015, attendance at the sectionals had dropped nationally as well as in Las Cruces. Now Sectional have returned to the Belton Center.

The cost of the Center was \$80,000 for the original building and land and \$44,000 for materials and labor. This was raised by using a \$17,200 existing building fund, \$32,900 in donations and obtaining a 15 year, \$65,000 note from Charlie Byrd, the previous owner of the structure. Payments on the note were \$584 per month. The note was paid off in 2004. The current (2018) County assessed value of the property is

\$236,000. The bridge center was named in memory of Roger Belton (b. 10/20/68) and Michelle Gose Belton (b. 5/9/69). While on active duty in the U. S. Army, they were killed by a drunk driver on 10/18/1992.