

ROOTS | Innovation

# Reno Reinvention

Known to tourists as a historic site, Fort Reno also is a center of scientific progress on the prairie. By Traci Chapman

**F**OR MOST, A visit to historic Fort Reno near El Reno recalls the time of cowboys, cavalry, and conflict. But for some, these historic structures point toward the future. Following World War II, many military installations were decommissioned. However, the grasslands covering much of Fort Reno's 9,493 acres were, for the United States Department of Agricul-

ture, the perfect place for a research laboratory where scientists could study ways to expand food sources for people and livestock. In 1948, the Agricultural Research Service's Grazinglands Research Laboratory was born. It has since become known for scientific breakthroughs in agricultural production techniques. ARS director Jean Steiner says many who visited the fort—even locals—never knew of the laboratory's existence. Since 1999, Steiner and her team have partnered with Historic Fort Reno, Inc., the nonprofit entrusted with preserving Fort Reno's past. While the two entities have different missions, Historic Fort

Reno executive director Karen Nix says the collaboration has been productive. "Education has always been a big part of our mission," Nix says. "To preserve, you must educate." Historic Fort Reno recently received a three-year, \$298,000 USDA grant that will fund a new center dedicated to the study of science, technology, engineering, and math—fields collectively known as STEM—on the site. The center will provide students from elementary to college a place to observe and work with ARS researchers. The grant first was used to restore two of Fort Reno's dozen long-vacant officers' quarters. The



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buildings now house laboratories and classrooms for the program. The center also will benefit Fort Reno's preservation and education efforts. "Students will be able to experience the area's history firsthand while they

work toward their own futures," Nix says. "The STEM center will take us beyond what we've been doing. It's an example of how Fort Reno is able to reinvent itself to stay relevant. We're creating a new future for this place."

**Get There:** Fort Reno is open for self-guided tours daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Guided tours are available Monday through Friday by reservation only. Museum admission is \$1 to \$2. 7107 West Cheyenne Street in El Reno. (405) 262-3987 or [fortreno.org](http://fortreno.org).

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