Oak Ridge Jail has new home at Rural Life Museum

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

LSU Rural Life Museum Director David Floyd got a Christmas present he has wanted for a long time—a jail. Emily McEnery Murphy gave the museum her 150-year-old jail, formerly located in Oak Ridge in Morehouse Parish. It was formally dedicated earlier this month.

"The Oak Ridge Jail is believed to be the only surviving pre-Civil War wooden jail in Louisiana," said Floyd.

Like the late Steele Burden, who founded the museum, Floyd roams the state collecting 19th-century buildings. "The jail is our 25th major building, not counting chicken houses and outhouses," he said.

The jail is tiny, just 12 feet by 22 feet, with two small cells. The walls, floor and ceiling are of laminated plank construction with three layers of loblolly pine and no corner posts. "It's the simplest form of construction," said Floyd. "It goes back to Medieval times. It has no frame. The boards are the walls."

The first step in construction was to put boards on the ground, side by side. "On the outside, they nailed boards diagonally," Floyd said. "Then they flipped the boards over and nailed more boards diagonally on the other side. Finally, they nailed the four 7-inch-thick walls together."

Whoever built the jail nailed thousands of nails no more than 2 inches apart all over the walls. That kept the boards together. "I never saw the like of nails in that building," Murphy said. "It was really overkill," Floyd said, "but the purpose was to keep people from using hatchets or axes to form an escape."

Who built the jail and when it was built are a big mystery. Although there was some speculation that the jail may have been a plantation or slave jail, it is generally believed that it was simply a community jail used by the parish sheriff to lock up any criminals, whether free or slave.

"The building predates the present town of Oak Ridge," said Floyd. "Oak Ridge is an antebellum town. The Oak Ridge Baptist Church dates to the mid-19th century. This jail was always across the street from the church."

Murphy said she has no idea how old the jail is. "There are no records," she said. "The records burned in Bastrop (the seat of Morehouse Parish). It's just old. It has always been there."

She does have an abstract of the property dating to 1866, when it was divided among the heirs of W.H. and Margaret Davis. It changed hands several times and was purchased by M.W. Bardin in 1921. He sold the property to Murphy's LSURural Life Museum.

ONE IN A SERIES

The building predates the present town of Oak Ridge, said Floyd. "Oak Ridge is an antebellum town. The Oak Ridge Baptist Church dates to the mid-19th century. This jail was always across the street from the church."

Murphy said she has no idea how old the jail is. "There are no records," she said. "The records burned in Bastrop (the seat of Morehouse Parish). It's just old. It has always been there."

Who built the jail and when it was built are a big mystery. Although there was some speculation that the jail may have been a plantation or slave jail, it is generally believed that it was simply a community jail used by the parish sheriff to lock up any criminals, whether free or slave.

The building predates the present town of Oak Ridge, said Floyd. "Oak Ridge is an antebellum town. The Oak Ridge Baptist Church dates to the mid-19th century. This jail was always across the street from the church."

Murphy said she has no idea how old the jail is. "There are no records," she said. "The records burned in Bastrop (the seat of Morehouse Parish). It's just old. It has always been there."

She does have an abstract of the property dating to 1866, when it was divided among the heirs of W.H. and Margaret Davis. It changed hands several times and was purchased by M.W. Bardin in 1921. He sold the property to Murphy's LSURural Life Museum.

"The Oak Ridge Jail is believed to be the only surviving pre-Civil War wooden jail in Louisiana," said Floyd.

Like the late Steele Burden, who founded the museum, Floyd roams the state collecting 19th-century buildings. "The jail is our 25th major building, not counting chicken houses and outhouses," he said.

The jail is tiny, just 12 feet by 22 feet, with two small cells. The walls, floor and ceiling are of laminated plank construction with three layers of loblolly pine and no corner posts. "It's the simplest form of construction," said Floyd. "It goes back to Medieval times. It has no frame. The boards are the walls."

The first step in construction was to put boards on the ground, side by side. "On the outside, they nailed boards diagonally," Floyd said. "Then they flipped the boards over and nailed more boards diagonally on the other side. Finally, they nailed the four 7-inch-thick walls together."

Whoever built the jail nailed thousands of nails no more than 2 inches apart all over the walls. That kept the boards together. "I never saw the like of nails in that building," Murphy said. "It was really overkill," Floyd said, "but the purpose was to keep people from using hatchets or axes to form an escape."

Who built the jail and when it was built are a big mystery. Although there was some speculation that the jail may have been a plantation or slave jail, it is generally believed that it was simply a community jail used by the parish sheriff to lock up any criminals, whether free or slave.

"The building predates the present town of Oak Ridge," said Floyd. "Oak Ridge is an antebellum town. The Oak Ridge Baptist Church dates to the mid-19th century. This jail was always across the street from the church."

Murphy said she has no idea how old the jail is. "There are no records," she said. "The records burned in Bastrop (the seat of Morehouse Parish). It's just old. It has always been there."

She does have an abstract of the property dating to 1866, when it was divided among the heirs of W.H. and Margaret Davis. It changed hands several times and was purchased by M.W. Bardin in 1921. He sold the property to Murphy's LSURural Life Museum.

ONE IN A SERIES

If you have questions or comments about this story, please e-mail us at newsdesk@advocate.com.
mother, Florence McEnery, around 1940.

Murphy's sister-in-law, Floy McEnery, moved into the house that Murphy now lives in when Murphy's mother bought the property. "She remembers that when they moved into the house, there were shackles in the jail," Murphy said.

Floyd used his extensive knowledge of old buildings and consulted with experts to try to date the jail. "Since we have no manuscript evidence on the age, we had to look at different things," he said.

The house was built on the property by Grey Barham between 1890 and 1900. "The jail was already there. It had just ceased being a jail," Floyd said.

Although the house was built facing the yard, the jail was in an odd location in the yard, facing nothing. To Floyd, that means that the jail predates the road.

Saw marks on the wood were made by a rotary saw with a round saw blade. "That means that the jail dates no earlier than 1845," said Jay D. Edwards, professor of geography and anthropology at LSU and director of LSU's F.H. Nutt Cultural Resources Lab, examined two nails from the jail. He found them to be Type 8 Louisiana Nails, manufactured approximately between 1835 and 1885. Because the iron in the nails is "exceptionally impure" and the heads "machine formed" but "also rather imperfect," he believes that they were "manufactured early in the period of use, almost certainly prior to the Civil War."

"This makes it the only antebellum wooden jail in Louisiana," Floyd said.

"There are plenty of brick jails but only one wooden jail."

One of the stories floating around Oak Ridge is that after the jail ceased being used for prisoners, the sheriff still had jurisdiction over it. One Sunday, worshippers in the Baptist church across the street heard something that sounded like gunfire and then smelled a strong aroma of alcohol. That's when townsfolk discovered that the sheriff, a deacon in the church, was operating a still out of the old jail.

How does a wooden jail survive for almost 150 years in Louisiana's damp climate?

"A barn was built around it," Murphy said.

The LSU Rural Life Museum at Essen Lane and I-10 is open from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day of the year except for five major holidays. Admission is $7 for adults, $4 for children and $6 for seniors.

After the house was built on the property, one of the owners put sheds around the sides of the jail and converted one continuous roof over the whole thing to convert it to a barn.

Sometime after World War II, the side sheds were removed, and the old jail became the storage shed. "My children played in it growing up," Murphy said. "It was full of stuff from my ancestors, but it was deteriorating badly."

In later years, the floor collapsed. "When it reached the ground, it started to rot and the walls started to separate," Floyd said.

State Sen. Robert Barham grew up in Oak Ridge about 100 yards from the jail. He developed an interest in the Rural Life Museum over several visits.

At one of the museum's Evening at the Museum events, he asked Floyd if there were something he could do for the museum. Floyd turned to him and said, "There's this jail in Oak Ridge..."

Barham knew exactly what Floyd was talking about. "About the time the jail was being built, my family came to Morehouse Parish," Barham said. "My great-great-grandfather was elected sheriff in 1851. There is a chance he locked someone up in that jail."

Just coincidentally, Barham was scheduled to speak to a group of ladies at Murphy's house. He told the group about the museum and then turned to Murphy and said, "They're interested in your jail."

To Murphy, that was nothing new. For decades, people had been interested in the jail. "People wanted my mother to open it to the public," Murphy said, "but she didn't want to."

Murphy had considered giving it to LSU in Shreveport, since she had lived in Shreveport for 40 years before moving back home to Oak Ridge. "I never did get around to it," she said. "I figured more people could enjoy it in Baton Rouge."

No one is happier than David Floyd. "It's a rare opportunity for us to talk about crime and punishment in the 19th century," he said. "This is a subject that is often ignored because it's so unpleasant, and very little is known about these community jails."

The museum has a collection of items that have never been shown including shackles, lead knuckles, a gun that came out of a privy and a rifle used in a feud in Tangipahoa Parish. "These items do not deal with slavery but with crime," Floyd said. "We are going to exhibit a lot of them in the jail."

In late August, members of the staff of the Rural Life Museum spent two days in Oak Ridge disassembling and labeling the jail. They put it on a truck and a trailer and brought it to the museum in Baton Rouge. It took them three weeks to reassemble. The jail now rests permanently to the right of the museum barn.

When George Raby, longtime employee of the Burden family and the museum, first saw the reconstructed jail he couldn't believe how little it was. "This just shows you how things have changed," Raby told Floyd. "Think of all the jails we have now and this little thing served a whole town and a whole parish."

Floyd thinks visitors to the museum will enjoy learning about this aspect of 19th-century history. "It's a dark, damp place. It's a depressing place," he said. "It's not glamorous, but it's interesting."

Murphy, Barham and the whole town of Oak Ridge were invited to the dedication of the jail Dec. 8. It was Murphy's first visit to the museum. "I think it's wonderful," she said. Barham gave a brief history of the jail at the dedication. "Miss Emily has given us a real treasure to tell us about who we are as citizens of Louisiana," he said. Murphy dedicated her gift in memory of her mother's family, the Florence McEnery Family.

Huei Perkins, special assistant to LSU Chancellor Mark Emmert, accepted the jail on behalf of the university. Perkins' wife, Thelma, a member of the board of the Rural Life Museum, is a native of Morehouse Parish.

Murphy thinks the jail will serve a real purpose at the museum. "People can come and see what it used to be like," Murphy said. "They can see how far we've advanced, if we have advanced. Maybe more people would stay out if they could see what it used to be like."