

LIFE & STYLE

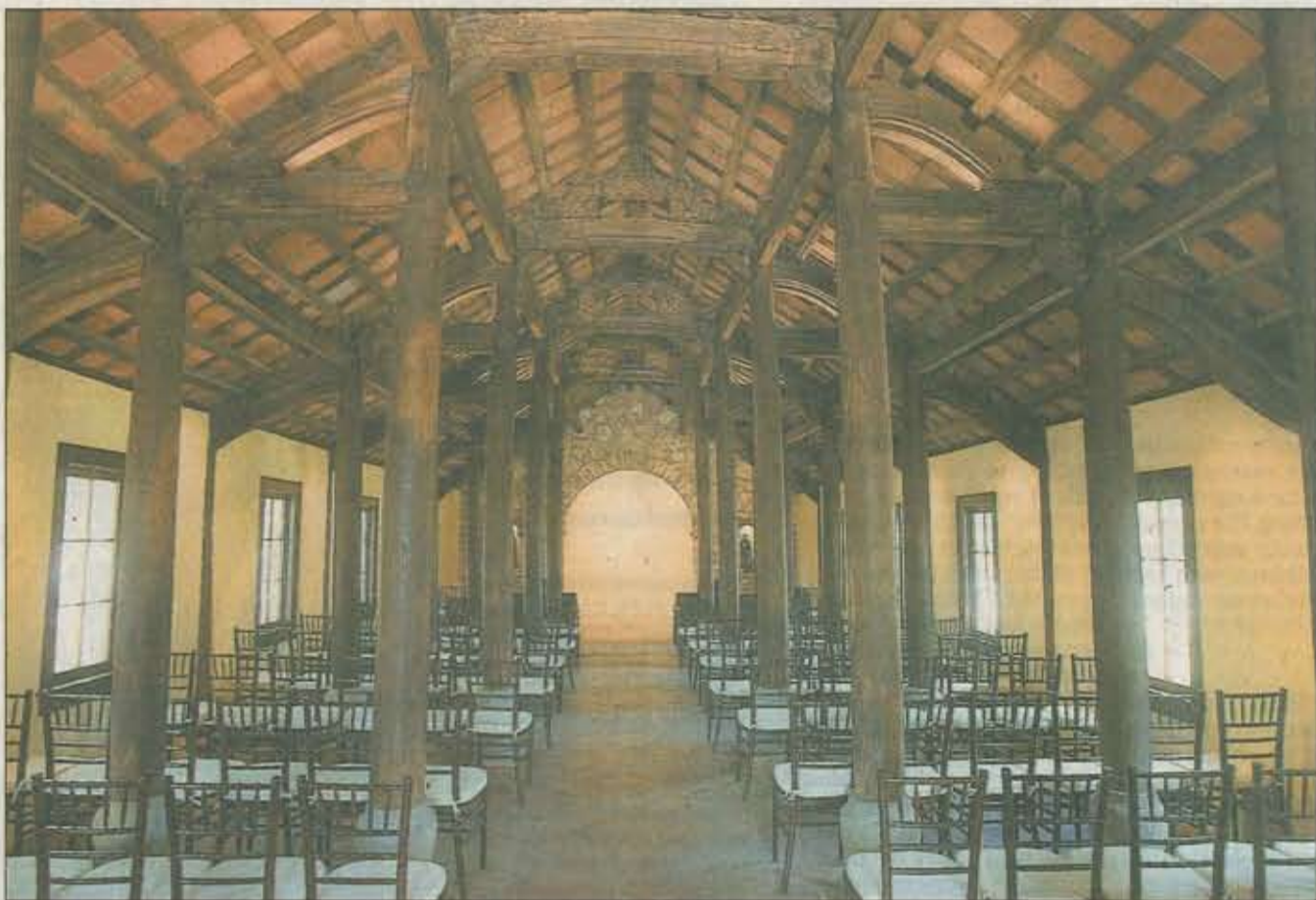
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THURSDAY, MAY 13, 2010 ■ SECT

SUMMER MUSIC Take a look at all the great shows ahead ■ Austin360 | 'ROBIN HOOD'



Russell Crowe, Cate Blanchett sally forth in latest version ■ Friday in Movies & Life



Larry Kolvoord photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

The chapel at Camp Lucy in Dripping Springs was constructed with ironwood from a Vietnamese church that was built in the 1880s. Each piece was numbered when the church was dismantled so that it could be reconstructed.

Assembly required

From two dismantled Vietnamese churches, a local developer creates a spot in Dripping Springs for storybook weddings

By Helen Anders

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

DRIPPING SPRINGS — Two years ago, Austin developer Whit Hanks found himself the proud owner of a disassembled Vietnamese church.

"I had to decide what to do with it," Hanks says. It's not a common problem, to be sure. But Hanks, who is also an antiques dealer, had jumped through a lot of hoops to get the church, and he wanted to do something cool with it. Happily, Hanks also owned about 300 acres on a Dripping Springs hill. He married the land with the chapel, added yet another Vietnamese church, and last month, after two years of hard work, he opened Camp Lucy, a wedding and event venue named for his mother.

"We had an emergency wedding" the first weekend, Hanks says, adding quickly, "That isn't what it sounds like." The emergency was that the bride's initial venue fell through. Whatever that venue was, it could hardly have been a more pastoral, serene spot for a wedding than Camp Lucy, on its breezy hilltop amid live oaks and post oaks, overlooking Onion Creek.

The Camp Lucy story started in 2007. Hanks had started collecting Vietnamese antiques after visiting Hanoi during a trip



On a trip to Vietnam, Whit Hanks learned that older Catholic churches were being torn down as congregations grew in the Asian country.

with his son. Hanks got the chance to buy the entire contents of one store for \$55,000 and took it. When the shipment arrived, he found a lot of saint statues and other religious icons.

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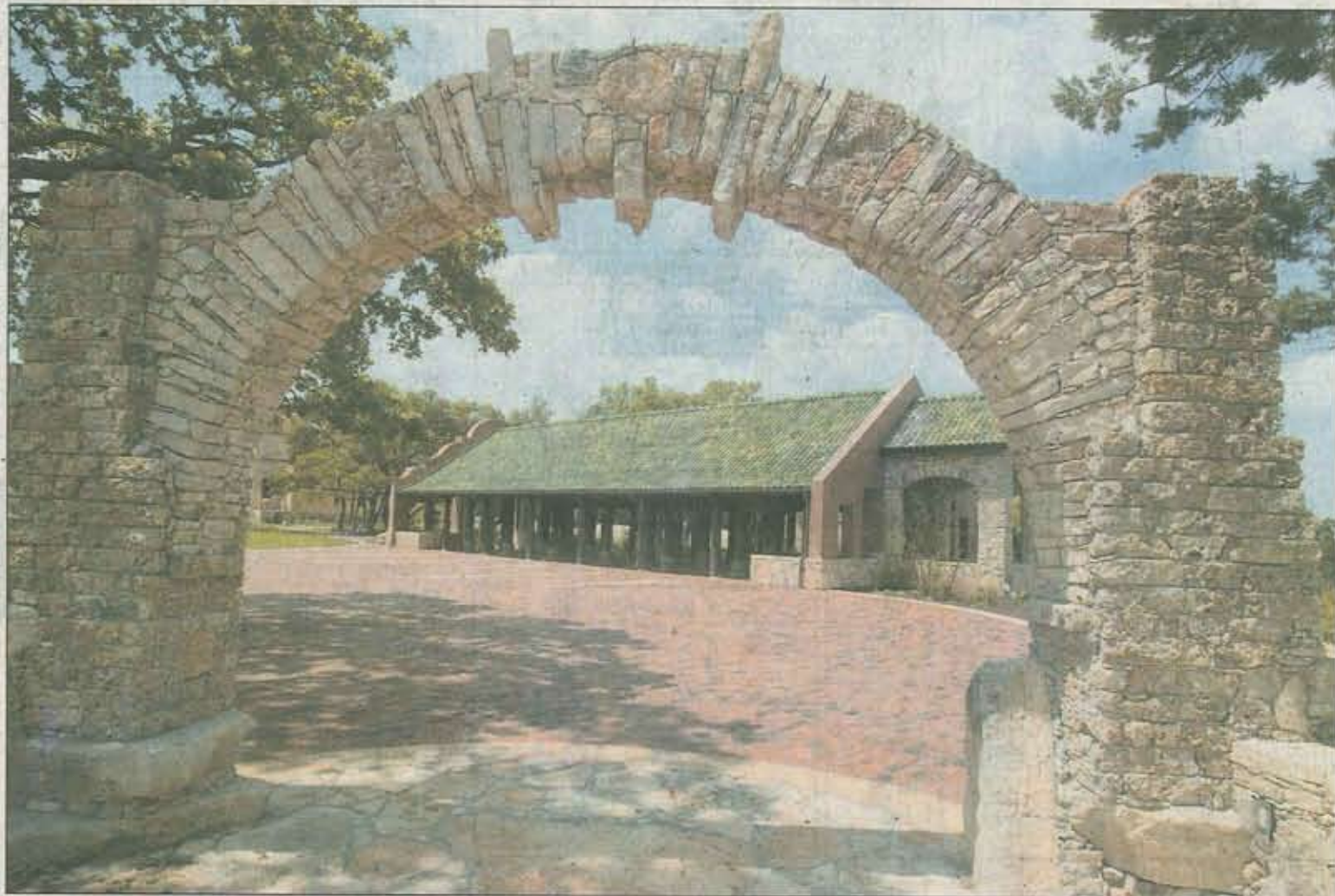
View more photos of Camp Lucy with this story online.

See **CAMP**, D6

CAMP: Materials find new life at Dripping Springs venue



A statue of St. Joseph and the baby Jesus occupies a spot in one of the cubbyholes that were built into the chapel.



Larry Kolvoord photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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"Where did these come from?" he asked his Vietnamese deal-broker, Hung Lai Manh.

"When we buy the church, we get the saints," he was told.

Huh?
Hanks learned that a lot of churches built in the 1800s were being torn down in Vietnam, where Catholicism was enjoying a resurgence and congregations were eager to build new, bigger churches.

"I said, 'Heck with the saints; I want the church,'" he said. Hung found one for sale. Hanks insisted on traveling to a remote village in Vietnam to see it himself. Big mistake: The price for the obviously well-to-do American who arrived by private car escalated from \$55,000 to \$80,000, then \$110,000. Hanks scrapped that deal and started looking at pictures of churches sent to him by Hung.

"I wound up with this church," he says, sitting in the sanctuary of the main Camp Lucy chapel, "which I really bought as a pig in a poke." The church had already been disassembled. Hanks had to buy it in a convoluted way, because Vietnamese law dictated that a church could only be sold to another congregation. He got a congregation to essentially act as a broker and, for a fee, resell him the church.

"I paid \$40,000 for it," he says. Shipping and re-assembling brought the total cost to \$125,000.

The church's hefty, dark support columns and rafter beams are ironwood.

"Ironwood is three times as heavy as oak," Hanks says. "It's insect-proof because it's so dense. You can't pound a nail into it. We had to pre-drill the nail holes."

Yet, the rafters are rather ornately carved with pastoral scenes and Chinese characters. Hanks says the church dates to the 1880s, but some of the carving was probably done later. The wood in the church is original. Each piece was carefully numbered when the church was disassembled so that it could be reconstructed. The terra cotta roof tiles are from Vietnam, but new; the originals shattered when the church was disassembled. Hanks had front (altar) and back walls constructed from limestone on his property, with little cubbyholes where some of the Vietnamese saints are placed. The side walls are plaster, and the floor is made of brick pavers from San Antonio. The result is a cocoonlike,

"Each one of those (columns) weighs about 2,000 pounds," he says about the pavilion, which, like the chapel, was made with ironwood from a Viet-

namese church. "It took a forklift to position them." The green tiles on the pavilion's roof were salvaged from the Bexar County Courthouse.



The bride's cottage is styled after an English cottage, a nod to Hanks' wife, whose favorite vacation spot is Cornwall, England.

intimate chapel.

Outside, Austin landscape architect Paul Smith used deer-proof, drought-resistant plants, including cacti, to create a pastoral garden, interspersed with antique art including a Cambodian forest fairy statue and an antique faux bois (concrete masquerading as wood) bird cage.

Then there's the pavilion, for which Hanks acquired a second church. Its ironwood columns are even bigger and heavier than the first church's.

"Each one of those weighs about 2,000 pounds," he says. "It took a forklift to position them."

The pavilion's roof of green-glazed tile was salvaged from the Bexar County Courthouse when it got a new roof. The pavilion was erected without walls and flows into an outdoor celebration area with a little alcove overlooking the hills, perfect for outdoor ceremonies.



The interior of the bride's cottage is furnished with upscale pieces, including a fainting couch, granite vanities and a claw-foot bathtub.

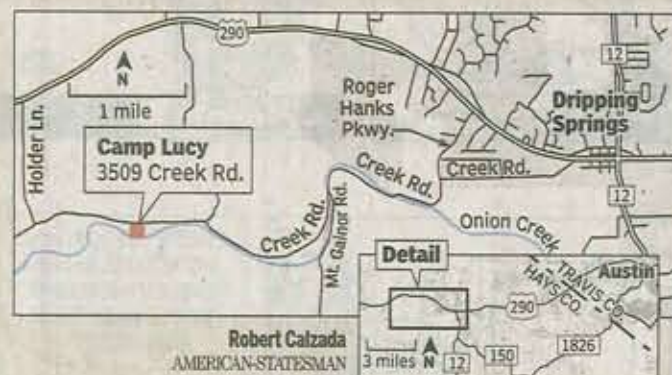
Off to the side is a limestone building designed by Jackson & McElhane that includes a catering kitchen and a groom's quarters — quite the man cave, with a leather sofa, wine fridge and TV, as well as a deck overlooking Onion Creek. (Designer Deborah Kirk worked with Hanks on the interiors.)

The bride's cottage is on the other end of the grounds, next to the chapel.

"That's my gesture to my wife," Hanks says. The little house is constructed and designed in the style of an English cottage in homage to Cornwall, England, Alison Hanks' favorite va-

cation destination. Hanks and Kirk created the interior as upscale-cottage, with granite vanities, a claw-foot tub and a fainting couch.

The drive out to Camp Lucy is a scenic one, taking Roger Hanks Parkway (named for Hanks' late father) off U.S. 290 onto Creek Road, which meanders past the twists and waterfalls of Onion Creek. There's a low-water crossing, but in the event of floods, there's an alternate route using Holder Lane. Nobody wants guests — or the bride and groom — to get in over their heads. handers@statesman.com; 912-2590



Camp Lucy
3509 Creek Road, Dripping Springs
512-894-4400
Chapel seats 130; pavilion accommodates 200; surrounding grounds can handle an additional 200. camlucy.com

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