

Willett retires from Prison Museum, Stephens named director

Listening to Jim Willett speak about the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is like hearing an audiobook come to life. The former senior warden of the Huntsville Unit and the now-retired director of the Texas Prison Museum is a walking TDCJ history book.

“I started working pickets at The Walls in 1971 while going to Sam Houston State,” said Willett. “It was just a way to make some money and I never had any intention of staying on, but by the time I graduated I had made a lot of friends and the money was pretty good,” he said. A couple of years later he was promoted to sergeant, then to lieutenant, advancing through the ranks to assistant warden at the Pack II Unit, then to senior warden at the Diagnostic (now Byrd) Unit. He retired as senior warden of the Huntsville Unit in 2001.

A couple of months after retirement, Willett began working at the Texas Prison Museum at its former downtown Huntsville location as a volunteer in the gift shop. The museum moved to its current location on Texas State Highway 75 in November 2002 and Willett became its director in June 2003. He retired from the directorship at the end of May 2018 but will continue volunteering at the museum.

Willett has always had an interest in history and his time as the museum’s director was crucial to its growth over the years. “When

you work at The Walls and you hear people talking about how something used to be or how a piece of equipment was once used differently, it raises your interest in it,” said Willett. “That information is now available to the public at the museum,” he said.

The museum expanded by an additional 5,000 square feet at the beginning of May 2018 to accommodate the many artifacts and items that have been acquired over the years and continue to be received from former TDCJ employees, their families and friends, and even ex-offenders.



Texas Prison Museum Director Bill Stephens (left) and retired TPM Director Jim Willett (right) with some of the weapons used by TDCJ officers over the years that are now on display at the museum in Huntsville.

One of Willett’s favorite objects in the museum was donated several years ago by a woman who had bought an offender-made item in the old craft shop store at the Huntsville Unit: a purse made out of cigarette packages. Such items no longer exist because tobacco products are now prohibited among the offender population.

“When the museum was downtown, we were lucky to have maybe 25 visitors in a day but now that we’re in this really nice facility that’s so visible to travelers on Interstate 45, attendance has exploded,” said Willett. “On a daily basis, we’ll get visitors who tell us they’ve traveled between Dallas and Houston

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many times over the years and that today is the day that they've finally decided to stop and visit the Texas Prison Museum," added Willett.

Taking over as director of the Texas Prison Museum is former TDCJ Correctional Institutions Director Bill Stephens, who assumed the role at the beginning of May 2018 when Willett retired. The transition has been a smooth one for both men, who have known each other for more than 30 years.

"I first met Jim when he was the assistant warden at the Pack II Unit and I then worked

concerned with an offender trying to escape or assault someone while you're on the job. "It's also a lot easier to manage nine employees at the museum instead of the 30,000 that are employed by TDCJ," noted Stephens.

"One of my biggest challenges in this position will be working with the staff to properly display and archive the many prison-related artifacts that we continue to receive from the public," said Stephens. "We have many prison rodeo items, as well as offender arts and crafts items that we'll be putting on display inside the new addition to the museum," Stephens noted.



Lieutenant Jim Willett, pictured in 1980 at the Huntsville 'Walls' Unit.

for him again at the Diagnostic Unit," said Stephens. "He's someone whom I've always looked up to over the years and have tried to emulate with his professionalism and compassion for people," added Stephens.

Both men noted that one of the greatest advantages of being the director of the Texas Prison Museum is that you don't have to be

All of the archiving and documentation of artifacts and information for the museum are the result of hard work by Willett and now-retired curator Sandy Rogers, who traveled extensively around the state talking with relatives of former employees.

Stephens said that while recently reviewing the database that Willett has built over

the years, he discovered an event which he had never heard about. "In the late 1920s, there was an escape by forty offenders in a shootout at the Huntsville Unit, through a back gate," said Stephens. "The citizens of Huntsville organized a posse that went after the escapees and rounded up all of them except one who turned himself in 17 years later after being a preacher in north Texas."

Willett noted that many people are unaware that the prison rodeo was not held for a couple years at the beginning of World War II, and, in the early 1950s, the prison rodeo went 'on the road' with eight performances at the State Fair of Texas in Dallas.

Willett said that one of the things that has amazed him over the years is how many visitors – especially younger museum patrons – are still fascinated with the story of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, more than 80 years after their deaths. "They can appear uninterested in what you're telling them about something within the museum but once you mention Bonnie and Clyde, their antennae go up! They've either heard about them through a relative who may have encountered them or through the movie or even just reading about them somewhere," said Willett.

Both men have high praise for the agency's relationship with the museum and its support of the operations through fundraising activities, as well as its daily operations with offenders cleaning the grounds and providing building maintenance. ▲