

Rockdale Police Department Building to Receive Historical Marker

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

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ROCKDALE - One of Milam County's most stalwart architectural artifacts - the two-story building at 140 W. Cameron Ave., that somberly originated as Rock dale City Hall and today bustles in its new role as headquarters of the Rock dale Police Department - will be recognized with a Texas Historical Marker during 3 p.m. ceremonies Sunday, Oct. 23.

Dr. Lucile Estell, Milam County Historical Commission chairman, will speak on the topic "History Happened Here" emphasizing the need for historical preservation. Mayor John Shoemake, City Manager T. Fleming and Chamber President Denice Doss are on the program.

Margaret Lenghert, lifelong Rockdale resident and long-time Rockdale teacher, will unveil the marker.

Rockdale Chamber of Commerce paid for the marker, and Chamber ambassadors will serve refreshments, Dr. Estell said.

Rockdale City Hall has been more to this Milam County city than a center for municipal government. Since it was large enough for social gatherings, school commencements and political meetings, the upstairs was the scene of dances, basketball games and various activities.

Rockdale newspaperman W.H. Cooke reported that during one graduation ceremony, a large potted plant was dropped from the balcony and fell on the school superintendent's head. No one was injured and the ceremony continued.

City Hall served as home to the Rockdale Volunteer Fire Department for about 80 years. The fire alarm was housed in the central bell tower. It was the only fire alarm within the city of Rockdale. It was rung manually by bell ropes near the center entrance.

City Hall retained its original structural lines until the 1930s, at which time the upstairs gym/auditorium was removed and the bell tower dismantled. The building was remodeled, and the upstairs floor space significantly reduced. City Hall was remodeled again in the 1980s, when the fire station was relocated.

A further significant change occurred in 2002 when the city offices moved to a new city hall, which had formerly housed a bank. The police department now occupies the original city hall building.

Rockdale was established in 1874 when the International and Great Northern Railroad pushed westward through Central Texas. City councils labored through the process of funding and construction and dealt with numerous delays and obstacles before the building was started.

Once a statuesque structure topped with a bell tower, the original Rockdale City Hall building was designed by Arthur Osborn Watson, of Austin a noted Texas architect, who partnered with Jacob L. Larmour for building ornate courthouses in Milam, Travis, Val Verde, Grimes and Comanche counties, as well as numerous banks, churches and college buildings, including Old Main at Baylor, Main Hall at Texas A&M, and Prairie View Normal Institute. The Huntsville Penitentiary was one of Watson's designs.

In spite of numerous tries in city records regarding start-up of the project, there is no precise entry that states the completion and the council's acceptance of the building.

The entries decline until finally, on April 7, 1899, the contract is let to make repairs to the city hall, namely, to glaze the floors. No mention is made in city council minutes of a dedication or other ceremony.

The cornerstone of the building erroneously indicates an 1895 completion date, according to the historical account submitted for the historical marker.

A survey of Sanborn maps gives a clearer picture of the situation. In 1885, the site selected and purchased for the City Hall shows only a pile of lumber on that lot. This same description appears on the Sanborn map for 1891. By 1896, the Sanborn map shows a structure on the lot. It is marked "New City Hall, Unfinished Inside." The next available map is 1901. At this time, it does show a building marked "New City Hall."

Historians surmised that the Rockdale Masonic Lodge probably laid the cornerstone as the structure was being built. Listed on the 1895 cornerstone are Mayor B.A. Coffield, and council members J.G. Brown, L. Wallace, Al Bowen and E.L. Rasberry, as well as E.A. Wells, city attorney, J.H. Burnett, collector and assessor, Leonard Isaacs, secretary and treasurer, J.B. Hamilton, city marshal, Watson, the architect, and R.G. Scott, contractor.

Rockdale Police Department WHAT: Building to be recognized with Texas Historical Marker.
WHEN: 3 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 23. WHERE: Rockdale Police Department, 140 W. Cameron, Ave., Rockdale.