

Mister Cool

If you took all the blocks and bags of ice Orville Conn has sold since 1944, and placed them end to end on I-10, they would melt.

Ice does that in a hurry in Houston's summertime. It gets so hot here that ice sometimes must be added to the slurry so concrete won't set up too fast at a construction site.

Conn has sold a lot of ice for that purpose, though not as much in the past few years. If you want to know how the economy is faring, ask an iceman. He can tell by how much he is selling to construction companies — for concrete and for workers' water coolers — compared to other years.

Ice distributors know whether attendance at amusement parks or sporting events is up or down by how much ice they are buying. And just thinking about all the hot and thirsty Republicans coming to town for a national convention next summer is enough to make an iceman shiver with excitement.

Conn has been in the business longer than most, and there is some irony in that. He didn't see much ice when he was growing up on a farm near Crockett.

"The ice truck didn't come out in the country," he said.

It was a real treat to get a chunk of ice when the family went to town. Maybe they would take enough home to crank out some homemade ice cream. And, using that old wooden-handled ice pick, they could chip off pieces for lemonade or tea.

But most Texas farm families in the 1930s suffered through one long and hot summer day after another without so much as a single cube of ice.

He built a life of ice

Conn was remembering this a few days ago while standing on the dock at Sparkle Ice Co. on North Shepherd. Inside the building, workers were turning out 300-pound blocks and other workers were bagging the crushed variety. Huge machines made ice in big rooms, and the finished blocks and bags were stored in other big rooms.

It felt good in there. The temperature on the other side of the walls was nearing three digits.

After Conn left that no-ice country place, he moved to a life of ice in steamy Houston. He got himself a route in the East End, off of Harrisburg.

Neighborhood residents had not yet acquired many refrigerators. People used ice-boxes and would put a card in the window to let Conn know whether they wanted a 25 or 50 or 75 or 100 pound block. The hundred cost 50 cents.

The iceman's biggest aggravation back then was hauling a big chunk of ice to an upstairs apartment only to find the door locked and nobody home. They should have taken the card out of the window if they weren't going to be there.

The customer's most common complaint was water dripping off the ice onto the floor.

Conn said his biggest customers in those days B.A.C. (before air conditioners) were the neighborhood beer joints. They depended so much upon ice, used so much of it

about it. But privately, convention lost more than 100 conventions for the tourism agency created in the and on the mortgage for their half-

See TWO CENTS on Page 2C.

MISSION TO SAVE 'CASA MARE'



John Everett photos / Chronicle

Built in 1910, the mansion at the Girl Scouts' Camp Casa Mare may face extinction next month.

Girl Scouts plan to raze costly but tradition-laden 'Big House'

By RUTH RENDON
Houston Chronicle

For more than 30 years, older Girl Scouts from around southeast Texas have traditionally been rewarded with a stay in the "Big House" in Seabrook during summer camp.

But that privilege — for ninth-graders and above — will become a part of history, as will the 81-year-old mansion at the Scouts' Camp Casa Mare, if officials at the San Jacinto Girl Scout Council follow through with their plans next month.

State and national preservationists are hoping to convince council leaders to change their plans to demolish the three-story mansion on Todville Road.

But, Ann W. Schneider, executive director of the

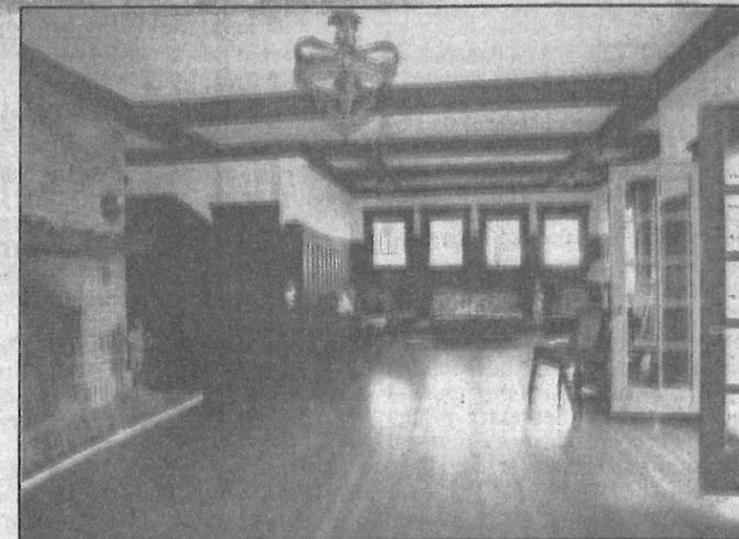
San Jacinto Girl Scouts Council, contends: "The house is very expensive to maintain and the decision of keeping it was not in the best interest of the Girl Scouts."

Officials of the Texas Historical Commission, the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance and the National Trust for Historic Preservation have contacted the Girl Scouts to try to save the concrete, mission-style home.

The mansion was built in 1910 by William Scott, then president of the Southern Pacific Railroad Lines of Texas and Louisiana. The historical commission has labeled it the "most distinctive mission-style residence in the state of Texas."

One of the first homes built along Galveston Bay, it has six bedrooms and baths with a full basement

See HOUSE on Page 4C.



The "Big House" at Camp Casa Mare includes a spacious front room with hardwood floor and lots of windows overlooking Galveston Bay.

House

Continued from Page 1C.

and five screened-in sleeping porches.

The home, then called Deepend, was on the "Surf" stop on Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad, which was owned by Southern Pacific. It was purchased by the scouts in 1958 for \$100,000.

Elizabeth Barker Willis, field office coordinator for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Fort Worth, wrote Schneider last month urging the Girl Scouts to apply for available grants and low-interest loans to preserve the "Big House," as it is affectionately called by the campers.

But, she said, Schneider "basically declined our offer."

"It's very frustrating," said Willis. "It's an incredible house and site. It's doubly frustrating because they won't apply for grants."

Margie Elliott of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance said her organization also offered to help prepare material to get the home listed on the national and state registers of historical places.

And, in a letter last month, Jim Steely, director of the national registers program for the Texas Historical Commission, offered the assistance of his staff to evaluate the condition of the home and to formulate a preservation plan.

But Schneider and Anne S. Moeller, president of the council, responded a week later saying the council's board of directors "concluded that San Jacinto Girl Scout Council was not in the business of historical restoration and/or preservation, but rather in the business of serving girls and that our girl membership would be better served by a different type of facility."

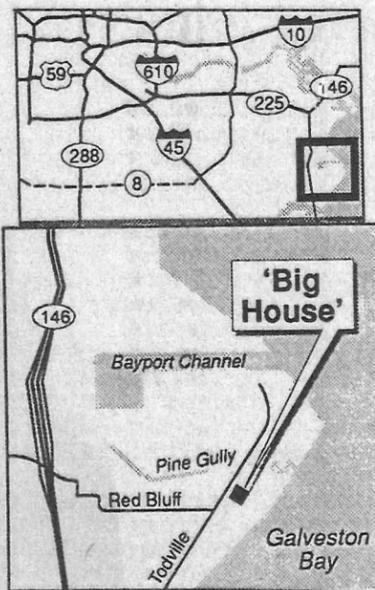
Schneider said the council hired an engineering firm in 1989 to survey the home and assess its condition.

The conclusion, she said, was that it would cost \$800,000 to restore the home and that major repairs would be essential about every five years. She said that in the last 10 years, repairs have cost \$650,000, and the tab is just too high.

But Houston architect Graham Luhn, who surveyed the home for the Girl Scouts, said he did not recommend demolition, but rather encouraged restoration. His report outlined a six-phase plan to fully restore the home inside and out.

"It's easy to repair, but it does cost," said Luhn, whose firm deals with preserving historical buildings.

"It bothers me that they've decided to demolish it. I've seen houses a lot worse that have been saved."



Chronicle

Luhn said the \$800,000 figure he gave to restore the home was an estimate and "that's doing the whole nine yards and that's not necessary for saving the building."

He said it would take about \$200,000 to initially save the building and suggested the Girl Scouts board the home for several years until funds are available.

"There could be three generations of Girls Scouts going there. You'd think that would be a good basis for a campaign to raise money for it, but obviously they don't have \$800,000," said Luhn, who is president of the preservation alliance and also heads the state board of preservation for the national registry under the Texas Historical Commission.

The home, slated to be razed around Labor Day at a cost of \$40,000, has structural problems stemming from reinforced steel within the concrete, Schneider said. It also has electrical problems as well as many leaks from water seeping through the concrete exterior, she said.

This past spring the home's third floor was closed because it was considered unsafe.

Schneider said the amount of money needed to restore the home will be better spent to meet the needs of more girls in the 41,000-member, 21-county San Jacinto Council.

In its place, the Girl Scouts are set to start construction this fall on a covered play shelter and swimming pool and next year plan to build a multipurpose building with dormitories, dining facilities and classrooms, Schneider said.

Girl Scout leader Melody Rountree of Houston said a group of leaders in favor of saving the "Big House" drew up a proposal to raise funds.

But Schneider said the potential

contributors for such a fund already had pledged to give money to the Girl Scouts Council and she did not want to ask for more funds.

Schneider said she has been surprised by the historical groups offering to assess the home when a few years ago no one expressed interest in helping. She said the only offers made then were for tax breaks, which don't mean much to a non-profit organization.

Willis said the Girl Scouts could apply to the Preservation Services Fund, which awards matching grants to hire consultants related to preservation. The maximum award, she said, is \$5,000.

The Scouts also could apply to the National Preservation Loan Fund, a low-interest matching loan to rehabilitate buildings as well as provide seed money to start loan funds for community projects, she said. The loans range from \$20,000 to \$150,000.

Schneider said structural problems had not been addressed because they were not aware the interior steel, which is exposed in various parts of the home, was rotting.

Houston architect Roger Ruppel and retired contractor John Sheffield of La Porte, who worked on major renovations at the camp in 1980, said they find it hard to believe the repairs have cost \$650,000.

"It doesn't make any sense to me that they'd spend double after we left, unless someone came in and took it apart and put it back together," Sheffield said, adding his renovation work cost about \$300,000.

"I've been around a long time and it's hard to believe it would have gone that bad," he said.

The men said they replaced wooden windows with aluminum ones, put a new roof and water-proofed the exterior of the home.

"At the time we did work on it, it was a substantial house," Ruppel said. "I would think they'd be able to preserve the building and respect its historical value. I think they have ample property to build any other building."

Rountree said more than 1,500 signatures were collected earlier this year from those in favor of restoring the "Big House."

"The main reason I want to see the house saved as a teacher is that this is such a great history opportunity," said Rountree, whose two daughters would be eligible to stay in the "Big House" next year. "They keep telling us that we have to plan and go into the 21st century. Well, I don't think you have to destroy history to go into the next century."

"They want to plan a futuristic camp. This is a little camp; it's not a Disney World. There's land out there to build other buildings without tearing the house down."

There is a Real Community Crisis
You Can Help Solve