



**Top: The Medina County Courthouse at the turn of the 20th century.
Bottom: The Medina County Courthouse today, with its wings intact.**

A Flap Over Wings

*Medina County Chooses
WWII-Era Additions
Over Chance at Funds*

by JOHN COUNCIL

Sometimes it's not only beauty that's in the eye of the beholder, but historical significance, as well. That's how a proposal to restore the elaborate Medina County Courthouse in Hondo ended up in controversy recently.

Some Medina County officials would have loved to see the beautiful three-story limestone structure taken back to its Victorian-era condition. Their restoration plans aimed to rebuild a dramatic clock tower removed from the courthouse 70 years ago and return the large second-story district courtroom to its original grandeur.

THIS OLD COURTHOUSE

But in order to win a \$4.5 million grant from the Texas Historical Commission to finance the restoration, two wings added on the courthouse in 1940 by the Works Projects Administration (WPA) would have to be removed, says Medina County Judge James Barden.

News that the Medina County Commissioner's Court was posed to vote on moving

JOHN COUNCIL

MEDINA COUNTY OPTS TO KEEP WWII-ERA ADDITIONS

ahead with the courthouse restoration project got plenty of the county residents stirred up in early March.

“We got ready to apply for the grant, and the grant called for it to be restored to its original 1890 condition. A lot of controversy ensued, and people said ‘You can’t take off our precious wings,’ ” Barden says.

Leading the charge against the restoration was Joe Manak, a solo from Quihi. He and more than 100 Medina County residents held a rally on the courthouse lawn to protest the effort to tear the wings off the courthouse. They collected 500 signatures from people who opposed the restoration effort for a variety of reasons.

“The major business in this courthouse is conducted in the wings,” says Manak, noting that offices for the county and district clerk, a county court-at-law, a law library and a justice of the peace court are located in the wings of the building.

“You put that all into a pile of rubble, what do you have? You have an 1890 structure and the district courtroom sitting above it and a fairly useless courthouse.”

Manak and others argue that the courthouse’s historic significance and its place in history can’t be found in 1892, the year it was built. “The real historical significance was the World War II era,” Manak says.

The WPA project that built the wings not only accommodated the need for additional office space in the building but also put plenty of Medina County residents back to work during the depression, he says. WPA workers cut and formed the limestone taken from the same local quarry used when the building was built.

Hondo also contributed greatly to the war effort in 1942. That year, the U.S. Army opened Hondo Army Airbase five



The courthouse’s second floor hallway.

miles north of the courthouse. More than 14,000 navigators who guided bomber crews to their targets in World War II trained at the airfield at Hondo Army Airbase, according to “The Handbook of Texas Online.” The planes that trained the navigators in Hondo were piloted by the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs), a pioneering organization of civilian female pilots employed to fly military aircraft under the direction of the U.S. Army Air Corps during the war.

“This is not a kill or be killed thing. We are all respectful of the county officials,” Manak says over a disagreement whether the wings are historically significant. “We just agree to disagree.”

It can be hard to tell the wings are not original to the building. “If you didn’t know any better, you wouldn’t know it wasn’t built at the same time,” says Elleen Gooding, a longtime Medina County resident who signed the petition to save the wings. “The ones that signed the petition say ‘We remember it this way. It’s a beautiful building.’ ”

Joe Fohn, whose great-grandfather Joe Decker donated the limestone from his land to create the original courthouse and whose grandfather Henry Decker reopened the quarry for more stone to build the wings, also doesn’t want the wings to be torn down.

“To me, it’s a tribute to my ancestors,” Fohn says of the wings. “And the WPA program was one of the greatest programs we had. It put people to work. It’s over 70 years old. So why destroy that?”

Two weeks after the rally, the commissioners decided not to vote on the courthouse restoration — a move that saved the wings, Barden says.

“There was enough controversy that we felt we shouldn’t go forward with it,” Barden says. “We won’t be applying for any more courthouse grants, at least through my next term.”

That’s a shame, says Stan Graves, director of the Texas Historic County Courthouse Preservation Program.

Graves says the THC doesn’t require courthouses to be restored to their original condition to receive grant money, but the historical commission places a higher priority on funding projects that do.

“It’s certainly something we’ve faced several times in this program. It’s a complex issue of what period is the most appropriate for a courthouse-restoration project,” Graves says. “I think there are legitimate and good arguments on both sides in Medina County. That being said, I think they are missing a real opportunity to recapture the significance that that landmark courthouse had.”

“The most iconic feature was the incredible clock tower that that courthouse had,” which he notes is one of the tallest on any of Texas’ 19th century courthouses. “To have that back on that building would do more for the community and bringing people to that downtown off the highway. My opinion

is they are missing an opportunity, but they are certainly able to preserve the courthouse in its current condition.”

The Tracks

While Texas Highway 90 brings visitors into Hondo, it's the railroad running along that road to which the city owes its life.

Prior to 1881, Hondo was nothing more than farmland where a handful of people lived. But that year, Thomas Pierce, who headed the Galveston Harrisburg and San Antonio Railway, decided to extend a rail line from California through the town.

The railroad brought people to Hondo. Eventually, Hondo displaced Castroville as the Medina County seat in 1892, says Steve Lapp, administrator of the Medina County Museum. It's based in Hondo's original 1880s train depot.

After Hondo became the county seat, the courthouse was built a year later to house county government. Castroville's 1853 stone courthouse still stands and serves as the town's city hall.

Many residents believe Castroville didn't want the rail line running through its town, which led to it losing its designation as county seat, but that isn't true, Lapp says. Castroville residents very much wanted the railroad and the business it would bring, he says.

“This guy [Pierce] was holding them up for money. He said, ‘You need to put up a certain amount of money.’ And people said ‘You're crazy,’” Lapp says.

So Pierce bought up cheap farm land in Hondo, built his railroad line and sold the land back to the county as city lots, making a bundle, Lapp says. “That happened all over the country,” he says.

While the railroad brought people to town, Hondo attracted some nefarious characters for other reasons, namely, the Newton Boys.

The Newton Boys were from neighboring Uvalde, and the four brothers had a specialty: robbing banks. Willis, Joe, Jess and Wylie Newton operated during the 1920s and robbed more than 80 banks



Joe Manak, a solo from Quihi, says, “The real historical significance was the World War II era.”

and six trains from Texas to Canada, including the single biggest train robbery in U.S. history. By the time they were all captured, the Newton Boys were believed to have stolen more money than all other outlaws at that time combined, according to “The Handbook of Texas Online.”

The gang had an unusual method of operation. They liked to break into banks at night so they wouldn't hurt anyone.

“It was easy to rob banks in those days. You cut the telephone lines, and nobody would know what's going on. I remember we robbed two banks in Hondo in one night,” a 76-year-old Joe Newton said in a 1977 interview with *The San Antonio Light*. “We got into Hondo about midnight and a norther had blown in. We got into the bank real easy, and Willis started working on the safe. He juggled the handle and the combination, and it opened right up,” Joe said. “We were out of there in about 30 minutes.”

The giant crowbar the Newton Boys used in those 1921 heists is on display at the Medina County Museum. It was found outside the First National Bank of Hondo by an employee of the bank.

The tale of the famous brother robbers was made into a 1998 movie called, what else, “The Newton Boys.” Matthew McConaughey played Willis Newton in the movie — a role he no doubt relished, as McConaughey also was born in his character's home town of Uvalde.

The courthouse has seen its share of weirdness, as well. In 1902, a man named James Lenard showed up there to turn himself into authorities. Lenard signed a sworn confession that he had held up a saloon and killed a bartender in Princeton, Calif., in 1884. Medina County Sheriff F. Frerichs later turned Lenard over to California law enforcement officials. Lenard was put on trial for murder in California — litigation that proved Lenard had no involvement in the crime, according to a 1902 article in *The Dallas Morning News*. Lenard just wanted a free ride to California, said B.M. Baker, the Medina county attorney at the time, in that article.

In 1929 a Medina County jury sentenced dairyman Luz Arcos to death. On Christmas night 1928, Arcos got in an argument over a bottle of milk with store owner Jose Barrientos and his two sons. They refused to pay Arcos for the milk because they “declared it was sour” according to a 1929 article in *The Dallas Morning News*. So Arcos shot Barrientos and his two sons, killing them.

In 1930, Gov. Dan Moody put off Arcos' execution so he could undergo a sanity trial. Another jury determined that Arcos was sane, and he was executed later that year, according a 1930 article in *The Dallas Morning News*. By then, newspapers across the country covered Arcos' execution, referring to him as “The Sour Milk Killer.”

John Council's e-mail address is jcouncil@alm.com. He is on Twitter at www.twitter.com/john_council.