

# The History of Rancho CASI de los Chisos

“Where did you get the idea? How did you start it? How did you do it?” These are some of the many questions I’ve had asked of me over the years about the formation of Rancho CASI de los Chisos, and The Old 320. I can start by saying the idea of CASI owning its own site began before being elected a CASI director in 1987. During the CASI Championships at Villa de la Mina that year I wandered around the Villa noting how much control Glenn Pepper, the owner of the Villa, had over the all the money being generated during the cookoff. He took in all the revenue from gate fees, the concessions including the T-shirts, the food sales and the beer sales. CASI got nothing.

Glenn Pepper was taking in several thousand dollars, perhaps as much as \$10,000 I guessed. Then I asked myself, “Why can’t we do this?” What was needed was a site. “But where, and what does land cost here? Is there anything available?” One way to find out was to visit a local realtor. While the party was going on at the Villa, Big Bend Realty was giving me a tour of land for sale in the area. My first choice for a location was at the site of the original Terlingua cookoff at the old ghost town. The biggest piece of ground there was 20 acres. Not big enough.

Too bad. Even Arturo’s store and the Behind the Store site of 40 acres was for sale for \$50,000. Oooops, I don’t think that would have gone over too well. There were several 5-10 acre pieces but nothing big enough at the ghost town. I went back to the Villa to cook and have some fun before heading back home.

Over the winter of 1988 more thought was given on how to pay for some land. It kept digging at me so off to Terlingua I went to look more deeply at land possibilities. While there I was introduced to the manager of the Lajitas complex who said the owner had something like 15,000 acres for sale. Right off the bat, after explaining to the manager the purpose of what I was looking for, she took me to a place that was adjacent on the west side of Villa de la Mina. When I saw it my heart just sunk! It contained a big flat area surrounded by hills. It is the largest flat area between Study Butte and Lajitis. The possibilities just exploded in my mind. A stage here for awards and live music. A dance floor there, a judging pavilion over here. Entry roads here and there for cooks, spectators and RV parking. And the price? It was \$115 an acre for approximately 320 acres. OMG, I knew this was going to be our place and we had to buy it! “But how?” I asked myself. At that time I was reading a book called *“Lone Star. A History of Texas and the Texans”* by T.R. Feurenbach. In there was a discussion on the Empesario Moses Austin. Texas in 1820 was still

under control of Spain, and King Ferdinand VIII. Austin arranged with the Spanish Governor in San Antonio to sell, with approval of the King, 300 deeds of land to Anglo immigrants. These deeds of 1,000 hectares were located in an arc north of San Antonio, which would be farmed or ranched and in part, to protect San Antonio from invasion by the Comanche. These first 300 legitimate settlers of Texas, became known and as they still are today, as The Old 300. I thought bingo, now I know how to raise the money to pay for the land! We will have 320 acres of property with plenty of land to have an arena for everyone to cook. We can ask the cooks for a donation in return for a place to cook in the arena. That would give us enough money to pay for the land. "Surely there would be 320 of us that would step up to help all this to happen," I thought. We could limit the sales to the first 320 cooks and call this group The Old 320. Each person or pod that makes a donation would receive a beautiful certificate from CASI showing them as an original participant in this historic occasion. An honorable group. Pretty cool. That night I went to my hotel room with my head spinning. So many questions to answer. The next day was spent walking the entire property. Things started coming together where the stage would be, where the entry road would be. I had an acquaintance that was a RV park developer who once told me he never put a dead end street in his RV parks because it causes traffic jams and is not safe, I remembered that, when the vision for where the RVs would be located. I had pretty much laid out in my mind and on notes the configuration of what Rancho CASI de los Chisos is today, when I went home. Sitting around the dinner table, my late wife Dixie and I brain stormed what to call the property. We tossed around several possibilities including such names as Rancho Caliente or CASI Chisos Ranch. We settled on using the word Chisos because of the beauty of the surrounding Chisos Mountains. *The name of the mountains comes from the Castillian word "hechizos" meaning enchantment.* That is how the name Rancho CASI de los Chisos came about. Another name she came up with was what to call the area for the spectators. At Villa de la Mina, the area for the spectators was called "Crazy Hill". I live on a very large river delta that is flat. The locals call it "The Flats".

Dixie said we should call the spectators area "Crazy Flats" and that is the real story as to how that name came about. Someone else later changed to spelling of Crazy to Krazy. At home, calling the Brewster County Planning Department was one of the first things I did. It turns out that there is no planning department in Brewster County. There is no county engineer. There is no permit application process to go through! There is a county clerk that is the focal point for everything at the courthouse in Alpine. She told me there is a private lawyer the county uses when needing legal advise who may answer the questions I had. The lawyer said, "I believe a man should be able to do whatever he wants to do with his own land. If you want to build your

chili pavilions and privies out there, go ahead.” No permit required. I couldn’t believe it! The next issue was what about electric power? I found the local power company isn’t so local. It’s 300 miles away in Uvalde. The Rio Grande Electric Coop is the largest electric utility in Texas. It stretches from east of Uvalde to New Mexico. It is part of the rural electrification program from the 1930’s to supply farms and ranches across the country with power. Their program is to run power lines from the nearest transformer to the property free for the first ¼ mile. They said they would haul telephone poles, hole digging equipment, electrical wire and materials including electricians and labor to run power lines from a transformer that was across Highway 170 into our site. Today there is a telephone pole and electrical control panel a few feet from the stage that is exactly ¼ mile from the highway. The utility did all of this for free! Can you imagine what you would have to pay your local electric utility to run wire and to put in a few telephone poles to a new garage you would build in your back yard?

In the spring of 1988, under new business, I presented my ideas to the CASI Board at a meeting in San Antonio. Ken Hudspeth was the only member that knew anything about what I was doing. I needed statistical data from someone who knew things like the number of dedicated CASI cooks we had and Ken could provide that. The whole concept was presented including where the site was, how to pay for it under The Old 320 organization. It was decided to hold the first cookoff in 1990 so we could have time to develop the site with all amenities in place. The Board agreed with the terms of the Lajitas people and voted to buy the property. Vann York, Ken Hudspeth and I drove to Lajitas to sign the papers. The day after the last cookoff at Villa de la Mina, the Board had announced a special meeting at the Lajitas facility to explain to the cooks the purchase of the land and the selling of Old 320 shares to finance the acquisition. It was explained that since CASI is a non-profit corporation they would not be buying a share of stock or an acre of land but making a donation to the CASI land purchase.

This way there would be no liability or assessments to a shareholder. The shares sold like hotcakes. During 1990 I did the final design and survey of the layout including mapping the location of the road systems, camping and parking sites for the cooks and their friends; the location of the stage and the judging pavilion. I wanted the spectators separated from the CASI people so the Old 320 arena and camping area was laid out and so was Crazy Flats. The Board had voted to officially change the name of the cookoff to what it is today, the Terlingua International Chili Championship. A ground breaking ceremony was held in the spring to begin the construction phase. The Lajitas people did something amazing and supplied the road grader, trucks and a D10 Caterpillar for free. After pads for the stage and judging

buildings were graded, contracts for these buildings were awarded. We were off and running for the first TICC at our own home that November of 1990. The ribbon cutting ceremony was indeed an emotional experience for a lot of the wonderful people of CASI that made it all possible. The success continues.

## ***Bob Whitefield***

*Editor's Note - With the purchase of the property in 1989 we are quickly approaching the 25th Anniversary of Rancho CASI de los Chisos. Next month we will feature an article from Ken Large on the Making of a Chili Ranch, originally published in 2005. If you have a story to tell of the first years at the Ranch or pictures to share please send them to [danap903@comcast.net](mailto:danap903@comcast.net).*

*Thank you.*