Impressiveness of Courthouse Is Undiminished in 'Atomic Age'

--Ray Holland

In a rainy, dreary April 21, 1923, "wagon loads" of flowers lined the corridors of the Caddo Parish Courthouse here for ceremonies officially dedicating the "magnificent edifice."

Today, that same building (with only a few remodeling and modernization changes) continues to be the seat of Caddo Parish's government 30 years after it was described as a "superb palace of justice" at the dedication.

Temed an "architectural epic" of the day, the eight-story, $1,250,000 structure was financed by a five year 2½ mill tax, with Caddo taxpayers completely paying for the building before it was ever occupied.

Its "dignity of design, beauty of detail and impressive grandeur" has been coupled with its historic background to serve as a winning argument against all moves to raze the structure and build a new one somewhere away from the downtown square.

Even in this atomic age with all its advances in architecture, materials and construction, many persons still will classify the Caddo Parish Courthouse among the masterpieces of the builder's art. Undoubtedly, many persons would argue that the passing years and booming growth of the parish have rendered the building inadequate. However, officials and the general public have consistently adopted a policy of renovation and remodeling to meet the changing needs in preference to a change of structures.

In fact, on May 12, 1954, the Caddo Parish Police Jury tabled a proposal offering approximately $3,200,000 for the purchase of the courthouse and property by Eastern interests. The offer was a move to replace the courthouse with a multi-million dollar combination store-office-hotel building. Among other reasons, the offer was considered "too low."

The popularity of the Caddo Parish courthouse's architectural design is manifested by the number of structures of similar appearance one will see in his travels throughout America.

Some of these similarities are not accidental; they are either "copies" of the one here or the local courthouse's architect, the late Mr. Edward Neild, was retained to duplicate the Shreveport building.

There is an interesting story behind a couple of the courthouses that are duplicates of the one here. A county judge from Missouri visited the local courthouse in the early 1930's and liked the structure here so well that he returned to Kansas City and spearheaded a move to have one like it built there. This county judge was Harry S. Truman, who later became President of the United States.

In a letter to this reporter recently, former President Truman said he visited many cities throughout the United States inspecting various public buildings "and came to the conclusion that the one in Shreveport would most nearly meet our needs in Kansas City."

He said he visited courthouses in Shreveport "of which I had had many reports," and Houston, Denver, Buffalo, Brooklyn, Milwaukee and Kenosha, Wis. "I sent for Edward F. Neild, the architect of that building and made Mr. Neild architect for the reconstruction of the White House in Washington. Neild and Sondal Assoc., also were architects "for my new library here in Independence," Truman added.

"Unfortunately, he (Mr. Neild) died before we were able to complete the final plans of the building (the library)," Truman said. "Gentry and Voisamp of Kansas City were the consulting architects for the project."

"Ed Neild was a grand man one of the ablest architects in the country," Truman said in his letter. "Most of our modern architects have succeeded only in increasing the size of old houses and woodsheds. It is called wonderful, but Ed and I did not believe in that sort of architecture."

Unquestionably, Mr. Neild conceived and designed and edifices that
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architecturally and artistically symbolizes strength and serenity when he drew the plans for the courthouse which still occupies and entire downtown city block here.

The structure's design is based on a modern conception of the Italian Renaissance. With an exterior almost wholly of Indiana limestone, the building's ornamentation is of classic simplicity which harmonizes with the dignified motif of the entire structure.

Furnishings and other expenses ran the $1,250,000 structure's total cost to $1,610,000 before it was occupied in 1928. Since then, more than a half million dollars have been spent in air-conditioning, remodeling and renovating the building.

L. F. Clason, secretary-treasurer of the Caddo Parish Police Jury, has been with the jury from the day the structure was dedicated until the present time. He has estimated that it would require $3,000,000 to duplicate the building under present construction costs.

As the 30th anniversary of the courthouse's dedication nears, no elaborate ceremonies have been announced to commemorate the historic day. But memories and recorded history testifies to significance of that memorable day.

The report of the dedication ceremonies had to share the front page of the next morning's Shreveport Times with stories of thunderstorms that raked the area. Despite inclement weather, thousands of persons crowded the corridors of the building hours before the formal dedicatory exercises at 8 p.m.

"Literally wagon loads" of flowers (gifts from friends and admirers of the parish officials) lined the corridors on each floor of the building the day it was presented to the taxpayers. In the main floor corridor was a "huge floral horse shoe composed of red and white flowers, which was a gift of the Glassell-Wilson Construction Co., contractors for the building," The Times stated.

Visitors were given the "run of the building" during the afternoon and evening of that day, with no business of any sort being transacted during the period. Phonographs were placed on each floor and played continuously throughout the afternoon as visitors toured each department and office. A special musical program was presented during the evening ceremonies.

The present courthouse is Caddo's fifth seat of justice since the parish was created in 1830 from a part of Wichita Parish. The home of Thomas Wallace, because of its central location, served for two years—1836-40—as the first courthouse. From 1840 to 1857 the courthouse was a frame building on the southeast corner of Market and Crockett streets which had been purchased from Washington Jenkins in an "involved transaction" that finally ended as a rental situation.

The first parish-built courthouse was completed on the city square in 1860 at a cost of $19,300. Civil War conditions must have imposed a strain on the building, because it was condemned as unsafe in 1870—only 10 years after its completion. Although condemned, the building was not demolished until 1899.

The next courthouse, and the predecessor to the present one, was completed and occupied in 1892 at an aggregate cost of $86,000. It was termed editorially in the Times "as complete a building of its kind as will be found in the South." However, time made the building inadequate and construction of the present building was begun in 1927.

The longevity of the present 30-year-old courthouse may yet be shortened beyond expectations, but current interior remodeling and renovation on the building indicates a much longer life.

The Shreveport Times, April 6, 1958.