

Griffis' Corner on Grapevine Lake

by Jim Morriss

Many of us who live in southern Denton County have frequent occasions when we must fight our way down highway 2499 into the tangled snarl of traffic that ties Fort Worth, Dallas and the Mid-Cities into the north entrance of the DFW Airport. The fact that this area seems to perpetually be in a state of reconstruction adds to the feeling of dread for traveling through the area that used to be known as "the Funnel." One way to possibly avoid some of this turmoil is to take Lakeside Parkway over the old route that 2499 used to follow, right over the Grapevine Dam. It is amazing how much everything has changed over the last 25 years. Long before there was a Gaylord Texan Hotel, a Great Wolf Lodge, a Grapevine Mills, a DFW Airport, or even a city of Flower Mound, things were very different. But one small landmark seems to have resisted the transmutation of the rest of the Metroplex. It is a spot, near the north end of the great earthen dam, that is called **Griffis Corner & Grill**.

This little outpost has been a fixture of consistency on Grapevine Lake for well over sixty years. This is where you can go for picnic supplies, groceries, beverages, ice, bait and other fishing equipment. They will also cook you a genuine old fashioned cheese burger with french fries just as they have been doing there since the days when the dam was brand new and the lake was filling up for the very first time. So maybe we should wonder why Griffis Corner is there and how it got its unusual name.

Some time after the Civil War, a man from Missouri named William M. Griffis decided to move to the state of Texas. He and his wife, Nancy, settled on a farm between Ft. Worth and San Angelo in Hamilton County. There they raised eight children. The oldest child, William, evidently did not want to remain on his father's farm so he moved to the growing city of Dallas. He married a girl named Mary Davis and got a job repairing railroad cars. William and Mary

Griffis had a son named Walter and a daughter named Laura.

Walter Vernon Griffis, who was born in 1905, preferred to be called Tony. He grew up and became a machinist working at a cotton gin in Dallas. He married a girl named Lola Mae Myers and the two had a daughter who they named Verna. Sometime around the end of WWII, Lola and Tony divorced. In 1946 Tony Griffis married a lady named Mary Louise Tobian and the two bought a 46 acre farm between Grapevine and Lewisville. Cotton and wheat were the two major crops that were usually grown in south Denton county and that is probably what Tony and Mary intended to do. But their plans were abruptly changed when they learned that the a new lake was going to be put on their property.

Tony and Mary must have been aware that plans were afoot to build a dam and create Grapevine Lake. But they also knew that the farmland they were buying was in a unique spot. Actually 40 acres of it were in Tarrant County, just 5 $\frac{2}{3}$ acres jutted up into Denton County and none of it would be in the lake. It was very well known that plans for a lake on Denton Creek had been in the works for at least 25 years. The city of Dallas was in dire need of water but to create this lake, a dam would have to be built in Tarrant County and getting any cooperation between Dallas and Ft. Worth was, in those days, nearly impossible. They may have been aware that Congress had passed the "1945 River and Harbors Act" and that Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn was taking credit for having Ray Roberts Lake, Benbrook Lake, and an expansion of Lake Dallas put on the "ToDo List" of the Army Corps of Engineers. What they would not have known was that Grapevine Lake was started just about when Tony and Mary Griffis were sealing the deal on their 46 acre farmstead. Furthermore Dallas was requesting that the Grapevine project be "fast tracked" and given priority over the other lake projects.

Mary Griffis later recalled that it took a lot of work to clean up the old farmhouse, fix up the out buildings and patch up the primitive water system that came with the place. Then came the notification from the Army Corps that all of their land situated in Tarrant County would be assimilated by a, soon to be built, Grapevine Lake. Despite the fact that their 40 acres were high above the lake, a buffer zone was to be acquired around this lake and no private ownership was to be allowed of property at the water's edge. Most of the owners who were displaced by Grapevine Lake were forced to sell all of their land, but Tony and Mary lost all of it except for the small 5 $\frac{2}{3}$ acre piece that protruded north of the county line. You really couldn't have a successful farm on just five acres, but since the Army seemed hell-bent on building a lake right on the Griffis' front doorstep, they considered what options were left to them. They could have sold the five acres or bought more land to the north of them. However prices were increasing for land that was close to, but not in, the new lake. Mary and Tony decided to take the little corner of land that was left to them, and establish a business to cater to the workers who would soon be building the dam, and then to provide supplies to the boaters and fishermen who would soon be flocking to Grapevine Lake. So the corner of land that was once attached to Griffis' farm, became Griffis Corner.

No one can deny that Griffis Corner is in a highly desirable location to provide services to those who come to the deep end of Grapevine Lake. The construction of the dam itself took over three years to complete. During that time, Griffis started serving hot meals to workers. Another opportunity presented itself when they learned that several houses in the lake bottom could be obtained for just the cost of having them moved. Tony and Mary had several of these set on their property and rented them out. They also rented plots of their land for mobile homes. It soon became known that Griffis corner was a good place to go to get a bowl of chili or hamburger and while there to check on the construction of the dam. Then in July of 1952 the project ended

and the flood gates of the dam were closed. But mother nature did not seem to be in any hurry to fill up the new lake.

Business declined at Griffis Corner with the departure of the work crews but Tony and Mary were able to keep their doors open. Gradually water started rising at the base of the dam. By 1955 there was enough of a lake that reports of good catches of Black Bass, Sand Bass, Catfish and Crappie were being reported by area fishermen. Of course Tony and Mary's business of bait, ice and fishing supplies took an up-swing. On warm summer evenings, in the days before homes were air conditioned, the Griffis' found a growing stream of customers who drove out for their specialty, catfish dinners. The juke box and dance floor got a good workout. People loved it. Soon Griffis Corner was staying open all night on weekends. Unfortunately large crowds of teens from Ft. Worth, Dallas, Carrollton and Irving discovered Griffis Corner with rival groups vying to dominate the place. Sometimes gangs of teenagers went over to the spillway where they got into brawls some resulting in trips to the emergency room. Tony requested and got the help of Denton County Sheriff Wylie Barnes and Grapevine Constable Lloyd Tillery to get control of the situation.

In the spring of 1957 the Cross Timbers area was blessed with the best soaking rains that had been seen in over a decade. The elevation of the lake crept higher until on June 5 the lake went over the spillway for the first time. The surface of the lake got almost ten inches above the overflow level and sent enough water over the spillway that Highway 121 had to be closed for several days. As soon as the flooding subsided people returned to Grapevine Lake. Now more water skiers and sail boaters were starting to enjoy the water and to find their way to Griffis Corner.

But another group of individuals was also taking notice of the popularity of the lake and the fact that so much of the area to the north of the lake was not incorporated into any town. The city of Irving decided in 1960 that they would annex 38

square miles of unincorporated land in Denton County. Their audacious move was viewed as nothing but an arrogant attempt to extort tax dollars from rural property owners. Some of the larger property owners in Denton and Dallas Counties took Irving to court and succeeded in getting the annexations reversed. During this pivotal time in the history of south Denton County, the Griffis Corner picnic area and dance floor became a popular meeting spot for citizens of the area to congregate and decide how to respond to the threats of larger nearby cities. The people living along the western edge of Lewisville petitioned for an election to incorporate. On February 25, 1961 by a vote of 105 to 1, the city of Flower Mound was created. Mary Louise Griffis was one of the election judges who filed the petitions and election results at the county courthouse. Many of the earliest meetings of the infant city were held on Saturday mornings along with a good supply of scrambled eggs, pancakes and hot coffee at one of the very few business establishments in the new town; it could be said that the City of Flower Mound was born at Griffis Corner.

As more people moved into the Cross Timbers area, Flower Mound became less rural and more suburban. Tony and Mary remained a fixture at the lake but their business, began serving fewer local citizens and more visitors who came for picnics, water skiing or fishing. A big problem in the 70's was their inability to sell beer or wine in Flower Mound. A competing business started across the road from "The Corner" and was able to sell beer and wine for off premises consumption because it was in Tarrant County. The Griffis started a petition for a wet/dry

election but in 1974 voters in the area decided to remain dry. Despite the unfair competition, Griffis Corner was able to remain open.

On July 25, 1981, Tony Griffis died at the age of 76. Mary Louise continued to run her business just as she had been doing for over 30 years. Then in the fall of 1981, Grapevine Lake once again flooded. This time the lake level went 42 inches over the spillway with as much as 9,100 cubic feet per second gushing at a very high velocity down the concrete chute. The overflow lasted for 21 days and gouged out many tons of dirt from the old creek bed. The deluge tore out the road just above the dam and isolated Griffis Corner from the dam. The many months that it took to repair Highway 2499 made a somber impression on thousands of commuters who now had to go west through Roanoke or else fight the traffic on Stemmons Freeway to go south. But when they finally reopened the road, there was Griffis Corner just like it always was.

Finally in 1986 Mary Louise decided to sell her business and retire. The new owners kept the name, Griffis Corner, but were unable to remain in business, thus forcing Mary Louise to come out of retirement and resume control of her store. Mary returned to operating "The Corner" until 1995 when she sold out to Greg Adams. Greg's son John Adams still owns and operates Griffis Corner, very much in the same way it has been run for over 60 years. Mary Louise Griffis moved to Lake Dallas where she lived until 2005 when she died at the age of 92. It is a testament to her tenacity that the business that she and her husband started is still there and still going strong.

*Jim Morriss
September 2011*



(Left) Mary Louise Griffis proudly shows off one of the prize catfish taken from Grapevine Lake around 1957.



*(Above Right) An old post card shows Griffis Corner as it looked around 1960
(Below) is a picture of Griffis Corner as it was in the fall of 2011.*

