

Governor's Tourism Awards /Arizona Cultural & Historic Preservation Revitalization of Yuma's Sanguinetti House Museum & Gardens

*Yuma Visitors Bureau is nominating **Yuma County Historical Society (YCHS)** in the **Arizona Cultural and Historic Preservation** category for its leadership in the revitalization of the **Sanguinetti House Museum and Gardens**. This project is part of a larger effort involving many organizations, but given the scope of the entire master plan, we believe recognition is due for the significant milestones already achieved.*

Background; Revitalization through Collaboration

Madison Avenue in downtown Yuma has played a central role in the development of the community. The Southern Pacific Railroad brought the first railroad line to Arizona in 1877, crossing the Colorado River at Madison Avenue and continuing south through town down the middle of the street.

The railroad's arrival spurred a building boom along Madison Avenue, including imposing homes built for steamboat captains. The Molina Block, an adobe built in the 1870s, was considered the premiere location for professional offices until the mid-20th century. E.F. Sanguinetti, who would become the Yuma area's most prominent businessman, purchased a home at 240 Madison Avenue in 1890.

Madison Avenue sat on relatively high ground in flood-prone Yuma, so that the disastrous flood of 1916 wiped out Main Street but spared the buildings along Madison. Since adobe construction was banned after the 1916 flood, they remain the most prominent examples of Yuma's adobe era to this day.

E.F. Sanguinetti continued to build his business empire into the mid-20th century. After his passing, his home, garden and aviary were operated as a museum by the Yuma County Historical Society (YCHS), established in 1963. To better provide for its long-term maintenance, Sanguinetti's descendants in 1971 decided to donate the property to the Arizona Historical Society (AHS). AHS has managed the home and gardens since that time, while the family retained control of adjacent retail and restaurant properties.

The AHS Yuma campus was expanded in the late 1980s as part of an ambitious effort to relocate the Lower Lights Mission from the downtown area and reclaim the Molina Block as part of its historical setting. Considerable local, private, foundation and city of funds were invested to accomplish this, followed by some critical conservation initiatives, such as putting a new roof on the adobe structure.

But lack of additional funds and the prohibitive cost of fully restoring the Molina Block inhibited further progress, and the museum was in decline by the early 2000s. The economic downturn of 2008 created further challenges as state funding eroded to the point where viability of the facility as a museum was in question. Since it seemed unlikely that substantial assistance was likely to arrive from outside the community, a group of Yumans decided to take matters into their own hands. To help revitalize the Sanguinetti House, they decided to resurrect YCHS, the organization that first sustained it.

Those efforts were spearheaded by Bruce Gwynn, a Yuma native and grandson of E.F. Sanguinetti, who in 2011 began encouraging a fresh generation of Yumans to join YCHS and its board. They concluded that to motivate donations and volunteer efforts locally, a new vision for the AHS campus was needed.

That vision took shape when Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area (YCNHA) in 2012 agreed to fund a community planning effort led by YCHS. Concurrently, YCHS created an annual fundraising event to

generate donations that could provide a local match for government or foundation grants. As the community gained confidence that local efforts would result in local improvements, membership and board involvement grew, and YCHS fund-raising efforts exceeded expectations.

By March 2012, a joint master plan was approved involving AHS, YCHS, YCNHA, the City of Yuma, Yuma County Library District, Arizona State Historic Preservation Office and other stakeholders. The full master plan is attached for reference.

The primary challenge was that the Sanguinetti House was being used for archival storage, office use, and interpretation as a period house museum. Given the incompatibility of those purposes in tight quarters built in 1870, it was not a surprise that the Sanguinetti House was failing at all three.

Different partners agreed to cooperate and pool resources to address these substantial challenges:

Job one was to find a better and more appropriate “forever” home for the irreplaceable materials haphazardly stored at the Sanguinetti House. The staff of Arizona Historical Society’s central archives agreed to take on the massive task of sorting through accumulated historical materials, cataloguing what was valuable and unique to Yuma, and determining how best to preserve them.

Concurrently, the Yuma County Library District agreed to serve as long-term custodian of the archives, and remodeled an area in its nearby Heritage Branch for that purpose. Despite the misgivings of some about letting Yuma’s historic materials travel to Phoenix for this process, the archives came home in 2014 and were installed in “gold standard” facilities where they are properly preserved but still accessible to both historians and ordinary citizens (see attached newspaper article).

With the archives preserved and maintained locally but off site, the focus shifted to the restoration of the Sanguinetti House building itself. Over a two-year period, Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area invested about \$100,000 and many hours of staff time in the building and its exhibits. The renovation also incorporated the time-tested “exit through the gift shop” rule, with visitors now entering and leaving through a shop operated by YCHS, providing both a “sense of arrival” and a source of revenue.

At the same time, the Yuma County Historical Society was hard at work on two additional fronts: Volunteers helped to restore and revitalize the gardens in a manner that would have pleased E.F. Sanguinetti, himself a noted gardener and grower of roses. YCHS raised more than \$100,000 to begin implementation of the master plan, including the installation of wrought-iron fencing along the Madison Avenue side of the campus, and grading and improvements to the area behind the Molina Building.

Meanwhile, Arizona Historical Society committed to hire a new director for its Yuma operations. The new director, Yanna Kruse, has developed and marketed varied and creative programming for the Sanguinetti House, including walking and trolley tours of the historic downtown area. Over the past 18 months, her efforts and the involvement of local volunteers have infused the museum with new life.

The bottom line result is that in just a few short years, using limited government funding, Yuma’s unique historical archives have been preserved, and more than half of the objectives envisioned in the Master Plan have been accomplished. This has only been possible due to the leadership of YCHS and its determined efforts to overcome mistrust and suspicion among organizations that often viewed each other as competitors rather than collaborators.

Project purpose, objective and goals

The stated purposes of the AHS Yuma Campus Master Plan¹ are:

- 1) To tell specific, compelling and distinctive stories of the history of Yuma -- stories which relate to the location and unique attributes of the Madison Avenue site
- 2) To restore and preserve the historic resources found on the AHS Yuma Campus site
- 3) To create a campus that facilitates a public/private partnership that sustains and enhances the museum while facilitating economic vibrancy for the private sector

As noted above, more than half of the specific items identified in the Master Plan have been accomplished, including:

- From Phase One, installation of fencing along Madison Avenue; grading and initial site improvements behind the Molina Block;
- From Phase Two, redevelopment of the Sanguinetti House museum and its exhibits; expansion and renovation of the Jack Mellon building, including reconfiguring entrance and exit to museum grounds through gift shop;
- From Phase Four, improvement of Sanguinetti Gardens in conformance with Master Plan.

Innovation & uniqueness

Because E.F. Sanguinetti was a unique individual whose drive, imagination and creativity were critical to the development of Yuma over a period stretching from the 1880s to the 1940s, preservation and enhancement of this site was critical to Yuma. What makes the effort to revitalize the Sanguinetti House and the whole AHS Yuma Campus even more innovative is the unusual mix of organizations and entities involved – both public and private, local and state, volunteer and professional. That the effort was led by Bruce Gwynn, Sanguinetti's grandson (inspired by his own mother and Sanguinetti's daughter, Rose Marie Gwynn) demonstrates the strength of the Yuma community and its dedication to preserving its own heritage. This is truly a story and an effort that could only happen here in Yuma.

Effective use of resources

What makes this project particularly unique is that if any one of these organizations attempted to take on the entire project, it would have never been completed. Instead, each organization used its specific talents to accomplish key projects.

- The Arizona Historical Society archivists committed hundreds of hours of staff time, combing through thousands of documents which were then delivered to the Yuma County Library District for state of the art archive management.
- With space in the Sanguinetti House now freed up, the plan for a new type of period house was implemented, primarily by the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area with National Park Service funds. The building was gutted of obsolete and oversized exhibit cabinets, and entirely new interpretive exhibits installed. At the same time, the Heritage Area, using staff and contractors well-versed in adobe restoration, completed important building restoration.

¹ The relocation of the Yuma historical archives was already under way when the Master Plan was development, so that effort was not included in the plan even though those efforts were necessary prerequisites plan objectives, such as the renovation of the museum building and its exhibits.

- At the same time, Yuma County Historical Society volunteers undertook an ambitious plan to bring back the type of gardens that E.F. Sanguinetti so loved.
- An equally important effort to unify the look of the whole campus took place, through a \$35,000 investment by YCHS in installation of black wrought iron fencing along Madison Avenue. These funds were raised through the YCHS annual fundraising effort. Further annual fundraising efforts have paid for incremental improvements to the new gardens behind the Molina Block.
- While physical improvements were necessary, it was the commitment of the Arizona Historical Society to hire a Yuma Director with strong management and marketing abilities that helped bring strong programming and new life to the campus.

In this age of diminished government funding, this type of collaboration is absolutely essential for such ambitious revitalization plans to be successful.

Measureable results based on stated objectives

This infusion of resources into the ambitious Master Plan for the Sanguinetti House Museum and Gardens continues to pay off. Current revenues for the museum (fiscal year 2015/16) reflect a 298% increase when compared to total revenue three years ago. Enhancements to the museum and gardens paved way for admission pricing to double from \$3-\$6 per ticket and garden rental pricing to increase from \$175 to \$750 per event. Steady, ongoing growth in income and museum admissions is projected.

Contribution to tourism industry & category specific criteria (“significant contribution” to Arizona legacy)

Endless sunshine aside, one of Yuma’s “draws” as a tourism destination is its location at the crossroads of the Old West and the multi-layered history that arose from being located at the safest place to cross the mighty Colorado River.

Just as Yuma was a significant place in the development of the state and region, E.F. Sanguinetti arrived at a critical and significant time in Yuma’s history, as the steamboat era was fading and the railroad was ascendant.

That he was himself a significant person is demonstrated by his rise from general store clerk to the owner of multi-faceted business empire that included stores, commercial real estate, a dairy and creamery, automobile dealerships, farm, irrigation and mining equipment and supplies, a freighting service, an ice plant with a cold storage warehouse, a marketing service for agricultural products, mines, mortuaries, a produce packing plant, public utilities, rentals housing, a construction and more than fifty farms. Sanguinetti was a major influence in bring the West’s first major reclamation project to Yuma, and lobbied for a transcontinental highway to cross the river here.

The story of E.F. Sanguinetti parallels the story of Yuma – and the State of Arizona.

Revitalizing the Sanguinetti House Museum and gardens brings a variety of Yuma stories to life in a way that the dusty “period home” incarnation stuffed with historical records never could.

Yuma Visitors Bureau can now market the Sanguinetti House, its downtown tours and other programming to both leisure travelers and group tours. This is now truly a local and regional “attraction,” and a significant addition to our tourism product.