

D EducationporVida

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EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Making history: UTPA launches Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail

FROM UTPA REPORTS

For Margil Vale, the Civil War wasn't just a topic covered in history class. It was a vibrant narration passed down from generation to generation.

Margil grew up in Roma listening to stories about his great-grandfather, John Henrik Vale, a Swedish immigrant who arrived in New York in 1840 and came to the Rio Grande Valley to volunteer for Taylor's Army of Occupation during the Mexican-American War. John, a Confederate sympathizer, made a living by transporting bales

of cotton along the Rio Grande.

"(John) came around the 1840s, with the American forces fighting the Mexicans in the 1850s. So he goes into Mexico, then comes back to the area of Roma and he marries a woman from Mier (Mexico)," Margil said. "He was in the business of trading cotton, and from Mexico they would get cotton, coffee, sugar that they needed here. ... He was back and forth, basically buying and reselling."

His family's legacy, combined with his passion

for history, prompted Margil to attend the launch of Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail, presented by the University of Texas-Pan American's Community of Historic Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS) Program on Feb. 28 at the Student Union Theater.

"I think the information was well presented," Margil said. "I learned things that I hadn't heard before, even though the cotton trade was the story of our family, what our ancestors did."

The RGV Civil War Trail is a virtual tour that includes a map, guide,

brochure and associated Web page and podcasts, all available in English and Spanish. Together the elements provide a conceptual "walk" through the history of the Civil War in South Texas. Local historians, educators and representatives from local, state and federal agencies provided support for developing the virtual tour.

The trail runs through a five-county stretch between Laredo and Brownsville and has key locations identified on a map, such as the "Robert



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Courtesy photo

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E. Lee House Museum' in Rio Grande City. These are accompanied by audio podcasts that describe each site's significance. The podcasts are accessible by cellphone and have an associated QR code that takes visitors to a linked website with additional information.

A six-hour professional development workshop was held Feb. 27 at the UTPA McAllen Teaching Site where 50 K-12 educators learned how to incorporate the trail into their history curriculum.

The RGV Civil War Trail website, explains that the Valley served as a significant point of conflict in skirmishes between

Union and Confederate forces along the border between the military forts of Fort McIntosh in Laredo, Ringgold Barracks in Rio Grande City and Fort Brown in Brownsville. The last land battle of the Civil War was fought on May 13, 1865 at Palmito Ranch near Brownsville.

During opening remarks at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, UTPA President Ad Interim Dr. Havidán Rodríguez said the project is history in the making and will help contribute to the growth and development of the region.

"It is a historical event, not only for the University of Texas-Pan American, but for the entire Rio Grande Valley," Rodríguez said. "This is about

building communities, strengthening partnerships to allow us to continue to move forward to recognize the history, the culture, the traditions, the value of the Rio Grande Valley."

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, the Cameron County Historical Commission's Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee will host a series of events May 11 to 16, including a reenactment of the Battle of Palmito. For more information on the week-long activities, visit their website at www.ph150.us.

To learn more on the RGV Civil War Trail, visit www.utpa.edu/civilwar-trail or call their office at (956) 665-3231.