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## **REMEMBER THE BIHL HOUSE**

By

Eric F. Lane

Even in its present state of dilapidation, it retains a sense of majesty. Yes, the windows are broken and shuttered with plywood. The interior is in disrepair and unsafe to enter. And the exterior is covered with years of graffiti. But, locked deep within the creases of its stone walls lays a secret, a secret so momentous that it should cause every Monticello resident to pause and realize that history, whether remembered or forgotten, is our neighbor.

It sits at the edge of the historical Monticello Park neighborhood on Fredericksburg Road across the street from the famed San Antonio watering hole, the Tip Top Café. Weathered by time and neglect, it's known as the Bihl House.

I was curious about the history of the Bihl House. I'd heard many different and sometimes conflicting accounts. Some folks referred to the house as the Garza House. This turned out to be partly true. Eusebio Garza, a pharmacist, did live there with his wife, Carolina, from about 1929 until 1934, but they were the second owners. It didn't take long to discover that George David Bihl was the original builder and owner, and thus, namesake of the house. And that his

daughter, a retired math teacher at San Antonio's Vocational and Technical School, still lived here in San Antonio. I immediately picked up the phone and called her.

On a spectacular lapis lazuli February afternoon, Mrs. Alleen Bihl Scott Locklear met me at her front door and welcomed me into her home.

This is a woman from the old school, brought up in an age when intelligent women hid behind a demure façade. Yet, by the age of fifteen, Mrs. Locklear had graduated from high school, and by the age of eighteen, she had a degree in philosophy from Incarnate Word. We sat at the dining room table with her husband, J.R., and her son, Vernon, who joined us late.

With gentle but piercing blue eyes and a Texas songbird voice, Mr. Locklear began.

"Daddy put up a subdivision and we had an awful time getting water out there," she said, showing me an old, faded photograph of the Bihl House taken about 1920.

"I was about five or six years old back then. Daddy was trying to sell parcels of land out there and we lived for a while in a stucco house while he built the rock house."

"I can tell you that the rock is historical," Mrs. Locklear continued, pointing to a picture of her mother standing next to a mound of rocks. "You see, Daddy got the stone from the Old Saint Mary's Church downtown when they tore it down. He'd go down there to get the rock and truck it up to the property."

"So, your father went down there and picked up the stone from the old church?" I asked.

"Stone is stone," her son jumped in. "If you'd been brought up like I've been brought up, if you've got useful material, you use it."

"Yes," Mrs. Locklear continued and then she dropped the bombshell:

"When they built the original Saint Mary's Church they took the stone from the fence around the Alamo."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when they built the Old Saint Mary's church in 1870, they used the rock from the fence around the Alamo. So, when they tore it down later, Daddy went and got that rock, cut it to size, and used it to build our house."

I sat stunned.

"You mean to tell me that the old Bihl House was built of stone from the Alamo?"

"That's what I've been told."

"In 1852," her son added, "David Russi, George Bihl's grandfather on his mother's side, my great, great grandfather, was commissioned by the U.S. Army to re-build parts of the Alamo as a feed house and depot. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Colonel Twig surrendered his garrison in front of the Alamo. We're not sure how the Confederates used the Alamo, but after the Civil War the Alamo was basically abandoned. In about 1870 the original St. Mary's Church downtown was built. Stone was taken from the Alamo fence that lay strewn around the

premises, cut to size and used to construct the new church. Fifty years later or so, Saint Mary's was knocked down and my grandfather went down and trucked the rock up to its present location."

"He squared off the rocks and reused them to build the Bihl House," Mrs. Locklear added. "They had to saw almost every rock."

Now, something I'd heard made sense. A rock expert had looked at the Bihl House and was puzzled by the fact that there were two distinct types of rock used in the construction. On close inspection, one can see the noticeable differences in the stones.

"So, you're pretty certain that the rock came from Old St. Mary's Church," I asked Mrs. Locklear.

"That's what I've heard all my life."

"How can we prove that the rocks that built St. Mary's original church came from the Alamo?"

"Because of the stone. There is a certain quality, a certain type of rock that was used over at the Alamo. And that's the type of stone that was used at St. Mary's Church and, later, to build our stone house."

"A stone expert would know?" I asked.

"I would think so." Mrs. Bihl answered.

George Bihl died on Oct. 11, 1932, at the age of 57. He had just finished building a "pretty" house at 446 East Hildebrand. It was a sudden and tragic

death that changed dramatically the life of Alleen Bihl and her mother, Allie Bihl. But that is another story for another day.

On March 3, Mrs. Alleen Bihl Scott Locklear and her family were the honored guests at the groundbreaking of the new Primrose Senior Community Development at Monticello Park. The old Bihl House will be rehabilitated and plans are to turn it into a community art gallery and performance center. And , along with the Alamo stone, the spirit of that little girl so many years ago will permeate the Bihl House and she will be remembered with nothing but joy and affection.

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