



Abandoned Vietnamese churches get new Texas home

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By Larry Kolvoord, AP

This April 21, 2010 photo shows the interior of the chapel at Camp Lucy near Dripping Springs, Texas, which was purchased in Vietnam by an Austin developer, moved to Texas and reassembled as a wedding chapel. Vietnamese are abandoning old churches to build bigger ones.

DRIPPING SPRINGS, Texas (AP) — 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 in April, 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 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.

"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.

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.

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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 reassembling 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 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 the 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, intimate chapel.

Outside, Austin landscape architect Paul Smith used deer-proof, drought-resistant plants, including cactuses, 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.

Off to the side is a limestone building that includes a catering kitchen and a groom's quarters. 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 vacation destination.

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