



Historic Past ---Prosperous Present

By Mrs. Oliver Howard

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The Court House

The courthouse in New London, 100 years old in 1958, is dear to the hearts of all who live in the area. It is not the oldest courthouse in Missouri, but it is considered the most beautiful. It is one of the finest examples of the Greek Revival period in architecture in the Middle West. The courthouse exists in its original condition, a remarkable preservation, rather than a restoration. Its interior, which conforms to its exterior, is kept in authentic repair. The second-floor Circuit Court Room is noted for its beauty.

The façade, with its four Tuscan columns, was the model for Missouri's buildings at the New York and San Francisco World Fairs in 1939.

The simple lines and neo-classic style of this century-old Hall of Justice were a happy choice on the part of county officials 100 years ago. It was built in the later years of the revival period when other cities and counties were choosing the newer and more florid fashions of the early Victorian era, with turrets, bays, and gingerbread excrescences which now seem over ornate.

On March 5, 1857, the Ralls County Court, Francis B. Stout, president, Landie Fagan and Nathan S. Dimmitt, judges, appointed a committee to submit a plan, suggestions for materials, and an estimated cost for a new court house. Ralls County had been organized since November 16, 1820; this new courthouse would be the third. On the committee were Chapel Carstarphen, James S. Dimmitt and John D. Biggs.

In planning the building they used two popular handbooks, English Engineer Thomas Tredgolds "Principles of Carpentry," published in 1820, and New York Architect Minard Lefever's "Modern Builders' Guide," issued in 1833. These two early "do-it-yourself" helpers gave structural details which could be combined to meet the needs of any designer.

James S. Dimmitt was paid \$8.00 for his work on the committee; County Attorney Henry C. Wellman \$15.00 for making and drawing the plan and specifications; Nathan S. Dimmitt \$23.00 for his work on specifications; William Whittaman \$12.50 for making total drawings.

In selecting details to incorporate in a courthouse for Ralls County, these men used good judgment, although we cannot know at this late date, whether or not the inferences were intentional. The Greek temple designs had been introduced in the United States in 1785 by Thomas Jefferson, in his model for the Virginia

State Capitol. The new Ralls County court house was a simple version of the central part of that famous old building, topped by a cupola that is a reproduction of the belfry on Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia.

This wedding of details was fitting, since Ralls County's farm population originated in Virginia, and Ralls County artisans, brick makers, educators and builders came in a migration from Pennsylvania. The machinery of Philadelphia's waterworks, on the Schuylkill River, is housed in a series of such Greek buildings, erected in the 1840's.

The courthouse portico, with plastered columns, wooden pediment, octagonal cupola and belfry, are the marble of ancient Greek translated in young American wood. It was felt that old Athens and young America had common democratic ideals.

On July 8, 1857, the County Court ordered that the building be erected, and appropriated \$8,000 for it. This sum soon proved inadequate; by the time the building and interior were complete, the cost reached \$18,000.

Chapel Carstarphen was named building superintendent and he worked until he resigned in April 1858. William Fagan was appointed to succeed him, and served until he was dismissed six months later. At that time Kemper Shumate was appointed, and to Shumate goes the distinction of having completed the building.

The courthouse was not completed and dedicated on any definite date. As soon as a room was usable, it was occupied, even before the ceilings were plastered. The old brick courthouse, which also stood on the square, was gradually vacated. Circuit Court was held in the Christian Church in 1857 and 1858.

Francis Kidwell was awarded the contract for the building, at \$16,4000, and was required to give bond for double the amount. Kemper Shumate won the second contract, for the finishing of the Circuit Court room.

Edward Dowling and Joseph Evans, assisted by Patrick Crowley, did the stone cutting and fitting, using rock quarried east of New London. Native limestone was a happy choice for this style of building. Standing in a rural atmosphere, the old buff stones have retained their youthful bloom, free of the grime which marks the aging of buildings in cities. A century of drenching rain and mellowing sun has only deepened its charm.

Hanceford Brown did the ironwork, the grills for vault windows, supports, and other blacksmithing. James D. Caldwell furnished the lime.

By October 1858, part of the new building was in use. The old brick courthouse was sold to Samuel Mayhall for \$175, and he was ordered to move it from the square within eight months.

Kemper Shumate reported in November 1858, that the masonry was completed except for the stone floors in the vaults, the windowsills, and some pointing. All carpentry was not yet complete.

Eugene Dix made the plans and specifications for finishing the Circuit Court room; Shumate won the contract for this work, including judge's stand, seats, lawyers' bar, and tables.

The interior walls and floor of the Circuit Court room were packed with sawdust. This insulation and the curved back wall, give this courtroom the best acoustics on the judicial circuit. The hand carved woodwork of the interior, around the doors and many-paned windows, was not fully completed until August 1859.

Kidwell was released with completed contract in September 1859. The courthouse halls were plastered soon after, Samuel Caldwell being paid \$10 extra for a hard finish on this plastering. The ceilings in the

downstairs offices, and the inside of the vaults were not plastered until August 1860, when William E. Harris was paid \$82 for doing this work.

In July 1860, Shumate was still fitting up bookcases and pigeonholes in the vaults. James E. Marnell was paid \$68 for tin boxes to slide in these pigeonholes – the cost per box being sixteen and two-thirds cents. Jeff Mayhall was paid \$24 for lettering the boxes in the vaults and painting signs over three interior doors. The vault windows were eventually finished, Shumate putting in window sash and installing exterior shutters, which were painted red.

December 1860, Shumate was paid for completing desks in the clerk's office. The next bill, dated April 1861, is for repair to office doors. Evidently the original work was at long last completed and the long succession of upkeep and repair bills had begun.

Many such bills include charges for wood to be burned in the fireplaces which heated the building. One of these fireplaces remains, in the office of the County Superintendent of Schools. The years have wrought many changes but the original beauty and character remain. For example, the hall doors of each office are carefully paneled on the face, but the backs are sturdily built of diagonal boards, accounting for their survival through one hundred years of opening and closing.

The bell which peals out centennial tidings to Ralls County's citizens and friends is the same bell which has called people to worship and prayer, to land sales, slave auctions and political speakings for one hundred years.

The original section of the courthouse now seems small. But in 1858, when county officers were few in number, they had room to spare. They had so much space that they rented one room in the courthouse to two lawyers, O.H.P. Ledford and J.P. Lancaster for \$4 a month.

Through the years, county business grew in volume, and government functions became more numerous. County officials used rented space in local business buildings. In 1936, two wings were added across the back of the building, changing it from a rectangle into a T. The courthouse now contains all the county offices, the health department, and five federal agencies.

The cornerstone of the annex was laid July 31, 1936, in ceremonies arranged by the late Warren G. Hatcher, who for many years was sergeant at arms for the United States Congress in Washington, D.C. Participating in the ceremony were Arthur Hogg, who drew the plans and supervised the erection of the annex; J.C. Derigo, stonemason contractor; Bud Newhouse, stonemason. The gavel used in the ceremony had been used in Washington by Champ Clark.

Mortar holding the cornerstone in place was mixed with sand from the Nile River in Egypt, symbolizing the international importance of rural Missouri. Inside the cornerstone is an Indian hatchet found on the Thomas Butler farm west of New London, representing early history of the county; two petrified snail shells from the old quarry east of town where stone was obtained for the original part of the building; a bronze commemorative medal of the State of Missouri, souvenir of the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904, honoring two Ralls Countians, John Owen, who was custodian of the Missouri building at that fair, and Attorney J.O. Allison, one of the Fair Commissioners; a copy of the Ralls County Record of the last week in July, 1936; a card announcing the candidacy of a Ralls Countian, Robert W. Winn, for State Treasurer. (Winn won the election, one of Ralls County's contributions to Missouri.)

The annex was so skillfully joined that, on the interior, it is hard for a newcomer to determine where the new part begins. The upstairs may be reached by three different stairways, and there are several vaults from basement through second story.

The Circuit Court room has been the scene of many local tempests, but in the summer of 1900, this old room was the focal point of the news-reading public in America.

This was during the trial of Alexander Jester for the murder of Gilbert Gates, brother of Chicago multimillionaire John W. (Bet-You-a-Million) Gates. The Pinkerton detective agencies rented a suite of offices in New London. Gates employed the country's leading lawyers. The trial ended in acquittal for lack of evidence, but during the excitement the courthouse saw its quota of great and near-great reporters, lawyers and businessmen.

First and Second Court Houses

The act of November 16, 1820, which formed Ralls County, named five commissioners – Dabney Jones, James Garnett, Richard Jones, Stephen Glascock and Francis Grant. They were to select the county seat and provide a courthouse and jail. They immediately named New London as county seat and set about having a courthouse built on the public square.

The original public square, platted by William Jameson when he laid out the town in 1819, was two blocks west of the present courthouse square. The original square was bounded by Fourth, Clay, Third and Church streets.

The first courthouse, completed in August 1822, was a 24x18-foot log building, two stories high. The lower floor was divided into a jail and a dungeon. The upper floor was the courtroom. The court used this court room whenever possible, but in winter had to meet elsewhere, for there was no heat in it. The custom was to convene in the courtroom and then adjourn to the home of some county official.

Drainage and roads were considered better two blocks to the east. When a better courthouse was proposed, plans were made to build the second one on the block which is now the courthouse square. When the second courthouse was near completion lots in the first public square were sold at public auction in May 1834. One-half acre was reserved, where the jail stood.

The second courthouse, completed in 1835, was built with money subscribed by private individuals. August 7, 1833, Stephen Cleaver was appointed to collect donations, and gave his bond of \$1,500. As he collected money, he paid Samuel Mayhall and Richard S. Howard, who made the bricks and built the building. March 1834, Thomas J. Rhodes was appointed to assist Cleaver in collecting subscriptions for the new courthouse.

The second courthouse was of brick, 50 feet square and two stories high. The courtroom, with brick floor, was on the ground. Clerk's office and jury rooms were upstairs. The building was used 23 years.

A decision was made to build a good new courthouse at taxpayer's expense. The county had assumed its present size and there were now other settlements besides New London. Madisonville was a growing community with much public spirit. A petition was filed to move the county seat to Madisonville and build the new courthouse there. The court acknowledged the petition and postponed considering it until the June 1857, term of court. On July 8, 1857, the court decreed that "a new court house be built upon the public square in the Town of New London."

Later, sentiment grew to move the county seat to Center. Sufficient signers were secured to petition an election on the issue, the election was held in November 1908. Open trenches can still be seen in Center where oxen were barbecued to insure a maximum number of voters election day. These were the days when

women did not go to the polls. A barrel of whiskey accompanied the barbecue. But the proposal failed. Exponents did not give up, however. The courthouse was not repaired while the issue was rehashed. The plaster fell from the pillars, the shutters hung awry, the cornice needed paint.

In February 1911, the state capitol building burned at Jefferson City. Guilford Harris commented thus, in the Ralls County Record: "For many years it has been the desire of Center to have the county seat in that city. Of course New London has always resisted such efforts. Some of the boys were down Monday from Center and we made an agreement with them whereby we think all will be satisfied: New London is to have the county seat permanently, and Center is to have the State Capitol. Our sister city will be an ideal place for the capitol and all our people are in favor of the scheme."

Eventually, the movement to build a new courthouse at Center lost momentum and the courthouse was properly repaired.

The Court House Square

In the year of its 100th birthday, the courthouse stands in the center of its own park like a southern mansion. It is a favorite model of professional photographers and is photogenic in any season. Fans return again and again, trying to catch the steeple against a blue sky, with one fleecy cloud drifting by. The courthouse is probably one of the most photographed objects in Missouri. The county court, charged with the care of the building, keeps the square in order as an effective setting. Occasionally they order the trees cut back, so the building can be brought into focus. The brilliant colored floodlighting, installed for centennial year as a gift of the Ralls County Rural Electric Cooperative, has added a new inducement to photographers.

The square has not always been the well-groomed shaded lawn enjoyed today. Just 50 years ago, a newspaper editorial deplored the bricks and rubble which were piled around the square.

In 1857, the bounds of the square were indefinite, and the court paid surveyor James G. Wylie to set the bounds. At the time this present courthouse was built, the old courthouse was also on the square, and there was a brick dwelling there, which the court rented with the provision that the public could use the well at reasonable hours. The house, yard and garden had plank fences. The courthouse also had a plank fence around it.

Outside the fence was a public well. A windmill was installed later, with a large tank for watering horses. There was a bandstand inside the fence, on the southwest corner, in later years. Hitch racks were outside the fence.

An ornamental iron fence eventually succeeded the plank and rail fences of earlier years. As gasoline buggies replaced horses, hitch racks, trough and fences became unnecessary and disappeared. Gradually walks were added and the square assumed its present uncluttered appearance.

Brief History

The courthouse is new, compared to the length of time the county has been settled. In the latter part of the 17th century, Spanish explorers in Salt River country reported it overgrown, wild, and unfit for the cultivation of corn and beans. In the 18th century, French trappers came in for the fur harvest. They made salt at the springs.

Settlements were made at what are now Saverton and Spalding Springs. Salt was manufactured by evaporation over open fires, and shipped to market at St. Louis by canoes down the Mississippi. Early in the 19th century the saline at Spalding was drilled to a depth of 300 feet to provide a steady stream of water for salt manufacture. Later, a summer resort and five-acre lake constructed at this artesian well became one of the pleasure spots in the county.

Permanent English-speaking settlers came in the 1800's, and built up an agricultural economy which continues to flourish. The towns are trading centers for the farm areas.

A government survey of the area was made in 1818. One of the surveyors, William Jameson, claimed land, made a plat, and founded New London in 1819.

On November 16, 1820, Ralls County was formed from territory taken from Pike County. The new county was named for Daniel Ralls. Like so many settlers, he was a native of Virginia. His farm was four miles west of New London. When just 35 years of age, he was chosen as Pike County's representative to Missouri Legislature. He became ill while attending the session in St. Louis, and was borne on his deathbed into the meeting to cast his vote and break the tie which sent Thomas Hart Benton to the United States Senate. Ralls lived a few days longer, was buried in St. Louis. When a new county was made in this region where his widow and four children lived, the county was named for him as a posthumous honor.

When organized, Ralls County embraced a large expanse of land from which nine other counties and portions of four others were eventually carved. Ralls assumed its present size in 1836. At first, it extended north to the disputed Iowa line, and west to a point between range lines 13 and 14. When New London was named county seat in 1820, it was selected as the next post of civilization north of Pike County, and so became the capitol of Northeast Missouri.

Another old settlement is Saverton, a town on the Mississippi. Dam No. 22 is just downstream, making this area a fisherman's delight. Near Saverton is the site of Fort Mason, stronghold of settlers in a fight with Indians in the War of 1812. Saverton is in apple orchard hills, and it was a resident of Saverton, Egbert Van Alstyne, who wrote the popular song, "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree." The composer and the trees whose branches sheltered him as he wrote are gone, but his melody lingers on and has become an old favorite in the annals of American music.

Center, in the prairie section, was named because it is near the geographical center of the old county highway and railroad. In earlier days, stockmen and drovers moving cattle and hogs on foot to Mississippi River markets at Hannibal, stopped near Center at an inn called "Halfway House."

There was a trading center at Lick Creek Crossing long before the town of Perry was founded there. Perry is a gateway to Mark Twain State Park, at the nearby village of Florida, in Monroe County. Offices of the Mark Twain Research Foundation are in Perry; the files and collections of the group are available to those interested in serious research. The foundation publishes a quarterly, "The Twainian," printed in Perry. The largest collection of Mark Twain first editions is in Perry. Mark Twain murals, painted by Ellen Long Elam, are in the Perry State Bank reception room. They may be viewed by appointment if the bank is closed.

The interest in Mark Twain is fitting, since his brief Civil War career took place in Ralls County where he was sworn into a Pro-Southern State Guard unit by Colonel John Ralls. An account of his adventure may be found in "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed."

The village of Ilasco grew up around the world's largest cement plant, built there in 1900. The location was determined by the inexhaustible supply of Bear Creek limestone, which tests 98 per cent pure and is the

principal ingredient of cement. "Ilasco" comes from the first letters of the ingredients of cement: Iron, lime, aluminum, silica, carbon and oxygen.

It may be said that the Panama Canal was built out of Ralls County resources, since the 4,500,000 barrels of cement used for the Canal came from Ilasco. When the plant was opened, the company brought in many families from the Balkan States in Europe, under labor contracts. These workers were the industrious type which seek frontiers in new countries. Their descendants are an asset to Ralls and adjoining counties.

Salt River, which flows over a winding limestone course across the county, is the original river referred to in the old saying, "Gone Up Salt River." Its legends are many, the fishing good, with drum and catfish predominating.

The Huck Finn Sportsman's Club maintains a rearing pond at Perry to release regular batches of young game fish into Lick Creek, a tributary of Salt River.

Two major prehistoric Indian trails, transcontinental in nature, crossed near Salt River in Ralls County. On the river bluffs at Cincinnati are Indian paintings, high on the stone bluff wall, seen only from a boat. These were painted by Indians before they were vanquished and moved westward. Here at Cincinnati is an old inn, built of walnut logs, now restored as a private dwelling. This inn is a reminder of the days when Judge John Marshall Clemens, father of Mark Twain, organized the Salt River Navigation Company to open the river to steamboat traffic. On the front lawn of the inn, sloping to the river banks, is an aged elm, 30 feet in circumference, relic of the days when such giant virgin trees were extant everywhere.

Buildings of interest in the county include the red brick and limestone edifices of the old Van Rensselaer Academy; the stone churches of St. Paul, Brush Creek and St. Joseph's in New London, noted for their aging charm.

Ralls County has the greatest variety of soil types in Missouri. All types of land, from flattest prairie, to steep hill ground, make a varied agriculture possible.

In 1950, livestock was a four million dollar industry. Beef cattle, hogs and corn are million dollar industries. Soybeans are produced by the hundreds of thousands of bushels; wheat, oats and sorghum are grown in quantity. The county has fine orchards, poultry, timber, pasture land and dairy farming.

As large population centers are no longer necessary for manufacturing, factories are moving to rural counties such as Ralls. Perry and New London have state approved municipally owned water systems. New London has natural gas. All towns have electricity. Improved farming methods make a year-round labor pool available in the area. In addition to the large cement plant, other industries in Ralls include the making of tarpaulins, dairy supplies, bags, garments and fish bait. The newest plant in the county is that of the Western Printing and Lithographing Company and American Yearbook Company, occupying the same modern building on Highway 61.

Ralls is proud of its educational and religious leaders. The first Negro priest in the world, Father Augustin Tolton, was born a slave on a farm at Sidney, near Brush Creek Church. More than 50 Ralls Countians have entered the Protestant ministry. The first high school vocational agriculture department in Missouri was started at New London in 1917. Two native Ralls Countians have been Dean of the University of Missouri College of Agriculture – Henry Waters (1895-1908), and the present dean, John Harwood Longwell.

Ralls Countians believe in modern homes, yet retain many old-fashioned skills. Fine china of the type popular in grandmother's day can be secured, hand painted and fired to order, at Perry.

Ralls County schools are changing to keep abreast of the times. School districts of Center, New London and Perry, together with many rural districts, have reorganized to provide a fine central high school building near Center, offering the best possible education for its youth.

Visitors to Ralls County receive a hearty welcome. The people follow Southern traditions of hospitality.