



Caprock Chronicles: As Lubbock grew, so did its jails

By Chuck Lanehart For A-J Media

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Caprock Chronicles is edited each week by Paul Carlson, emeritus professor of history at Texas Tech. Chuck Lanehart, Lubbock attorney and historian, writes this week's essay on the history of jails in Lubbock County.

When Lubbock County was organized in March of 1891, Sheriff William Lay had no hoosegow to hold the hooligans he arrested, so judges were obliged to entrust defendants to their defense lawyers' custody to await trial. Offenders without lawyers just went home, but not for long.

In May, Lubbock County Commissioners approved a \$3,700 bid for construction of the village's first public building, the Lubbock County Jail, a rough, boxlike two-room frame structure. The jail was located near the northeast corner of the rectangular two-block town square, sharing space with a solitary windmill and water tank.

The lockup offered accommodation for much more than just prisoners. The jailhouse provided a temporary place to congregate for the churches of Lubbock — Methodist, Baptist and Quaker — and served the tiny community as a social center.

Lubbock's first schoolteacher, Minnie Tubbs, taught in the jail building in the fall of 1891. Later that year, a two-story frame courthouse was constructed, enabling churches and schools to use the new county building as their meeting place, rather than the jail.

The jail was later enlarged to three rooms, but in 1909, it was destroyed by fire. In 1911, a new three-story red brick jail featuring indoor plumbing and heating was erected on the east end of the square, at a cost of \$14,000.

The second jail provided living quarters for the sheriff. Sheriff C.A. Holcomb and his family resided on the main floor for four years. The sheriff's wife cooked meals for inmates, and three of the couple's ten children were born in the jail.

At times, Lubbock County's second jail was almost empty. In April of 1920, it housed just three prisoners, two of whom were being held for Crosby County crimes.

Lubbock's architecturally significant third jailhouse was completed in 1931. The jail's \$148,000 price tag paid for the shell of the building, with interior work and cells to be completed later, helping create local employment during the Great Depression.

The exterior of the jail, a three-story poured concrete facility, was of distinctive Art Deco design by local architect Sylvan B. Haynes. The building, still intact at Main Street and Buddy Holly Avenue, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2018.

In 1951, two floors were added, bringing the jail to a height of five stories. A tunnel connected the jail to the new 1950 courthouse. In 1960, another five-story addition to the west brought the building to its current 35,000 square feet of space.

Male inmates were housed on the third and fourth floors. Women and juveniles were housed separately on the fifth floor. The kitchen and housing for jail trustees was located on the second floor. Inmates were carefully segregated by race. Booking areas, the infirmary and offices occupied the main floor.

Jailers escorted attorneys to visit clients via a single elevator. Jail cells were in the interior of the building, with a "walkaround" hallway separating cells from exterior windows. Lawyers used the walkaround to visit clients.

One day, after a young lawyer completed his consultation with a client, he buzzed the jailer to usher him downstairs. No jailer appeared, seemingly for hours.

Finally, the lawyer yelled through an open window to pedestrians below, "Help me! I'm a lawyer, and I can't get out of here!" Without looking up, a passerby replied, "You're a lawyer? You're right where you belong!"

Multiple jail breaks plagued the 1931 facility. In January 1969, three prisoners threatened jailers with makeshift knives and fled. All were soon recaptured. Eleven inmates escaped July 12, 1974, but only ten were recaptured. Four unsuccessful breakouts involving six prisoners happened within a six-month period in 1983.

In 1980, a large addition to the Lubbock County Jail was completed to the east of the 1931 structure. Sheriff Sonny Keesee refused to provide private visitation cells for attorneys to consult with clients in the new facility. Lawyers were obliged to share public visitation spaces with inmates' family members and other callers.

A federal lawsuit was filed against the Sheriff and Lubbock County by the Lubbock Criminal Defense Lawyers Association. Settlement of the litigation resulted in the construction of private attorney-client visitation cells on the first floor of the 1931 jail.

In 2010, the state-of-the-art Lubbock County Detention Center was completed. Located six miles north of downtown Lubbock on Holly Avenue, the \$100 million, half-million-square-foot space can accommodate 1,512 prisoners and is staffed by 362 employees.

The 1980 jail addition adjacent to the 1931 Lubbock County Jail was recently renovated for the Sheriff's Department Law Enforcement Center at a cost of about \$7.7 million.

The deteriorating 1931 jail, listed on Preservation Texas' "Most Endangered List" in 2016, sold for \$200,000 in 2017. The new owners, Tulsa businessmen John and Jim Snyder, are in the process of transforming the old jail for use as apartments.