

Jerry McKelvy's
WAY BACK WHEN
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NEVADA COUNTY COURT HOUSES

Nevada County was created in 1871 from parts of Ouachita, Hempstead, and Columbia counties. Mt. Moriah was selected as a temporary county seat in 1871 and the first court was held there. Later that year, a permanent county seat was established at Rosston and a temporary court house was constructed. In 1873, Prescott was established on the new railroad and was growing rapidly. An election was held in 1877 to move the county seat from Rosston to Prescott. The results of the election were 1107 for Prescott and 392 for Rosston. The temporary court house at Rosston was sold for \$35 after the county seat was moved Prescott.

The new county needed a court house and in 1884, a nice court house was erected in Prescott.



The details about this court house are unknown, but it appears from this photo taken by a well-known Prescott photographer that it was a very nice structure. The Nevada County Picayune noted in 1886 that Prescott had a fine new court house furnished with native pine costing \$20,000. The article also mentioned a new jail and a fine school.

I found an article in May, 1887 about the grand jury's report of their findings about the operation of the county government. They mentioned that the jail was in fine shape but the court house needed new rods at the bottom to preserve it, a general overhauling of the roof and the roof painted. I don't know what they meant by "rods", but it is surprising that the roof was in bad shape when the court house was only three years old.

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In January, 1906, the grand jury made this report—*"We find the court house in perilous condition, the walls being cracked in many places rendering it dangerous to those who work there and to anyone who has business there"*. The land around Prescott is known for being somewhat unstable which can cause problems for large buildings. Maybe that was what caused the court house to be in that condition only sixteen years after construction.

Another grand jury report in 1909 mentioned the court house being too small and in an unsafe condition. They recommended a new court house be built that was more suitable for the county's needs. They also reported that a building on the court house block being used by the city as a calaboose was filthy and in an unsatisfactory condition and should be removed.

It was also suggested in June, 1909 that wooden benches be placed under the trees in the court house yard so that citizens could get some relief from the summer heat.

A NEW COURT HOUSE

In December, 1910, County Judge A. M. Denman appointed three commissioners to work on getting a new court house for Nevada County. The three men were C. C. Hamby, Thomas C. McRae, and J. J. Hirst. An architect, Theo Sanders of Little Rock, was selected to draw up plans for the new court house. Bids for the construction were sent out in March of 1911 and were opened July 1, 1911. The winning bid was from Falls City Construction Co. of Louisville, Kentucky. The building was scheduled for completion by April 1, 1912.

The old court house had to be removed from the site. This job was done in August and took about two weeks. The county offices were moved into nearby buildings during the construction work. The forms for the concrete foundation were in place by September. As usual with construction projects, there were some delays due to the weather, but by November of 1911, the building was beginning to take shape.

Construction of the new courthouse took less than one year and was completed by May of 1912. The overall cost of the building was \$60,000. The building was said to be absolutely fireproof. The new court house was opened to the public at night on May 16, 1912. Ladies from the Methodist church served ice cream during the open house. The county offices began moving into the new building. Prescott's new court house was said to be the most magnificent court house in south Arkansas.

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There was a big debate in 1912 concerning the court house grounds. Some wanted the entire block to be enclosed by a fence. Others wanted the grounds to be landscaped and used as a city park. Citizens were reminded that this was a county court house and not a city court house and that Prescott already had a park.

At the time it was built, automobiles were just coming on the scene, but many people still traveled on horseback or in wagons pulled by horses. Those coming in from the rural areas by wagons had to have a place to hitch the horses and some thought the court

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house grounds would be destroyed by numerous wagons being hitched to the trees around the court house. The animals would also contribute to the problems with flies and mosquitoes. One suggestion was to erect an iron fence around the block but leave at each corner a place to hitch animals, but they wanted a law passed to prohibit any animals being hitched to the fence. The county judge decided not to erect a fence, but to build wide sidewalks around the edge of the block. The Depot Museum web site has several pictures of this court house including one that shows many wagons, horses, and old automobiles at the court house yard.

One would think that such a magnificent building would last for many years, but just five years after construction, major problems began to surface. In 1917, the entire northeast corner of the building gave way leaving three large cracks entirely through the wall making it unsafe. That corner of the building had to be propped up with long poles until it could be repaired. Workers had to tear away the entire northeast corner of the building on each side up to the second window and the foundation had to be rebuilt. The contractor believed that this was the only part of the building that was dangerous, but there were numerous cracks on the interior from floor to ceiling.

Attempts were made over the years to fix the problems, but they only got worse, and in 1956, the building was condemned by the State Health Department and the Nevada County grand jury even though it was only 44 years old.

I don't know if it was poor construction or natural causes that caused the problems with the 1912 court house. I think the ground around Prescott is known to shift causing foundation problems with large buildings, but having the entire corner give way only five years after construction leads me to believe poor construction may have been more to blame.

From The Nevada News – 1963

County Judge Mack Hillery informs county residents that the courthouse has been declared unsafe to public health and safety. The building is unsafe and cannot be repaired. He asks voters to approve a tax increase to match a \$159,500 grant to build a new courthouse.

From The Nevada News – March 12, 1964

The new courthouse is under construction. County Judge Mack Hillery said the county received a \$159,000 grant matched dollar for dollar. The total cost was \$300,000; Voters approved a tax increase by a margin of four to one to build the new courthouse.

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So, the present Nevada County court house (now 61 years old) is the third one to be constructed at that location. Some of the older residents still remember the previous court house and how elegant it looked. It is too bad that it had to be replaced so soon.

CHRISTMAS TRIVIA (answers on page 6)

1. In an older version of the song “Jingle Bells”, who was seated by my side?
2. What was Scrooge’s first name?
3. In the song “Silver Bells”, what is dressed in holiday style?
4. Name the three reindeer with names beginning with the letter “D”.
5. Which reindeer’s name is also the name of a kitchen cleanser?
6. The wise men brought gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and _____ to the baby Jesus.
7. Children were all snug in their beds while visions of _____ danced in their heads.
8. What two towns in America are named Christmas?
9. What is the traditional Christmas meal in Japan?
10. Which president issued a proclamation making December 25 a national holiday?

The Latest Gizmo at Christmas – by Don Mathis

Uncle Johnny was an engineer at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama and he was always fascinated by the latest in technology. So, he gave his kids a little battery-operated reel-to-reel tape recorder for Christmas back in the 1960s.

It was a long trip from Uncle Johnny’s house in Decatur, AL, to Grandmother Walker’s house in Camden, AR, and patience soon flew out the window. Little did Uncle Johnny and Aunt Pete know that my cousins, Alexa and Gilda, secretly recorded their parents’ petty argument on some Mississippi highway.

It was awkward and embarrassing to listen to their squabble at first – played back time and time again after Christmas dinner – but my cousins were having such mirthful glee over it, their laughter was contagious.

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Aunt Pete, always one to make a joke, could take it as well as dish it out. Soon she began laughing as hard as the rest. “I learned my lesson,” she smiled. “Never argue in front of the kids.”

Daddy said that would never happen in our family, “Because I would never buy such a contraption.” Ah, but of course he did.

Just a few Decembers later, the Walker descendants listened to another tape recording. My brother Jeff was drafted in 1969 – and he had made a cassette tape from Germany with a few tales of Army life. I listened intently, because I was fearful that I was to be drafted next. The family responded by recording a cassette with everyone wishing Jeff a Merry Christmas.

And so, technology crept into our Christmas traditions. The country was at war; the world was changing. But the transistor allowed our family to strengthen our bonds.



Rose Walker celebrates Christmas with the grandkids

Answers to Christmas trivia questions

1. Miss Fannie Bright
2. Ebenezer
3. City sidewalks
4. Dancer, Dasher, and Donner
5. Comet
6. Gold
7. Sugar plums
8. Christmas, Michigan and Christmas, Florida
9. KFC
10. President Ulysses S. Grant in 1870

Something to Think About

No one graduates from Bible study until they meet the AUTHOR face to face.