

Canutillo's rich history includes mother of First Lady Laura Bush

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Special to The monitor

Local students are amazed to learn that Jenna Welch, who taught the First Lady of the United States how to read, grew up in Canutillo.

The name "canutillo" comes from a plant that was prevalent in the Upper Valley — north of the city of El Paso — along the Rio Grande during the 1800s. The town of Canutillo was established in June 1823, when the Canutillo land grant was assigned to 30 citizens of El Paso del Norte. A small agricultural settlement was established in 1824, but was abandoned in 1833 because of Apache raiders. The area remained vacant until the mid 1800s when settlers arrived. The Canutillo Townsite and Land Company was chartered in 1909, and a post office was established two years later.

Canutillo's first school was built in 1911, and was named the Lone Star School. It consisted of one room and one teacher, and served first through eighth grades. Canutillo was identified as a rural post office in 1914 and had four general stores to serve the surrounding population. The community's population grew to about 300 by 1925.

In 1927, Jessie Laura and Halsey Sinclair Hawkins along with their only daughter, Jenna Louise, moved from Little Rock, Ark. to the town of Canutillo. They lived on Nuway



COURTESY PHOTO

Jenna Welch spoke during the El Paso Community College Northwest Campus' dedication to the Jenna Welch and Laura Bush Community Library. Shown from left to right, Jenna Hawkins Welch, Lydia Tena-Perez, dean of EPCC N.W. campus, Charles Hart, superintendent, CISD, Joe Villarreal, president, CISD Board of Trustees and Dr. Richard Rhodes, president, EPCC.

Street, which was approximately two miles north of Lone Star School, west of Hwy. 80, also known as Doniphan Drive. Welch, who was born July 24, 1919, in Little Rock, was only 8 years old when she arrived in the community of Canutillo and enrolled at the Lone Star School as a third grader. Sinclair Hawkins owned and ran a local business called Nuway Lumber. Along with the lumberyard, he also

built the Tourist Courts, which was a motel for travelers passing through on their way to California.

"Because of the Depression in the 1930s, a lot of people from Oklahoma and Arkansas picked up and moved west to California. The Okies and Arkies came through, and of course they all wanted to rent a 75 cent room, which only had one bed and not enough room for a whole family, so

they had to take the \$2 rooms," recalls Welch recalls.

One of the general stores in Canutillo at that time was owned and run by Estanilado Sierra, whose daughter, Alicia, was in the same class as Welch. She and Alicia went through school together at the Lone Star School. Welch says that she remembers she and Alicia tied for salutatorian when they graduated from the eighth grade. The Lone Star School only served students up to the eighth grade, so when Welch graduated she went on to high school at El Paso High. She attended college at the Texas College of Mines, which is now the University of Texas at El Paso.

She married Harold Bruce Welch in a chapel ceremony at Fort Bliss in 1944. Soon after, they moved to Midland. Nov. 4, 1946, their only daughter, Laura Welch, was born. She is now the First Lady of the United States of America, wife of President George W. Bush.

El Paso Community College in partnership with the Canutillo Independent School District honored Welch by announcing the Jenna Welch Family Literacy Program, in celebration of Welch's example of reading to her daughter. The program was announced at the dedication of the Jenna Welch and Laura Bush Community Library, at the EPCC's Northwest Campus and will be shared by both Canutillo ISD and the EPCC campuses.

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