

CAPROCK CHRONICLES

Restoration underway at historic Lynn County Courthouse

CHUCK LANEHART



The original forbidding Lynn County jail cells will be preserved. [PHOTO BY CHUCK LANEHART]



EDITORS NOTE: Caprock Chronicles is edited by Jack Becker, librarian, Texas Tech University Libraries. Today's essay is by Chuck Lanehart.

Early Lynn County fathers commissioned an elegant, classic courthouse in 1916, but their successors regarded the three-story structure with benign neglect for a hundred years. By 2016, the result was a still-beautiful building—essentially historically intact—in dire need of restoration.

Almost exactly a century after the courthouse was built, a \$5 million grant from the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program made it possible for the Lynn County Courthouse to be restored to its 1916 grandeur. Lynn County pitched in another \$3.1 million to implement the project. It was the culmination of a 13-year effort by county leaders.



The Lynn County Courthouse prior to restoration. [PHOTO BY CHUCK LANEHART]

Situated on an irregularly-shaped town square near the center of county seat Tahoka—population 2500—the Neo-Classical structure is the tallest non-agricultural building in the county. The stately courthouse's architecture and history merited its 1982 inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

The project will include restoration of the grand steps which guide visitors to the two main entrances, ceramic tile floors and marble wainscoting, which enhance much of the interior and a charming marble stairway that dominates the first floor. Featured in many offices are beautifully-adorned walk-in vaults—manufactured by the venerable Mosler Safe Company—will be restored as well.

The most interesting historical vestiges of the courthouse will not be altered, including forbidding remnants of the original third-floor jail and blood stains on a marble wall.

The bloodstained wall is a grisly reminder of the story of Elmo Banks and F.E. Redwine. Banks, a prisoner, overpowered Deputy Sheriff Redwine on the night of March 8, 1936, and took his gun. Banks shot Redwine, who fell dead against the marble wall. The killing triggered one of the biggest manhunts in South Plains history. Heavy rains covered Banks' trail, but he was captured two days later 15 miles southwest of Tahoka. He was found with Redwine's pistol and three shells.

Banks' reckoning began in Lynn County District Court two days after his arrest, four days following the shooting. After a two-day trial, he was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Banks was electrocuted in Huntsville on October 23, 1936.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the courthouse is the only remaining courtroom balcony on the South Plains. Abandoned for decades, the once-magnificent gallery is dusty and concealed by acoustic ceiling tiles, but the restoration will allow spectators to once again witness court proceedings from above.

The third-floor jury dormitory is the last of its kind in West Texas, but the dormitory—along with the original jury deliberation room next door—will be converted into the district clerk's office. Two unique spiral steel staircases leading from the third floor to the second will be preserved.

The district courtroom will be restored to its original glory. Much of the 1916 courtroom furniture remains, including oak counsel tables and 178 oak theater-style gallery chairs. Beneath each chair seat is a cleverly-designed gentleman's hat-rack. The modest judge's bench is original. Ample space before the bar will

allow lawyers to effectively present their arguments, and a row of windows at the rear of the courtroom will provide plenty of natural light.

The courtroom was the setting for perhaps the most notable trial in the county's history. An 18-year-old black farm hand named Bennie Lee McIntyre confessed to entering a rural home in Lynn County on April 15, 1961. He sexually assaulted a young farmer's wife while her husband was away, as her baby slept in another room. Lynn County Attorney Harold Green witnessed McIntyre's confession. "He told me he'd always wanted to have sex with a white woman," Green remembered.

Lamesa lawyer John Saleh was appointed as defense counsel. Saleh remembered the McIntyre case as life imitating art. It was like "To Kill a Mockingbird," Saleh said. "A lynch mob showed up with ropes, led by a local Baptist preacher. The sheriff had to move our client to another jail somewhere."



The only remaining South Plains balcony gallery will be restored. [PHOTO BY CHUCK LANEHART]



The courthouse grand marble staircase will be restored to its original glory. [PHOTO BY CHUCK LANEHART]

The trial began a month later, and the courtroom was packed with spectators. “People were all over the lawn waiting to get in,” Saleh said. “They brought box lunches and ate in their chairs, so they would not lose their spots.”

McIntyre plead guilty, throwing himself “on the mercy of the Court and the jury.” After a one-day trial—following three days of voir dire—the jury recommended the death sentence. Appeals to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals and the United States Supreme Court failed. On January 20, 1963, he died at age 20 in “Old Sparky,” the Texas electric chair. His was among the last Texas executions for the crime of rape, and only seven men were electrocuted after McIntyre.

Much of the restoration budget will go for infrastructure improvements, electrical, heating and air conditioning, windows, brick exterior, bathrooms and a new elevator. The project is scheduled to be completed in May of 2019.