

Millard's Crossing Historic Village: Lera Thomas' Incredible Gift

by Susie Lower with Ernesto Valdés

A short drive north of Nacogdoches, Texas, on Highway 59, is a history buff's delight—a quiet village made up of eighteenth and early nineteenth century buildings, at least one of which existed when Texas was *Tejas*. Millard's Crossing Historic Village offers visitors, especially parents, a unique opportunity to step into the past with their children and share a sense of early Texas. This village of antiques has its own story, which begins with Lera Millard Thomas who was born in Nacogdoches, Texas, on August 3, 1900.

She had always been an extremely smart, restless child with high ambitions, as one often-told story illustrates. In her early teens, Lera decided that she wanted a tennis court, which was unheard of in a small East Texas town in those days. When her father summarily dismissed the idea, she engaged one of his hired help to work with her to build one herself, and build it she did. Much of her life is intertwined with that of her husband, Representative Albert J. Thomas, one of Houston's most popular congress-



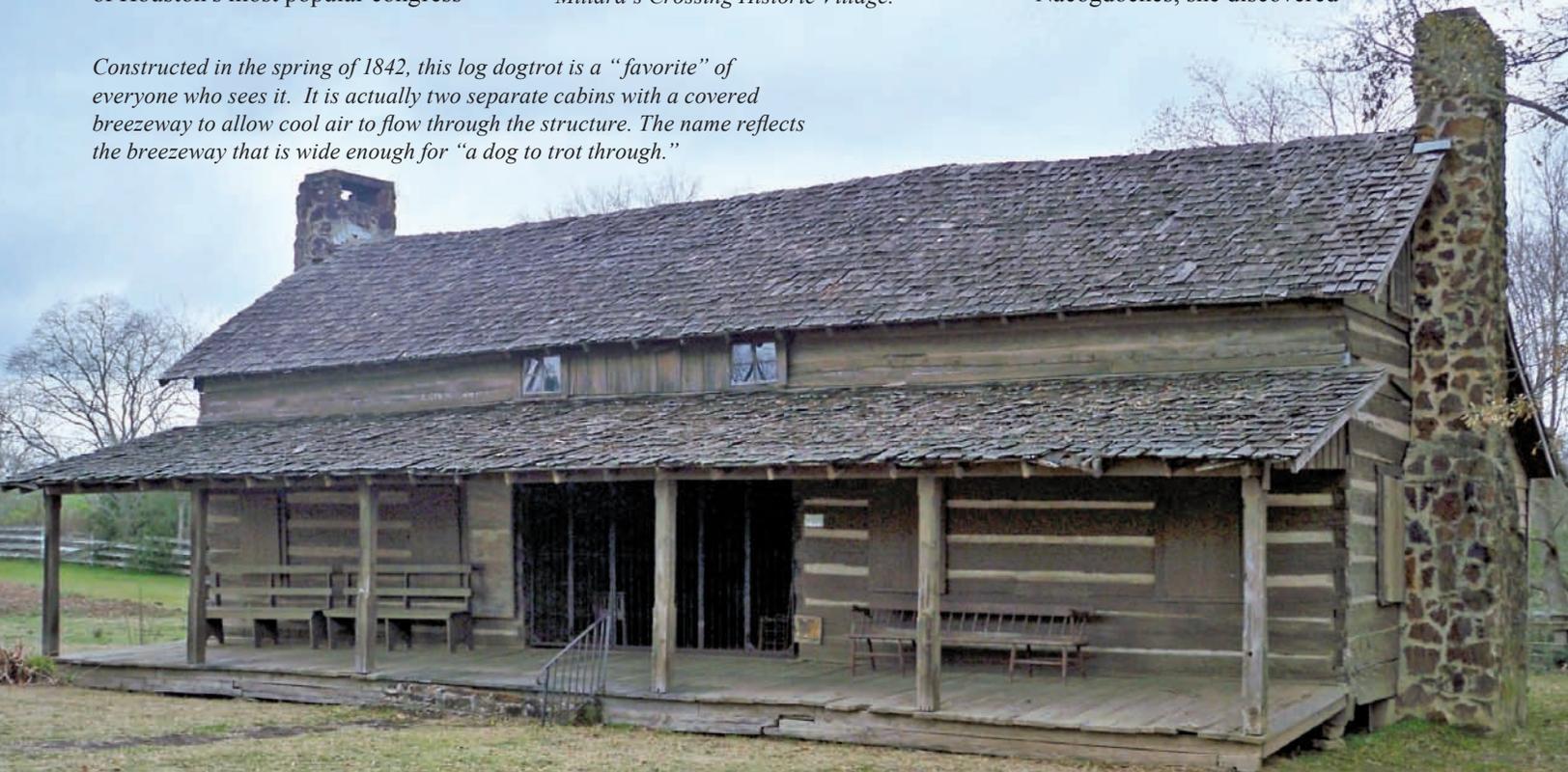
Lera Thomas, a Nacogdoches native, began an amazing preservation project in the "Oldest Town in Texas" when she moved several threatened, antique structures to what is now Millard's Crossing Historic Village.

men, who served fourteen consecutive terms in the United States House of Representatives from 1936 until his death in 1966. The Democratic Party leaders asked Lera Thomas to run in the special election to fill the vacancy left by her husband's death; she did and won seventy-four percent of the votes. After serving out her husband's term, she returned to Nacogdoches, where she had inherited some family land, woods, and a cow pasture. It would not be long before the cows had to move over as she embarked upon a remarkable preservation project, relocating cabins and structures that now make up Millard's Crossing Historic Village—her legacy to the people of Texas.

During the years in Washington with her husband she had rubbed elbows with some of the most powerful political leaders of the time. As a congresswoman in her own right, she worked to put her own stamp on legislation during her abbreviated term in office. She was accustomed to "getting things done."

When she returned home to Nacogdoches, she discovered

Constructed in the spring of 1842, this log dogtrot is a "favorite" of everyone who sees it. It is actually two separate cabins with a covered breezeway to allow cool air to flow through the structure. The name reflects the breezeway that is wide enough for "a dog to trot through."



All photos courtesy of Millard's Crossing Historic Village unless otherwise noted.



“The Watkins Log Cabin,” built in 1842, is a “two-pen” square log house with a spacious loft and two “side rooms.” Relatives of Thomas’ mother, Annie Watkins, lived in the cabin in the late nineteenth century. It was moved to Millard’s Crossing Historic Village from northwestern Nacogdoches County.

Photo by Alan Richman.

the slow and steady destruction of many of the town’s historical and stately old buildings. Given that the town calls itself the “Oldest Town in Texas,” the destruction of its past was an outrage that shocked her. Rapid commercial growth due to the baby boom in the mid-1960s began destroying the gracious old town where she had grown up. In a growth spurt of its own, enrollment at Stephen F. Austin State College (SFASU) jumped from 3,500 to 12,000 students in three years, and the college became a university. Unfortunately, most of the stately old homes located near the college became the first casualty of this economic growth as fast food franchises came to town, offering money for these properties that seemed like a fortune to their owners. Many visitors ask why the loveliest homes were not at least moved to another location. I always tell them, “You don’t understand. There was no demand for them back then. To this generation, old was OLD. Old was leaky, old was drafty, old was hard to air condition. They had lived with old all their lives, and they were sick of it. They wanted to be modern.”

Lera Thomas, a close friend of Ima Hogg and Faith Bybee, who spearheaded historic preservation in other parts of the state, had visited every major preservation project in the country. In no uncertain terms, Thomas conveyed to the town fathers the insanity of destroying the very thing that would be valued most to the “Oldest Town in Texas”—but she got nowhere. She decided to start her own preservation project stating that “if I don’t do it—who will?”

The result of Lera Thomas’ effort to preserve her town’s heritage became Millard’s Crossing Historic Village. Thomas gathered as many aging structures as she could that were “restorable” from Nacogdoches County and moved them to her own property. Those that required restoration were repaired using authentic materials as much as possible. Today, Millard’s Crossing is probably the most uniquely preserved collection of historical buildings in the state, if not the nation.

At first, the Village “grew like Topsy,” with no particular game plan until, at some point, Thomas decided she wanted a village, which would require a church, a log office, a log school house, and a country store. Many of the structures date back to the early days of the Republic, including three particularly fine treasures: an 1840s square, log dogtrot; a two-pen log cabin constructed in 1842; and a two-story double house built in 1837 that is one of the finest examples of its kind in East Texas. The dogtrot is a favorite of the visitors. Built with massive square pine logs, it is large and classic in design with a covered breezeway, wide enough for “a dog to trot through,” that connects what are essentially two separate cabins. Eventually, if the project receives funding, this house will be the centerpiece of a “homestead”—complete with a log barn, a corn crib, chicken house, and an outhouse—where the Village can move its “hands-on” education program, making the experience all the more authentic.

When the railroad came to Nacogdoches in the late 1880s,

the track turned northeast to Shreveport and crossed Millard property, which is why Thomas called her Village “Millard’s Crossing.” Today, one can still hear the trains as they pass on the north side of the Village. A pre-1916 wooden caboose, once part of the Nacogdoches and Southeastern line chartered in 1905 to log the Angelina and Attoyac River bottoms, represents train history at Millard’s Crossing Historic Village.

My first acquaintance with Thomas was from the headlines in our local newspaper. Everything she did was either in the headlines or on the front page. “Who is this Lera Thomas?” I thought at the time. I had not lived in Nacogdoches long enough to know, but twenty years later I found out. In 1989, after earning a teaching certificate, on an impulse, I answered an ad and was hired for the position of tour guide at Millard’s Crossing, the most challenging job of my life. Getting on with Thomas was not an easy matter—her temper was legendary—but I survived, learning some valuable lessons from her.

For one thing, Thomas was a businesswoman. I will never forget the day she stopped me and asked how the visitation was going. I replied, cheerily, that we had about fifteen visitors that day. She gave me a hard look and asked, “Does that pay your salary?” I had to confess, it did not. Not in charge of the finances at that time, I had not worried about budget shortfalls; but when I was appointed director of the Village after her death in 1993, I discovered that they were annual, and relentless. As programs were built and rental facilities improved, so did our financial situation—but it was never enough for such a large and aging complex.

In 1982, Thomas, who worried about what would happen to the Village after she passed, donated roughly half of the property to Communities Foundation of Texas along with an endowment grant from the Brown Foundation. This move provided tax exempt status for the Village and shared management responsi-

bilities. It was an uneasy partnership but it saved the Village from being closed upon her death.

When I took on the directorship, there was no mission statement—something I knew little about until I attended “museum school” at Winedale. I thought long and hard about the goals of Millard’s Crossing. For Thomas, the village sought to save threatened Nacogdoches County structures and, in doing so, established a place to display her collection of curios and antiques collected in her world travels. What a collection it was! I soon discovered from older area residents what all the tools in the collection were for, why the buildings were designed as they were, and how they reflected the story of pioneering in East Texas. Our mission statement now goes way beyond preservation.

My new employers were very supportive and approved ideas for a “hands-on” education program. Today we teach subsistence farming, how it built character, and how it reflects the strength, resourcefulness, and toughness of the people who settled the state. In doing so, we connect the generations by simulating the experiences of past generations for today’s children, by having them do “chores.” School children learn how to operate a push-plow, plant corn, how to do “Mama’s laundry” by utilizing water from a well and a hand wringer on the back porch of one of the houses, shelling corn by hand, and then being introduced to the wonder of a mechanical corn sheller. Finally, they attend school in the log school house and learn to write with quill pens to “better” themselves so they may not have to work so hard to survive in adulthood.

Children also experience the fun of an old-fashioned childhood, playing games known to their grandfathers such “anty over” (two teams throwing and trying to catch a ball over the school house), making toys out of corn cobs, and having a corn cob dart fight as they learn first-hand how children created their own amusements. For closure, they are told to go home and to share their experiences with older members of their families to establish a dialog between the generations, which is an important step in learning from the past.

According to a recent Pew Foundation poll, eighty per cent

Children attend school at Millard’s Crossing where they wear old-fashioned hats and bonnets and learn to write with quill pens.



Millard’s Crossing is more than just a museum. Its award-winning “hands-on” programs give children an opportunity to feel what it was like to live, play, and work in another time period in Texas.



agreed that a generation gap exists in America.¹ In today's single-family units, fewer opportunities exist for passing down wisdom from older, caring family members to younger generations. Millard's Crossing, with its hands-on program, attempts to bridge that gap.

Adult visitors who take the tours get back to the "good" in the "good old days" as they play "guess what it is" and attend school—writing with quill pens and wearing hats, and bonnets. All visitors have the fun of tapping their feet to the peppy tunes of an Edison phonograph, an old player piano, or one of many pump organs that are kept in working order.

My background includes theatre, so many of our events attempt to bring history alive. For instance, on Halloween night the Village hosts "The Ghosts of Millard's Crossing" with actors, posing as former residents of the houses, sitting on the porches and telling their stories to their visitors. "An old Fashioned Christmas" includes lots of live music, live theatre with a presentation of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" in the chapel, and a great variety of activities for visitors to enjoy including "learn on the spot" contra-dancing. Melodramas are also performed at events both at the Village and in town.

As its motto asserts, Millard's Crossing is indeed more than a museum; it is also a classroom, a place for weddings, receptions, banquets, and guided tours. Visitors come as close to touching the past as they possibly can. It is one thing to read and project oneself into the past, it is quite another to stand in the past and look out at the surrounding nineteenth century shops, church, barber shop, general store, and homes. Places like Millard's Crossing take pages of history and infuse them with a tangible

sense of the past. How that is done makes this place more than a museum.

In the last fifteen years, the Village has won many awards for its "hands-on" programs from the Texas tourism industry, as well as a Citation of Honor from the Northeast Texas Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Two of the buildings bear medallions from the Texas Historical Commission and the Village is highly commended by teachers from area schools at all levels. Millard's Crossing partners with SFASU, and other local colleges, serving as a resource for students in education, history, hospitality, film, photography, and interpretive classes.

In 2004, the Village applied for grants to improve several of its structures, including the church and a Victorian house that were rented out for weddings and private parties as a cost-effective source of income. However, when approaching larger foundations, Village administrators discovered that Millard's Crossing was not considered "a good receiving entity" because of its ownership structure. Communities Foundation of Texas owned half, and Thomas' daughter and heir to the property, Anne Lasater, owned the remainder. The Village's eligibility for large grants, rested on its becoming a singly-owned local 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Nacogdoches rallied, donating generously to a legacy campaign initiated to demonstrate community support. Made possible by the cooperation of Communities Foundation of Texas and Lasater, Village ownership transferred to Millard's Crossing Historic Village, Inc. in 2008.

Millard's Crossing Historic Village is an amazing place. Yet, few outside of East Texas have ever heard of it or know that the Village is one of the largest historic complexes in the state. Ideally located at the gateway to heritage tourism on El Camino Real, it has the potential to become a crown jewel for heritage tourism in Texas. In 2008, the Texas Historical Foundation recognized that potential by choosing the Village as its annual project, making a generous donation. Thomas did an incredible thing when she began the preservation project at Millard's Crossing—then she passed the baton to the next generation to take it and run with it.

Millard's Crossing Historic Village is located at 6020 North Street (Business U.S. 59 North), P.O. Box 634221, Nacogdoches, Texas 75963, 936-564-6631. Hours of operation are Monday through Saturday, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and Sunday, 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Guided tours are \$6.00 for adults and \$5.00 for children; self-guided tours are \$1.00. For additional information, visit www.millardscrossing.com.

Susie Lower was raised in New Jersey and came to Texas in 1965. She is an avid birdwatcher, acts in local theatre, produces melodramas, and plays keyboard for Susie & the Jazzdaddys. Susie has been the Executive Director at Millard's Crossing for twenty years.

Ernesto Valdés has a B.A. from Trinity University, a J.D. from South Texas College of Law, and an M.A. in Public History. He serves as Director for the Oral History Project in the Center for Public History at the University of Houston.



Children experience life in early Texas through the education programs at Millard's Crossing. Here children are push-plowing as they learn about subsistence farming.