



Southern Gardens Series

By Thornton F. Jordan, Ph.D.

Two Touches of Texas History in Westville's Gardens

About 1854 an army crossed the Rio Grande and entered Texas. By all the folk descriptions of the time, this army was fearsome enough. Each of these invaders was said to have eyes like a pig, ears like a mule, claws like a bear, a head like a lizard, a snout like a hog, and a tail like a rat. As Mark Twain once said in defense of his mongrel dog, they were composites.

Still marching, inexorably, a hundred years later they had reached the western banks of the Mississippi River, which baffled their progress for a time. But by 1972 they had penetrated southern Alabama, and by 1982 southern Georgia. Meantime, some foolhardy person had deliberately transported some of these invaders into east-central Florida in 1949, and by the early 1980's they had pushed up into southern Georgia from a second front. Westville stood in the path and now finds itself host to a platoon from this army that left Mexico over 150 years ago. I refer, of course, to the army of the nine-banded armadillos.

About six years ago armadillos took up residence at Westville, under the farmhouse, and have blissfully gone about foraging and reproducing each year. As if any one of them isn't homely enough, each female in this species produces four identical young of the same sex, and all from one egg. Last spring when I was planting bulbs, four baby dillers came out from under the farmhouse, ambled over to sniff my shoe, then went on about their business of rooting for grubs, beetles, ants, and worms. The divots that pockmark Westville, not only in the gardens but even in the hardpan, are not from Ed Cannington's nine-iron. They are craters from rooting armadillos.

It turns out that armadillos are 55 million years old. They prefer beetles, ants, and termites, but will eat earthworms, caterpillars, toads, small snakes and frogs, lizard, roaches, scorpions, millipedes, centipedes, shrimp, crayfish, maggots, and spiders (including black widows). I have read in more than one source that they are fond of fire ants, and have wondered if their recent migrations has not been to follow in the wake of the fire ant migration. I have yet to see an armadillo eat a fire ant, but Charlie, Mrs. Moyer's caretaker, says he has seen them break into fire ant mounds.

They dig with strong, four-toed claws, and root with their snouts. Competent swimmers, they can swallow air, float, and dog paddle on the surface, but they can also sink and walk across the bottom of a stream. They can hold their breath for ten minutes under water, and when digging in earth can hold their breath for six minutes.

In spite of popular belief that they can roll up in a ball for defense, only the South American three-band armadillo can perform this feat. The nine-band armadillo hunkers down and draws his head back into his shell far enough for the shoulders of

his shell to protect his face. Otherwise, when startled they spring straight up into the air, which accounts for the frequent road kills.

One community in Texas, where they have had to deal with them much longer than Westville has, holds a festival called Diller Days, with armadillo races and tosses. Originally the toss was a contest to see who could throw an armadillo the furthest at \$1 per ticket, or "A Dollar a Diller." After catching some criticism from conscientious folks who oppose flying armadillos, they substituted a water-filled football.

The other touch of Texas history in Westville's gardens is in the antique rose collection. It involves an historic character, Lorenzo de Zavala. He was born in Merida, Yucatan and served in the Mexican government as a Liberal deputy to Spain in 1820. Like Stephen Austin and others, Lorenzo had applied to the Mexican government for a proprietorship in Texas. Mexico initially encouraged this arrangement to establish a buffer against the Plains Indians. Proprietors could get grants of land to establish farming and working communities with the understanding that they would be allegiant to the government of Mexico and practice Catholicism. Not only did Lorenzo hold a land grant, he continued to serve in the Mexican government as Minister of Finance in 1829 and Minister Plenipotentiary to France in 1833. All the while, he remained friendly to American interests. When Santa Anna took over the government in 1834, dissolved the congress, and fired most of his cabinet ministers, Zavala fled to Texas with a warrant out for his arrest. When Texas began its war for independence from Mexico, he allied with the Texans. After the battle of San Jacinto in June, 1836, when Texas became de facto independent, Zavala served as a commissioner to the constitutional convention in 1836 and was elected Vice-president of Texas.

When Zavala returned from the French Court of St. Cloud in 1834, he brought with him a rose, Louis Phillipe, which he took with him to Texas. We grow his rose in the Grimes-Feagin House garden, amidst the craters left by the rooting armadillos.