

MENARD COUNTY

Population: 2,360 (2000 estimate)

History:

Man has had a presence in Menard County for millennia, with native hunting and gathering tribes establishing themselves as many as 10,000 years ago. From the 1500s to the 1800s the area was utilized by both Apaches and Comanches. The Spanish began exploration in 1753 and founded Santa Cruz de San Saba Mission in 1757 in hopes of converting the Apaches to Christianity. The San Luis de las Amarillas Presidio was established in 1758 to protect the mission, but their extensive militia could not stop the Indians and their allies from burning it to the ground. The presidio's poor living conditions and lack of supplies caused it to be ultimately abandoned in 1770.

In the early 1830s James and Rezie Bowie voyaged to Menard County in search of a silver mine that the early Spanish had believed to be in the area. Their quest was unsuccessful but the legend of the Lost Bowie Mine has persisted for more than 150 years. Few others migrated to Menard County until after Texas was annexed to the United States in 1846. Six years later the War Department established Camp San Saba, also



Credit: Rod Gardner

known as Fort McKavett (*right and below*), to protect the early settlers. In 1858, Menard County was officially formed from a portion of Bexar County and named for the founder of Galveston,



Credit: Shannan Yarborough

Michel Branamour Menard. Most of Menard County's settlers came from within Texas or a neighboring Southern state, but some immigrants did come from England, Ireland and Germany and later from Mexico.

By 1890 cattle raising was the dominant occupation and more than seventy five percent of Menard's population lived on farms or ranches. Cotton, corn, sorghum, wheat and some grains were grown. Wool production peaked in the 1920s, far surpassing the cattle industry. Mohair also became a popular industry at that time and a number of goats were raised in the county. Menard County was also fairly rich in oil and gas, with oil production peaking in the 1960s at more than 270,000 barrels.

Geography:

Menard County lies on the Edwards Plateau, entirely within the Colorado River Basin and 130 miles northwest of San Antonio. It is crossed from east to west by the San Saba River.

Menard (pop 1,653): The county seat and located on the banks of the San Saba River, just one mile from the presidio. Formerly called Menardville, it served as a trading post and overnight stop for ranchers driving cattle north and west. The name was shortened in 1911 with the coming of the railroad. The change was requested to expedite sign painting.

Things to see and do:

Fort McKavett State Historic Site: Managed by Texas Parks & Wildlife, this 79.5-acre site with more than 25 historical buildings ranging from restored and refurbished to in-ruin. Buildings include a hospital, officers' quarters, schoolhouse, bakery, barracks and more.

Presidio San Saba: A crumbling reminder of Menard County's rugged frontier past, this Spanish fort was once the largest and most significant military installation in Texas both in size and militia.

"The Ditch Walk:" Menard's answer to the San Antonio River Walk, visitors can walk along the irrigation ditch that has run through town for more than 100 years. A decorative waterwheel now marks the spot where the grist mill once stood.

Nature Tours/Photography: Guided and self-guided tours to private ranches to observe and photograph wildlife and scenic landscapes of the Hill Country. Rod Gardner Outdoor Photography, 325/396-4590 or 325/656-7254. www.rgardnerphoto.com.

Menard County Courthouse: An art deco era building on the National Register of Historic Places, currently undergoing a massive renovation.

Kayaking: Full day and hourly guided tours and self-guided kayak adventures on the San Saba River are available through San Saba River Adventures. Menard. 325/456-6447 or 325/396-2658

Lodging:

Hilltop Motel, Menard
Hat Creek Cabins, Menard

Dining:

Branding Iron BBQ, Menard
Ojeda's Café, Menard
SideOats Café, Menard

For more information about Menard County and the Central Texas Hills & Rivers Region, visit their website at www.