



# THE GASTON HERITAGE



Life Before, During and After the East Texas Oil Boom



## **Gaston Museum Closes the Doors, Opens a Virtual World of History.**

Amber Lollar  
Managing Editor, The Henderson News

After nearly 20 years spent sharing a broad spectrum of Rusk County history, the Gaston Museum board has made the heart-wrenching decision to close the museum doors, citing a lack of funding and manpower.

Since its dedication in June 2005, a labor of Red Devil love and loyalty, even then, Gaston Museum has played host to carefully curated exhibits depicting life during the East Texas oil boom and the history of wealth and success that followed. This influx of local revenue funded the Gaston School, which held records as the largest rural school in the world, with more than 1,800 students enrolled before the school merged with New London, in 1965, to form West Rusk County Consolidated school district.

“As Chairman and Director I feel especially saddened that I was not able to prevent the closing,” said long-time museum director, Stephanie Osteen, in Sunday’s social media statement. “The Current and previous Board members have devoted precious time and sacrifice to remain as long as we have. Many hours of hard work and wonderful financial donations from all of you has kept us going this long.”

Osteen, herself, has poured 15-years of blood, sweat, and tears into the museum, alongside hard-working docents, Gary and Julie Dickeson, creating exciting new exhibits, hoping to spur the community’s interest and generate much-needed funding for the struggling facility. From the hands-on educational stations created on the museum grounds to the exciting Historic Escape Room, the first of its kind, museum volunteers created a fun and educational oasis for their beloved visitors.

As the sad undertaking of re-homing the carefully curated exhibits begins, interest has been shown by Henderson’s Veterans of Foreign Wars post, the Depot Museum, and Kilgore College’s East Texas Oil Museum.

“This will be a long process,” said Osteen in a follow-up post. “There are a few items that we know of that will be accessioned out of the museum for the Depot, but the remainder will not even start until after September. This will be a 12 to 18 month project getting everything to its new homes.”



**Watch for the Complete Virtual Tour of the Gaston Musum - Coming 2025**



# Red Devil Reunion 2024

October 5, 2024 9am-12pm

Raider Café on the West Rusk Campus

10705 S. Main, New London, Tx 75682.



Fellow Red Devils, this will be the final reunion hosted by the Gaston Museum. We took over the reunion several years ago at the request of the Reunion committee and now we must pass it back. There are several alumni that have already suggested that they might help in the future. If you are interested, please let us know as soon as possible. This event is planned as a chance for Gaston exes, along with families and friends to gather and remember. There will be a light brunch of donuts, muffins, juice and fruit but no catered meal. If there are any exes willing to help plan and work with the reunion, we would very much appreciate your help since we have few active Board members at this time. Please contact Rosemary Whitten at 903-863-2108 or 903-238-6849

The Museum has closed and the exhibits are no longer in place. We have already donated much to the Depot and the remainder will be distributed after the first of the year. Updates will be posted on the Facebook page.

## A Special Note From The Director

I have personally been the Director for 12 out of 14 years that I have been a Board Member. My love for the history dates back to my grandparents, W.E. (Alec) and Iola Moore, my Mother (Barbara Moore Green) and her brothers, Billy, Bobby and James (Corky) Moore. It is my heritage as much as theirs even though I attended Henderson schools. Barbara Hardy Barton instilled a love of this history in me as a young girl and I feel I have been a responsible, dedicated servant during my tenure. Without ample help from the younger generations, we have not survived. I would like to impress upon each of you that we have begged and pleaded for volunteers and aid in continuing the legacy. Because no one stepped up, we as a board had to make sad decisions. We have joined forces with the East Texas Oil Museum and their Foundation to make sure that our history will be protected. An exhibit will be created in the Oil Museum for the Gaston School and our local history. The Depot has already started integrating artifacts into their Rusk County History. The Veterans history will go to the Oil Museum, Veterans Office at the Rusk County Courthouse and the American Freedom Museum in Bullard. The pictures and timeline artifacts of the school will go to the West Rusk County Consolidated School for an exhibit honoring ALL of the schools that merged through the years. The jobs carried out by your Board of Directors and volunteers are not an easy ones; all been done for no pay and many hours donated. Please know that we are saddened that we were the ones that had to close our doors. I have treasured my time with each and every one of you and I can say without a doubt, your Red Devil blood runs deep and our love has kept the Devils alive for us to remember. If any of have questions, I will be glad to answer them after the middle of September. At that time I will be working towards getting the remainder of the artifacts documented, digitized and placed in their new homes. The virtual museum will roll out in 2025 and our Facebook and YouTube will continue to grow with videos, interviews and articles preserving your memories.

With all my respect, adoration and love for the Gaston Museum,  
*Stephanie Osteen*

Your current serving Board of Directors are Stephanie Osteen/Director/Chairman/Treasurer, Dwight Huntsman/Vice Chairman, Rosemary Whitten/Secretary, John Whitehead, Andy Elliott, Shana Moland and RuthAnne Moland, (Junior Board Member).

Without these volunteers and all before them, we could not have lasted this long.

## Long live the Red Devil Memories

## My Good Old Days At Gaston by Gary Dickeson

Gaston was always a part of me. My Father was a member of the first graduating class. My brothers and sisters went to school at Gaston. Uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews went to the Gaston campus even after it had become West Rusk. The same teachers taught many of us. To say Gaston was ingrained in us is an understatement. It brought a rough and tumble oil field community into an educational field of scholastic achievement during the Great Depression and continued that excellence for more than 30 years. It brought some like my father from horse and buggy times to the jet age. The dirt roads those early students knew became shiny oil roads and eventually asphalt highways to the campus where you had the opportunity to receive an education few others could match.

Yet, the true knowledge imparted to us was the sense of community and belonging to something more than just a school. The pride, love and feelings for Gaston and its people is akin to what one feels for their State or country. This sentiment I have heard from coaches, teachers, students, parents and museum volunteers who were never students or even from the community, long after Gaston ceased to exist except in the memory of former students. The bonds of friendship and close ties formed through the association with Gaston are very different from most schools.

This bond of friendship has no age limitations or boundary lines of economic status, if you were a part of the Gaston experience whether school or museum you are one of us! I could write hundreds of my experiences, some the same as yours only separated by the year in which it occurred. Others specific to each of us and yet all coalescing into the unique fabric of the Gaston pattern of our lives.

As the Gaston Era winds down to its final conclusion, all those who have had a part in its being, whether Parents, Students, Faculty or Museum Supporters have had a part in shaping each other's lives and are better for the experience.



Gary and Julie Dickeson being presented with gifts on their Farewell to Arkansas. They had such an impact on the preservation of our history and the success of the museum during their time. They are greatly missed.

## A Red Devil 'Wannabe' by Julie Dickeson

Describing my experience at the Gaston Museum, and everything it meant to me, will be a very difficult task. But I'll give it a go, in true Red Devil spirit!

No, technically I am not a "Red Devil." My high school years were spent as a "Buckaroo" in my hometown of Smackover Arkansas, which is, coincidentally, another town born of the Oil Boom of the late 20's – early 30's. I still remember in the mid-1970's getting stuck behind the huge old pulling rigs crawling along on the oilfield back roads, the derricks, pump jacks and the great smell of oil that pervaded the little town. I imagine the burgeoning town of Joinerville must have been very similar to Smackover during the boom days. My first visit to the Gaston Museum in 2018 brought back many of those memories from my childhood, and I immediately felt at home!

Gaston blood runs deep in my husband Gary's family, himself a Red Devil until the integration and consolidation of four area schools created the West Rusk School District in 1965. Gary's two sisters and two brothers attended Gaston before him; and his father Jim Dickeson was a part of the first graduating class at the new Gaston school in 1933.

Gary began volunteering at the museum in 2016, after we had retired and made our home back in East Texas. In early 2018 I became involved as a volunteer; and was subsequently voted in as Board Member, and Treasurer upon the retirement of Rosalee Burns. In the four years that followed, I was blessed with some of the best memories, most meaningful friendships and most rewarding experiences of my life.

After an extended absence, Director Stephanie Osteen returned to the museum in mid-2019, bringing with her new and exciting ideas for a re-energized and refurbished Museum. Ideas that included a complete remodeling of the building interior, bold new exhibits, an enhanced Golf Tournament fundraiser, and the expansion of the annual Education Day into a continuous Education & Activity Program. Stephanie created partnerships with community leaders, bringing them to a new awareness of the historical and educational value of the Museum; resulting in the FIRST EVER budget allocation for our Museum from the Rusk County Commissioner's Court. She formed relationships with museums in nearby cities, fostering collaborative relationships that will now be a critical component in keeping the Gaston legacy alive.

I was blessed to be a part of this comprehensive re-birth! Along with several Gaston alumni and other volunteers, TOGETHER we became carpenters, painters, gardeners, builders, writers, movers, restorers. We brought White's Snack Shop back to life inside the Museum, and painted the tent house and filling station. We restored old furnishings from the Home Economics building, and showcased beloved military items that had previously been tucked away. We climbed ladders, dug gardens and built walls and fences. We recovered old maps, photographs, blueprints and documents. We brought Elvis back to Gaston, and created an extensive community exhibit featuring the Boy Scout hut, Joinerville churches, businesses and founding families. We displayed works from an acclaimed Gaston artist, and re-created the school with original Gaston band instruments, publications, artifacts from numerous school clubs, sports uniforms and trophies, and academic accolades.

**And TOGETHER... we prayed.** Daily. For our museum's mission, for our alumni, and for our community.

Although our beloved Gaston Museum is now closed, our efforts were not in vain! The delight of the alumni at the 2020 reunion & renovation unveiling was something I'll never forget. Their reactions alone, for me, made all of our efforts worthwhile!

But most importantly, thanks to the founders of the museum, the faithful workers, board members and supporters over the years, the year of renovation and the dedicated leadership and outreach of our Director and my sister of the heart Stephanie Osteen, **the history of the Gaston school will live on...** through each youth that participated or volunteered, each scholarship recipient, every remaining Gaston alumnus, and the hundreds of tourists that experienced it in person. Now, thousands of visitors will learn about Gaston history at the Depot Museum, the East Texas Oil Museum, the Kilgore Broadcast Museum, and the Henderson VFW; and countless more will experience the Museum online through virtual tours.

As for me, a Red Devil 'wannabe,' I will always treasure the forever friendships made through working TOGETHER with wonderful, God-loving, dedicated people on a truly worthwhile mission – preserving and sharing forever the his-

**FOREVER RED DEVILS**

## My Time by Rosemary Whitten

My Gaston memories are twofold - as an elementary student 1959-62 and as a Museum boardmember 2008 – present. I thoroughly enjoyed my years in 4<sup>th</sup> (Mrs. Henson teacher), 5<sup>th</sup> (Mrs. Grambling) and 6<sup>th</sup> (Mr. Gentry) grades at Gaston. Because my mother (Mary Jim Whitten) was the high school librarian and Dad (Kenneth Whitten) was high school principal, I not only knew classmates but lots of the “big kids” too. I felt then and still feel that small schools have a distinct advantage by giving students a chance to associate with others who are both older and younger. All of us have similar memories of the Good Friday Easter cross where we placed our flowers, Homecoming and the way all the adults dressed up to attend, coronation and related activities for Halloween, elementary students playing under the pine trees and on the lawn in front, viewing and maybe picking roses in the rose garden, walking the rock wall during recess... Although my time at Gaston just made up three of my school years, I am fortunate that I have classmates with whom I still keep in touch. Then after I moved back to Rusk County as an adult, I started volunteering at the Museum and serving on the Board. I renewed acquaintances and met many folks for whom I could put a face to a remembered name and learned lots more about the school and community. All are treasured memories.



Left: Nancy Miley Stephenson  
Right Rosemary Whitten

## Board Members' Memories

Dwight Huntsman creating a  
Masterpiece of history!



### Farewell by Dwight Huntsman

Hello classmates and friends, I would like to tell you how much I appreciate getting to serve on the Gaston Museum board for the past years. It was an honor and privilege.

This is my farewell to all, as I am greatly saddened to this end. I have much love for the school and museum.

My prayers for you, I hope you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and that He is living in your heart. May God be with you 'til we meet again.

Once a RED DEVIL, always a RED DEVIL  
The Gaston Legacy Lives on in our Hearts

Reunion 2023

Gaston Red Devils gathered at the Museum on October 7, 2023. Alumni and friends shared breakfast snacks and remembrances of their happy days at Gaston.



We are looking forward to a great RED DEVIL reunion 2024 !!!

Board Members Past and Present

Top Left: RuthAnn (1st Jr Member) and Shana Moland, Bottom Left: Stephanie Osteen, Gary and Julie Dickeson, Top Right: Rosemary Whitten and Roy "Spogie" Davis, Bottom Right: John Whitehead and Julie Dickeson, Center: L-R Shana Moland, John Whitehead, Rosemary Whitten, Gary Dickeson, Julie Dickeson, Dwight Huntsman, Stephanie Osteen and Andy Elliott



## Full Armor Visits for Last Time

Students and teachers from Full Armor Christian Academy have long been supporters of the Gaston Museum. Each year they participated in the Education Day activities and learned hands on what it was like to live in a time gone by. That was a highlight for them but more so for us.

On the 25th of April, Full Armor came for the last time. As the last school group to attend, teacher, Emily Whitworth sent a wonderful video with the music to Elvis singing Memories. I was moved to tears.

‘It’s very special but it’s also sad that there’s not going to be another one,’ said Baxter Whitworth, a 7th grade student.

As the Director, I will miss these days the most. Sharing our legacy, the history and the fun with these kids has been an honor and a treasure I will hold dear forever.



## Final Farewell

We have lost so many alumni, teachers, and friends of the museum and going forward, This Final Farewell goes out to them all. We do want to remember two devoted board members who in the past, dedicated time and energy to the museum’s creation and success over their years.

Rosalee Hyatt Burns,  
'49, 10/9/1930 - 3/9/2024

Robert Forsythe,  
'54, 7/25/1935 - 6/14/2024

Donations were received in their  
memory



## Terry Irick Memorial Scholarship Winner 2024

Congratulations, Luis Sanchez

Luis is the son of Matt (Gaston/WR alumni) and Shaena (Sanchez) Osteen, Grandson of former Gaston alumni', Henry Minor SR., Great Grandfather, Jane Minor Roy, Grandmother, (Gaston/WR alumni), and Stephanie Osteen, Grandmother, Director Gaston Museum.

Luis was an exceptional student and an asset to his class of 2024. He excelled in academics as well as sports and topped the applicants with his GPA. Congrats to a fine young man.

We are very proud of you.

Good Luck to the other applicants, you all had excellent applications and the judges had a difficult time in determining the top choice.

Judges are not associated with any of the applicants and all have professional backgrounds in business and education. We thank them for their dedication to choosing the very best qualified.



## Financials

General Funds	22,090.25
Roof Savings	20,000.00
CD'S	12,876.62
Stock	3537.50
<b>Total 6/30/2023</b>	<b>\$ 49,636.48</b>

# Red Devils Forevermore



From the 4 room schoolhouse to the Largest Rural School in the World in the 1930's, we will never forget our treasured Gaston School.



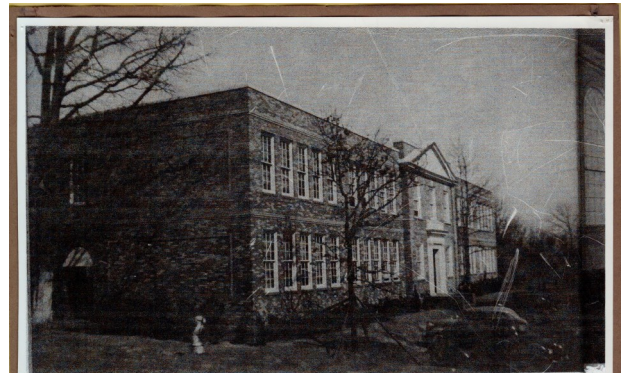
MILLER SCHOOL  
LOCATED ON MILLER FARM, LATER HWY 64W NEAR MT. HOPE, CUMBERLAND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
(CONSOLIDATED WITH MT. HOPE IN 1925 AND NAMED SCHOOL GASTON)



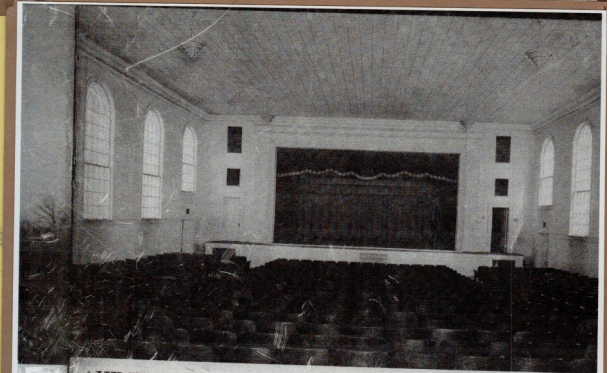
Gaston Home Economics Cottage - 1948



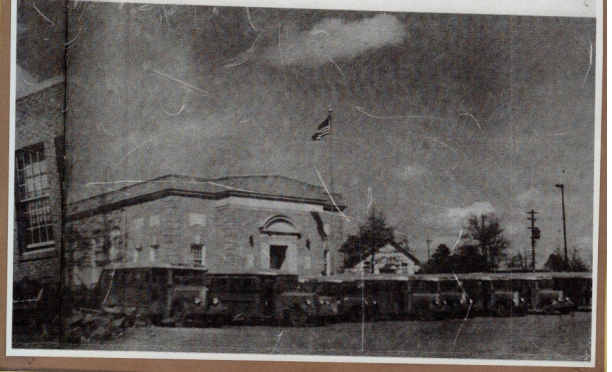
A piece of our hearts  
**ALWAYS**



JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL -- ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



AUDITORIUM - INTERIOR - ENTRANCE AND BUSS



POWER HOUSE  
(Below)