

HISTORY OF THE GRIMES COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The first Grimes County Courthouse was constructed from cedar logs. Fire destroyed this structure in 1838, and in 1850, a ferocious wind destroyed the second Courthouse. W.W. Arrington designed the third Courthouse and built it from stone in February, 1859. The third Courthouse burned on May 15, 1890, and the fire of January 20, 1893 destroyed the fourth Courthouse. This (5th) Courthouse was built in 1894.

The Courthouse bricks have 3 distinct colors: (1) the original hand molded red brick of the surviving 1891 east wall vaults; (2) the 1894 pinkish red brick on the south, west, and part of the north walls, and (3) a rustic brown colored brick on a section of the north wall. The third color of brick has an interesting story. The bricklayer had run out of bricks and was waiting impatiently for a wagonload of bricks to be delivered. While waiting for the bricks to arrive, he went around town gathering a few bricks to keep his job moving along. When the wagon arrived, he continued bricking with the original bricks.

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During the election of 1898, the election returns disappeared from the County Clerk's office – supposedly were burned. The Populist-Republicans claimed victory and the Democrats contested. In the spring of 1899, five men gathered to discuss ways to fight the coalition. This group became known as the White Man's Union Association. One day, the Populist-Republican Coalition and their "elected" Sheriff barricaded themselves in the County Jail across the street. When the two coalitions met, a gunfight began resulting in five bullet holes in the Courthouse structure, four on the west side located near the second floor windows and one on the right side of the south entrance doors. They are still visible today. One person was killed and several were injured. The Governor was called in and the bad coalition was "run out of town".

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In 1933, a Grimes County Grand Jury indicted Clyde Barrow for robbing a business in Navasota. The indictment was dropped when Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker were gunned down in a Louisiana gun battle. In 1934, Joe Palmer, a member of the Barrow Gang, was tried, found guilty and sentenced to death for killing Major Crowson of the Walls Unit in Huntsville.

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As far back as anyone can remember, it has been a tradition in Grimes County for its citizens to gather around the Courthouse on election night to "party" and await election returns. The County Clerk hangs two large tally boards outside his office, and votes are posted as returns are received from all over the county.

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Hollywood came to the Courthouse in June of 1997. Goldie Hawn directed her first film made for TV named "Hope". Grimes County residents were able to try out for parts in the movie and be a part of it. The town got to watch Main Street be renovated for the movie and watch the burning of the constructed movie theatre (where the Confederate Memorial is today).

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Sheriffs, Shootings and Gangsters: Grimes County's Fifth Courthouse Overcomes Its Violent Past

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In January 2007, when Betty Shiflett became the first woman elected as Grimes County Judge, she brought one of the County's most important citizens – Sarah Dodson – with her into office.

Dodson's name may be little-known outside of this rural Brazos River Valley County, but her work product is familiar to all Texans: she stitched together one of the first versions of the Lone Star Flag in 1835.

Shiflett admired a painting of Dodson by Grimes County Historian Russell Cushman, so she offered him her first paycheck for the artwork. He accepted. Now Dodson hangs in Shiflett's corner office in Grimes County's 1894 courthouse.

"Whenever Sarah goes, I go," Shiflett says proudly.

The three-story Victorian structure where Dodson's image resides was restored in 2002 at a cost of \$1.8 million and was one of the first projects completed by the Texas Historical Commission (THC) Historic Courthouse Preservation Program. Inside, the pressed tin ceiling of the second floor courtroom shines, and the concrete floors of the first floor hallway gleam. But other refurbished items in the courthouse have started to deteriorate. Several of the windows in the courthouse are in danger of falling apart because of wood deterioration. And plaster and paint is coming off the walls in the stairwells.

"There's been a lot of things that they've (the THC) learned since this was restored," Shiflett says of the courthouse, as a workman outside repaired one of the building's window. "It's just something we'll have to deal with." "We're working with them (the county) to address those items," says Mark Cowan, a project reviewer with the THC Historic Courthouse Preservation Program.

But some of the problems at the courthouse can be blamed on Grimes County residents' forefathers. The current courthouse is the county's fifth – replacing others that were destroyed by wind or fire. During construction in 1893, contractors didn't clear the debris of the fourth courthouse, which had burned that same year, and instead laid concrete floors of the current courthouse over the wood scrap, providing a breeding ground for termites, Cowan says. The courthouse has had termite problems ever since.

But other blemishes, such as the scuffed-up wooden landings on the stairs to the courtroom, are just a consequence of daily use. After all, the structure is a working courthouse, not a museum.

Bill Boyce, a justice on Houston's 14th Court of Appeals, got a sense of the courthouse's history when he climbed those courthouse stairs on June 17 to hear arguments in Grimes County Bail Bonds Board v. Sonny Ellen D/B/A Sonny Ellen Bail Bonds. The 14th Court began traveling last year, hearing arguments in counties where the appeals originated, Boyce says. The 14th Court has 10 counties in its jurisdiction including Grimes County.

Boyce had to sit in the witness stand during the argument, because the courtroom was not designed for a three-justice appellate panel hearing. Boyce was joined at the hearing by 14th Court Chief Justice Adele Hedges and Justice Jeff Brown. But Boyce was glad to get the chance to not only see the courthouse he'd always wanted to visit but to use it as well.

"It certainly does come across that you are a part of the flow of history of cases in that courthouse," Boyce says of the hearing.

The Grimes County Courthouse was the scene of an armed struggle in 1900 between a sheriff who was backed by a diverse Populist coalition of white and black residents and the newly formed White Man's Union Party, which had formed to suppress the voting rights of African-Americans who lived in the county, according to a 1971 article in *The American Historical Review*.

On Nov. 7, 1900, the day after the White Man's union candidate had defeated People's Party Sheriff Garrett Scott in the general election, armed White Man's Union members surrounded the courthouse and occupied the second-floor courtroom. Scott was warned not to appear in the streets, according to the article.

But he did not heed the warning: While standing in the street, Scott was cut down by rifle fire from the second floor of the courthouse – wounds he survived.

He dragged himself to the county jail across the street from the courthouse, where he and his deputies had a five-day standoff with the White Man's Union members in the courthouse, each side exchanging gunfire between the buildings, which were located 150 yards apart according to the article.

A Texas Volunteer State Guard unit intervened in the conflict and escorted the wounded Scott out of the jail and placed him on a train to Houston, according to the article.

The next year, Scott filed *G.T. Scott v. O.S. Johnson, et al*, in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas, according to a 1901 article in *The Dallas Morning News*. The complaint accused the White Man's Union Party of using intimidation to prevent a fair election and conspiring to kill him before he could conclude his term as sheriff.

The suit was resolved when the defendants in the case each paid \$25 in fines, according to a 2002 pamphlet about the courthouse's history.

The courthouse had at least two connections to Clyde Barrow's infamous gang, which robbed banks and businesses across Texas in the early 1930's. In 1933, Barrow was indicted by a Grimes County grand jury for robbing R.B. Parten of Navasota of \$2,900 according to the pamphlet. The indictment was dropped the next year, after lawmen killed Barrow in Louisiana.

Barrow also helped orchestrate a prison break for his gang members from the state penitentiary in Huntsville. One of Barrow's henchmen, Joe Palmer, escaped death row in 1934 and fatally shot guard Major Crowson while fleeing. Palmer was later captured and re-sentenced to death in the Grimes County Courthouse on a change of venue from Walker County, according to a 1934 article in The Dallas Morning News.

Hog Heaven

These days, the Grimes County Courthouse is more likely to be surrounded by motorcycles than armed insurrectionists.

Grimes County is connected to suburban Houston by 60 miles of two-lane highways that twist and roll through some of the prettiest farm and ranch land in Texas, making it a popular destination for Houstonians who like to travel by two wheels.

Vic Pecorino, a municipal judge for the city of Humble and a motorcycle enthusiast, convinced the producers of a short-lived syndicated television show, "Hog Heaven," to film a group of Harley-Davidson riders on a trip to the Grimes County Courthouse last year.

"We were out front, and here comes the little county judge who says, "What y'all doing out there?" Pecorino says referring to Shiflett. "And she invited us in for a tour of the historic courthouse."

The completely unplanned moment made it into the episode of the show that aired last year, Pecorino says.

"I hope that's not the highlight of my judicial career, but they were nice," Shiflett says with a laugh. "We have a lot of motorcycle clubs that come through Grimes County."

Last year, Shiflett accompanied a group of ghost hunters who wanted to stay inside the courthouse at night to search for spiritual inhabitants. But in the still of the night as the hunters placed video cameras in the building hoping to film a ghost, the calm was disturbed by the engines of two motorcycles whose riders wanted to get a closer look at the courthouse, Shiflett says.

She adds, "It's very interesting being Grimes County Judge."

SERIOUS RIOTING IN TEXAS

Another Conflict Imminent at Anderson – State Troops Called Out.

Special to The New York Times

Austin, Texas, Nov. 10 – Another conflict is imminent between the authorities and the contending factions at Anderson, where, as already reported, fatal rioting caused by the local elections, occurred last Wednesday.

Adj. Gen. Thomas Scurry arrived at Anderson to-day. He will be reinforced by Capt. William McDonald and a detachment of State Rangers to-morrow. Almost every citizen of Anderson is armed. Sheriff Scott and his force are barricaded in the jail.

The members of the opposing factions are fortified in the Court House. The two factions exchange shots at frequent intervals, but no casualties have been reported since Wednesday, when three men were killed.

All business in the town has been suspended since the outbreak occurred.

The Rangers will take charge of the situation as soon as they arrive. Their first work will be to disarm every man in the town.

Sheriff Scott has consented to leave the county, and the military will escort him to Houston.

The trouble had its origin when Sheriff Garrett Scott was held responsible by the White Men's Union for alleged misconduct of affairs. At the recent election Scott was defeated and later was warned to leave the county, which he refused to do. Late Wednesday afternoon the Sheriff was shot and seriously wounded by an unknown person. Emmett Scott, his brother, and William McDonald engaged in a street duel. When the smoke of the battle cleared away both were dead, as was also John Bradley, Jr. The entire town of Anderson was excited over the affair and Sheriff Scott took possession of the jail, which he has since held by force.

The New York Times

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Scurry going to Galveston

Austin, Texas November 9 – Adjutant General Scurry left for Anderson, Grimes County, tonight to which point he was ordered by the governor who has received several applications for protection from parties claiming to have been ordered from their homes in that county. General Scurry goes to the scene of the reported trouble to ascertain the particulars thereof and act as he may deem necessary.

Houston Daily Post November 9, 1900

Anderson Full of Armed Men

They are there to prevent any further trouble.

The three victims of Wednesday's Tragedy were Laid to Rest at Anderson.

Navasota, Texas, November 8 – Information from Anderson this afternoon says that the scene of yesterday's bloody battle is now perfectly quiet, but practically in the hands of rural citizens gathered from all parts of the county. Their avowed purpose is to preserve the peace, and they are doing it. It appears now that Mr. Scott's wounds only amount to an ugly bullet hole through the fleshy part of one thigh. Deep scenes of sorrow marked the bearing away of the dead today and all three were laid to rest in the Odd Fellows' cemetery by those who loved them living and revered them dead.

John J. Bradley Jr. was buried at 10:30 under auspices of the Odd Fellows. Yound McDonald was also a member of this order, but the Navasota gentlemen arrived too late to participate in his obsequies. The body of Emmett Scott was laid away shortly after 12 o'clock. Both Bradley and McDonald were to have been married shortly. Bradley was shot in the region of the heart by Scott and was so close as to be powder burned. He ran into his store when the shooting began. McDonald shot Scott after he (McDonald) had first been knocked down and shot.

Houston Daily Post Saturday, November 10, 1900

A State of War in Grimes

Sheriff Scott and Followers Besieged in the Jail at Anderson

Navasota, Texas, November 9 – Wild reports of the commencement of a battle between Sheriff Scott and his party in the jail and citizens in the court house and surrounding houses in Anderson reached Navasota at 11 o'clock today. This afternoon all is quiet at the "city on the hills". It is said that the first shot this morning came from the jail, and was promptly replied to from the court house. All told there were five or six shots fired, but no one was hurt. And all remains quiet and lonely, patiently awaiting what the next moment may bring forth. The sheriff and his party of some ten or fifteen men, some women and some prisoners, are in the jail; a company of between fifty and 100 armed citizens are at the court house and on the street. All business in Anderson is suspended. The stores opened for a little while this morning, but soon closed. The saloons were promptly closed immediately after the shooting of Wednesday afternoon. The people are cool, sober and resolved. Any overt act is sure to be fraught with tragic consequences.

In a telephonic talk with Senator Neal this afternoon, Governor Sayers at Austin stated that he had advices from Grimes county today, and intimated that he would send General Scurry or Captain McDonald to the scene tomorrow for a personal investigation of the impossible stories that have been set afloat by Dame rumor. Late this afternoon Sheriff G. L. Scott sent out from the jail to the citizens a proposition signed by himself and indorsed by his father, J.N. Scott, in which he asked that in consideration of the citizens allowing himself, father, brothers, sisters and brothers-in-law to leave the county unmolested, he will immediately leave the county, never again to return to it. He to amicably settle all past differences with citizens and persecute no citizen for any act him or his.

The citizens straightway met and considered the proposition. They discussed it thoroughly and decided to answer that so far as they were concerned the conditions would be granted, but that they could not answer for others and guarantee him safety through the county. This leaves the matter for the State authorities to unravel. They are expected here tomorrow.

Scott has Left Grimes

Under Military Escort the Party was put Aboard a Train

Navasota, November 11 (1900) – In accordance with telegraphic orders issued yesterday evening by Adjutant General Scurry, Captain George McCormick arrived here on the 1 o'clock train last night with forty men of the Houston Light Guard and other military organizations of Houston. They were met at the depot by Colonel Gordon Boone and taken to the Shaw Rifle's armory for the night.

At an early hour this morning they departed for Anderson, ten miles away, in wagons. The boys were received there with due courtesy and treated to a good dinner, after which they repaired to the jail and stationing sentinels about in every direction as a matter of precaution, placed Sheriff Scott in the bed of a spring wagon, one of his nieces on either side and a cordon of troops closely around the vehicle; the four or five other members of the sheriff's party were seated in buggies and wagons and the remaining troops were thrown out ahead and to the rear of the procession. In this matter the relieving force came on to this city. Within the city limits they wound around the suburbs until the south side was reached, then down the track they went to await the evening train and in an hour all were speeding toward Houston.

A large crowd of interested, orderly citizens witnessed the departure from Anderson and another viewed the march through Navasota. With a little jeering of a sentinel who made himself obnoxious at Anderson, there was no ill feeling manifested and no friction between the citizens and the officers commanding.

Houston Daily Post Monday November 12, 1900

Scott Brought to Houston

Arrived Last Night Escorted by the Light Guard

Turned over to Friends at the Grand Central Depot and Taken Out to Jourdeville

The Houston Light Guard returned from Anderson yesterday evening on the 7 o'clock Central train, accompanying Sheriff Garrett Scott of Grimes County, who was wounded Tuesday at Anderson by unknown parties. The company was ordered to Navasota Saturday night by Adjutant General Scurry, who had already gone to Anderson to investigate the condition of affairs at that place as detailed in The Post. The boys, forty of them, under command of Captain George McCormick and Lieutenants Hutcheson and Hoover, left Houston at 10:40 Saturday night and arrived at Navasota, reporting to Colonel Gordon Boone for further instructions. At about 6:30 Sunday morning they started in wagons for Anderson, which is about 10 miles in the interior from Navasota. The company arrived there about 11 o'clock and was met by Adjutant General Scurry. Dinner was prepared and partaken of and the company proceeded to the jail, where Scott and his family were.

On account of the wound received by Scott not having received proper surgical attention, it was in pretty bad condition, and he was put into a spring wagon and hauled away from the jail. He was not taken directly by the court house, where armed citizens had esconsed themselves it being feared that such action would cause someone to lose his head and shoot.

On reaching Navasota Scott was placed on a stretcher and aboard the regular train and brought to Houston. At the Grand Central depot he was turned over to friends, who loaded him onto one of the ambulances of the Westheimer undertaking establishment and had him driven out to Jourdeville or to some point in the Fifth Ward near that suburb.

Members of the Light Guard say they found things far more peaceable at Anderson than they expected and that the only time they consider that danger threatened was when they were removing Scott from the jail. The citizens the boys say appeared somewhat excited then, and were peering from every window in the vicinity.