

Old Red

Restoration of a Dallas landmark

BY RANDY MALLORY

Southbound traffic flows along I-35E as I jockey toward my exit. Ahead, the 50-story Reunion Tower marks the western edge of downtown like a giant, gleaming pushpin. I zip past American Airlines Center sports arena and its posh neighbor, W Dallas Victory Hotel & Residences. Suddenly, the elevated freeway affords a fine view of Dealey Plaza, hands-down the city's most famous historical spot.

I notice the former School Book Depository (now the Sixth Floor Museum) where Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President John F. Kennedy in 1963. There's the triple underpass of Commerce, Main, and Elm streets, route of the president's ill-fated motorcade. I also see the 1915 Dallas Criminal Courts Building, where Jack Ruby was tried in 1964 for murdering Oswald.

But something new rises from the plaza panorama—a castle-like tower that's back after a 90-year absence. I ease off the freeway for a closer look at the 1893 Dallas County courthouse. Fresh from a \$40 million renovation completed last year, the fairy-book building is home to the new Old Red Museum of Dallas County History & Culture, which retells the story of the 31 towns now in the county.

The courthouse sits atop a bluff above the Trinity River on a block of land donated by John Neely Bryan, who founded Dallas in the 1840s. Unlike most 19th century Texas courthouses, the first Dallas County courthouse was built on the block's corner (Main at Houston Streets), so as not to disturb the town founder's cornfield. Four courthouses rose here, and all burned down. The 1893 incarnation is a four-story brick and stone edifice with arched entries and windows, and round turrets. Its designer, Arkansas architect M.A. Orlopp, employed the Richardsonian Romanesque style to symbolize the ambitions of a growing town on the Texas frontier.

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Blocks of rusticated blue-gray granite comprise the first floor and window trim. Red sandstone forms upper floors and the massive clock tower...hence the nickname “Old Red.” Interior embellishments—an ornate cast-iron staircase, granite wainscoting, two elevators, and six courtrooms—are rare for early Texas courthouses.

The 20th Century was unkind to Old Red. Fears of structural weakness resulted in the removal in 1919 of its landmark tower. As county offices expanded, interior renovations masked the original interior’s charm. The county built a new courthouse in the 1960s. By the mid-1980s all offices had relocated, and Old Red stood vacant.

Beginning in 2001 the county tapped public and private funds for a restoration inside and out. Lacking original plans or drawings, project architect James Pratt of Dallas used early photographs as a starting point, then watched for tell-tale signs of original features and colors as crews peeled away layers of renovation.

Old Red is the perfect place to tell the sweeping story of Dallas and the surrounding county. As Pratt puts it: “This was a public project in 1893 that showed Dallas at its best, when courthouses and law and justice were very important on the frontier. In size and intent, Old Red ranks second only to the State Capitol in its attempt to be an important building.”

A half-block away, I get a full view of the restoration’s crowning accomplishment. Old Red’s clock tower rises once again nine stories high, with period clockworks and a 4,500-pound bell...just as it appeared in 1893. Whimsical sculptures called wyverns stand watch around the base of the tower like dragon guards.

Old Red’s first floor features a free museum space summarizing early county history, as well as the courthouse’s construction and restoration. There’s also a museum gift shop and a Dallas Tourist Information Center.

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Dominating the first-floor hallway is a huge winged Pegasus near the grand staircase.

Built as a sign for the Magnolia Petroleum Company's exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair, the glowing red neon horse later topped a service station at Buckner and Garland.

I admire the craftwork of the ornate staircase—each tread engraved with a Lone Star—then catch the daily 2 p.m. building tour. Everywhere you look, original colors revive the eccentricities of the Victorian Age in pastels such as avocado green, sky blue, and salmon pink. The fourth floor houses a ceremonial courtroom and meeting spaces, and the third floor has offices. The second floor boasts a Children's Learning Center where youngsters try on vintage clothing, play old-fashioned games, and explore history and culture in flip books and computer stations.

The second floor also houses four former courtrooms turned into the museum's main chronological galleries. A short video introduces each of the four eras—entitled Early Years (prehistory-1873), Trading Center (1874-1917), Big "D" (1918-1945), and World Crossroads (1946-present). Concise information panels and captioned vintage photographs hit the historical highlights: how settlers tamed the frontier; how railroads, automobiles, and airplanes accelerated commerce; how cotton, oil, banking, and technology made Dallas an economic powerhouse; and how a diverse population coped with all the changes.

Interactive audio-video displays liven up the historical record. One display describes the wild celebration (and barbecue dinner for 7,000) that met the arrival in July 16, 1872 of the first train to Dallas. Another discusses the creation of a "Little Mexico" on McKinney Avenue by immigrants fleeing the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Yet another recalls the music of Deep Ellum, an African-American district of the 1920s where early blues legends such as Blind Lemon Jefferson gained fame.

Throughout the exhibits, period artifacts (on loan from the Dallas Historical Society and other sources) make history seem even more personal. Here is a ceremonial pipe of Texas' last

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Comanche chief, Quanah Parker, and there is the family Bible of town founder John Neely

Bryan. Here is a rolling pin used by slaves, and there is a note hand-written by Texas

Confederate Governor Francis Lubbock calling for more troops. Here is a sod-busting plow that

first turned prairie into farmland, and there is the first integrated computer circuit, built in 1958 by

Texas Instruments' engineer Jack Kilby.

To its credit, the Old Red Museum doesn't dodge difficult subjects. One exhibit, for instance, tackles the mob lynching in 1910 of an African-American, Allen Brooks, who was tossed out of a second-floor courtroom in this very courthouse and hung a short distance away. Another exhibit plays a first-hand account of John F. Kennedy's assassination as observed from one of Old Red's balconies.

Old Red not only houses history, it is history. Located within eyeshot of numerous historical treasures—Dealey Plaza, the JFK Memorial, an early pioneer log cabin, the 1916 Union Station, and the historic West End—a fully-restored Old Red promises to remain Dallas' premier 19th century public landmark for at least another 90 years.

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THE OLD RED MUSEUM OF DALLAS COUNTY HISTORY & CULTURE is at 100 S. Houston St. in downtown Dallas. Hours: Mon-Sat 9-5 and Sun 12-5. Admission: \$8 adults, \$6 over 65, \$5 under 16 and groups (minimum 20). Some free exhibits. Public tour daily at 2 p.m. Allow two hours for museum exhibits. Call 214-745-1100; www.oldred.org.

RESOURCES:

--Sam Childers, Old Red Communications Manager, samc@oldred.org; www.oldred.org

--James Pratt, restoration architect

--THC Atlas online re: historical sites

--Texas Handbook Online

--RE: Bryan & Dallas history

http://www.dallashistory.org/history/dallas/dallas_history.htm