

“You’re not just buying land: you’re buying history”

The sleepy hamlet of downtown Umland, Texas is at the crossing of Plum Creek and the Old Spanish Trail, also know as the Camino Real. They may not look like much, but the flow of people along both routes spans centuries, and predates the colonization of the Western Hemisphere.

“El Camino Real de los Tejas” is the official Spanish title for what is probably the oldest road in Texas, developed by the Spanish conquistadors beginning in 1690, in response to the establishment of a French settlement along the future-Texas coast in 1685. The road undoubtedly followed existing game trails, and these trails were likely also used by the Native Americans who hunted those animals, as well as possibly being part of the network of trade routes set up by the Aztec empire, some of which ran as far north as present-day Colorado.

“Tejas” is a Caddo word for “friend” or “ally”, and the Spanish adapted this word to be their name for their newly-seized colony. And the Caddo WERE friendly, at least in comparison to the other tribes that occupied Texas at that time. The Karankawa along the coast were said to be cannibals, and the Apache and Comanche to the west and north already had established fearsome reputations for raiding and torture (more on this later).

“In 1690, a party of soldiers and priests crossed the Rio Grande on their way to the Neches River, where they established two missions intended to cultivate religion and a sedentary lifestyle among the Caddos. Following a smallpox outbreak in 1693, however, the Caddos warned the Spanish to leave or die. They retreated back across the Rio Grande, establishing one of the enduring themes of El Camino Real de los Tejas: American Indians often dictated the terms of Spanish settlement in eastern Texas, and not vice versa”. (National Historic Trail, National Park Service website, [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)).

Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 led to more activity along the old mission road, including a new phenomenon: American settlers from the United States, led by Moses Austin and his son Stephen F. Austin (for whom the city of Austin is named) came down the road from the northeast through Louisiana and Arkansas starting in 1823. Within twelve years, these new Anglo settlers became disgruntled by Mexican rules and rulers, and declared Texas to be an independent Nation. The revolution that followed was swift and epic. The “Texicans” formed a nation, but life there would be difficult, as both the Mexican army AND the warlike Comanche and Apache remained constant threats.

In 1840, four years after the revolution, the Comanche launched what is now considered to be one of the largest and most successful raid in American [Native] history. They attacked, looted, and DESTROYED the town of Linville (the town was never rebuilt) along Plum Creek east of present-day Lockhart, Texas, and then carried their loot and drove their stolen horses and mules back up along Plum Creek to return to their stronghold far to the north. A pursuing party of Texas Rangers caught up with the Comanche RIGHT HERE ON THIS SITE, and a running battle ensued. There is a historic marker on our land that commemorates this event. It is a bit thrilling to image this scene as you gaze at the gently sloping hillsides on either side of the slow-moving tree-shaded waters of Plum Creek from the point of view of that marker, with no buildings or power lines in sight to spoil your musing.

Moses Austin literally passed through present-day Umland on his way to San Antonio to petition the governor of what was then know as “Coahuila y Tejas” to allow American settlers in, under his leadership. Moses died before this dream could be realized, but his son Stephen accomplished the task in the years that followed.

In 1845, Texas entered the United States of America: the only state to ever do so by treaty as — and with — a sovereign nation. That sounds impressive, but the fact was that the Nation of Texas was virtually bankrupt due to poor leadership and the cost of ongoing war (in whatever form) with the Mexicans to the south and the Comanche everywhere else. We needed our Big Brother to step in.

By 1860 a community had formed on the banks of Plum Creek at the old Comanche crossing and along the old Camino Real. It was named Live Oak, and remained such until 1900. There were two entities from this period that survived into the 20th century: fittingly, they were a bar, and a graveyard. Now only the graveyard remains.

In 1900 a post office was established in Live Oak, and a prominent member of the community suggested/insisted that the town be re-named Umland, after his favorite German poet of the mid-1800’s. Other buildings followed, the white two-story Victorian mansion with the wraparound porch being one of the first, in 1912....at the same time that the dance hall/basketball gymnasium was added behind the old bar. This latter structure became known as Club 21.

Across the street (Camino Real) were a couple of livery stables (that later morphed into gas stations as automobiles took over) a town Mercantile store, and eventually some residences. These are the structures you see today. The original mercantile was replaced with the current brick building — with copper molding on the display windows and colored ceramic tile beneath them — in 1933.

The Red House (#6 Old Spanish Trail North) was the last to arrive, built in 1935 and then moved onto its current site from a nearby farm probably in the 1940's or 1950's.

During World War Two, it was determined that Texas Highway 21, which ran from San Marcos to Nacogdoches (once the furthest Spanish mission town on the old Camino Real) was important to the War Effort, particularly given the oil fields around Lufkin (near Nacogdoches). The section of 21 that ran through "downtown" Uhland was deemed too steep, rough, and twisted for fast cargo and tanker trucks, so a bypass was built past the downtown area, and a new Magnolia gas station (now a cafe) was built facing the new road. This effectively cut Uhland off from progress, and the downtown languished as the decades progressed.

By the late 1970's, Uhland was pretty much a ghost town, a time capsule of what the first half of the twentieth century looked like in rural Texas. Well-preserved, but mostly vacant. People still lived in the community of Uhland, but did most of their shopping and business in Lockhart, San Marcos, or Austin (the surrounding county seats).

However, thus static situation made the town perfect for movies and commercials seeking a vintage appearance, and with the nearby presence of Austin as an anchor, a steady progression of such film projects were shot in or around downtown Uhland over the next forty years. The earliest such production I have researched was a motion picture called "Resurrection" shot partially in Uhland in March 1979 and released in 1980. Sam Shepard — the American playwright and actor — costarred in the picture, and refers to it and his work in Uhland in his book *Motel Chronicles* (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1982)(Shepard's manuscripts are now in the Witliff Collection at Texas State University in San Marcos).

This was the "situation" in Uhland when I first saw it in 1990-91, when I returned to Austin and subsequently opened an antique store in an older storefront on Main Street in Buda, Texas. I was immediately drawn in by the timeless appearance of the Uhland hillsides and buildings, the slow pace, and the light. The Texas Film Commission had been formed by Governor Ann Richards in 1990, and many more film productions were coming to the central Texas area and beyond. I began renting props to these productions, and after my building in Buda burned to the ground in 1994, I moved my remaining "burnt offerings and baked goods" to one of the old livery stable/garages in downtown Uhland. Thenceforth, within a year or so, I began to acquire properties downtown there, always via owner-finance arrangements based on my connections in the town. And over the decades that followed, I not only rented props out of my warehouses there, but also rented out the storefronts themselves — both inside and outside — as sets and locations. Over a dozen movies used either my antiques, or my properties, in Uhland during this period.

The most recent such production was the streaming series *Fear The Walking Dead*, which occupied the entire downtown for two different one-week periods in the summer of 2021. Uhland had become a post-apocalyptic Paradise, prized for its authentic time-warp values.

It wasn't all "business" for us in Uhland, however. My wife Gail Chovan and I were married in Club 21 on 7 November 1998: we walked down the street in 1912-period clothing, while a friend played the theme song from *High Noon* on his accordion, and three hundred guests witnessed.

On Saturday nights in the years that followed, the dance floor at Club 21 would come alive again, usually to a live country "cover" band, while locals from 9 months old to 90 years old plied their two-step skills. After the dance ended, my wife and I would host late-night dinner parties at the little red farmhouse we were fixing up, accommodating up to 12 overnight guests during weekends. We filled the house and the yard with antiques and collectibles, built front and back porches, and achieved enough notoriety for our efforts that we — and the Uhland house — were featured in a coffee-table-book called *Lone Star Living* about Texas architectural and interior style, published in 2002 (Scott has the book, for attribution). We planned to restore other downtown buildings next, in hopes that Uhland might become the next Marfa, or at least the next Martindale, but with closer access to Austin than either of those "period" destination towns.

This golden era came to an abrupt end when our twin children were born three months premature, with complications, in September 2005. They were in various hospitals for six months, and required extensive medical care for the next several years that followed. They stabilized by 2008, but we then launched a remodel on our house in Austin to accommodate our now-larger family. Uhland languished again, as our interests and energies were elsewhere.

In 2012 Club 21—the longest continuously-operating business in downtown Uhland, with the bar opening in the 1890's when the town was still called Live Oak — was destroyed by fire when two street racers lost control of their [stolen] vehicles and crashed into the structure. The culprits escaped and were never tracked down. The Club had no insurance. An effort to rebuild a structure on the site in subsequent years met with misfortune. Uhland languished.

In 2018 my wife and I bought the old Club 21 site, along with the house, surrounding acreage, and frontage on two historic creeks. We had the idea of turning downtown Uhland into a event or wedding destination, similar to ones we had witnessed or even worked on in nearby central Texas towns like Round Top, Dripping Springs, Wimberley, Johnson City, and Fredericksburg. We began the slow process of clearing years of weeds, deadfall trees and branches, collapsed or unnecessary livestock sheds, etc....as well as the carpeting, linoleum, sheetrock, and plywood paneling that had covered up the original architectural finishes and details inside the magnificent Victorian home.

Then the pandemic hit, in early 2020, and Uhland languished again. Our efforts ground to a halt. Our interests went elsewhere.

Now, in the post-pandemic, development is booming in both Hays and Caldwell County, as swarms of people move to the Austin area from other parts of America, often seeking a more affordable and/or more pastoral alternative to the Capitol City, but still with close access to Austin. Tech companies are following this same path, announcing new plants in the Lockhart region. Artists and musicians flee Austin rents and prices now, forced out of the place they helped make attractive.

We hope you find Uhland as attractive as we did, long ago, and as many others have before us, for generations.

We also hope you find this history lesson helpful, inspiring, or entertaining. We poured a great deal of our souls into this dirt. We hope you do too.