



Courthouse Burning Closed Stormy Chapter in History

By Jack Castleman

(The following article appeared in the Enid Morning News on February 21, 1971).

The burning of the Garfield County courthouse 40 years ago (January 29, 1931) closed one stormy, bitter chapter in Enid's history and opened another.

Both disputes were about building courthouses.

Built in 1907, the courthouse dominated the Square and downtown Enid until it burned January 29, 1931, as thousands watched.

Broadway did not go through, and the two-story courthouse was in the center of the two-block Square. The south side of the building was where the front of the Enid Post Office is now.

Enid's post office federal building was on the south side of the block where the Enid-Garfield Public Library is located now.

The bottom story was of native Oklahoma granite and the upper portion of Indiana stone. The jail was on the roof which had a number of dormers.

The lawn to the north, almost an entire block, was landscaped and featured a pergola. It also had a maze of sidewalks to fit almost any direction one might want to take going across the lawn. Apparently, Enid residents jaywalked in 1931 just as much as they do now.

The architectural style was typical of courthouses and public building constructed at the turn of the century, and the spacious-looking building must have been one of which Enid was proud.

The election to build it had been bitter, pitting Enid against rural Garfield County.

Special Points of Interest

- Enid's First Court House.
- Friction between Townspeople and rural community.
- New Court House in 1907.
- Court House Burns on January 29, 1931.
- Controversy over location of New Court House.



Enid's Second Courthouse: 1907.
Sat in the center of Broadway Street.

Enid historian George Rainey recalls that after the Cherokee Strip opened in 1893, the appointed county commissioners made do for county officers and the courts in leased quarters throughout Enid.

A plaza had been set aside for federal buildings and courthouse prior to the opening of the Strip. The land office where the settlers filed their land claims was located on what is now the downtown Square. Garfield County elected its first commissioners in 1894 and after they took office in January, 1895, they leased the upper story of the only brick building in town to house county offices.

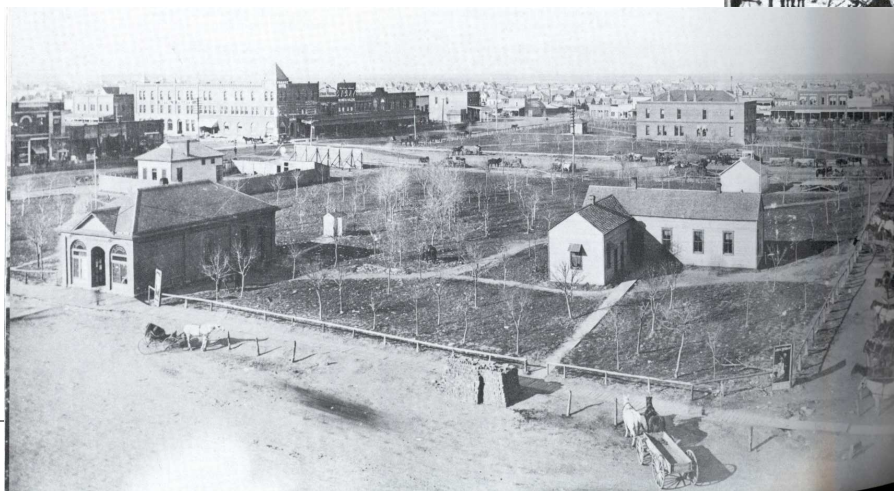
The commissioners decided that more permanent quarters were needed, and the business interests on the west side of the Square proposed constructing such a building on the west side and leasing it to the county. **The east side interest then proposed a brick building on the east which would be two stories and large enough to house all county officers, plus provide for federal and district court, also on a lease agreement but with the proposal that at the end of four years, the county would own the property.**

Broadway was opened and the courthouse was built in the exact center of the north block, north of where the present courthouse stands. It had entries on both the east and west.

The new building was completed and ready for occupancy April 1, 1896. Rainey notes that it was pretentious structure for the young county, but in less than ten years it was inadequate for the county's needs.



Enid's First Court House: 1896



On May 2, 1905, the county commissioners called a special election for the following June 27 to spend \$100,000 for the courthouse with it to be paid off by making a tax levy of five mills for a five-year period.

The farmers charged that the election was deliberately set in June when they would be at their busiest, harvesting wheat. They said this would give the advantage to Enid where a majority were known to favor the levy.

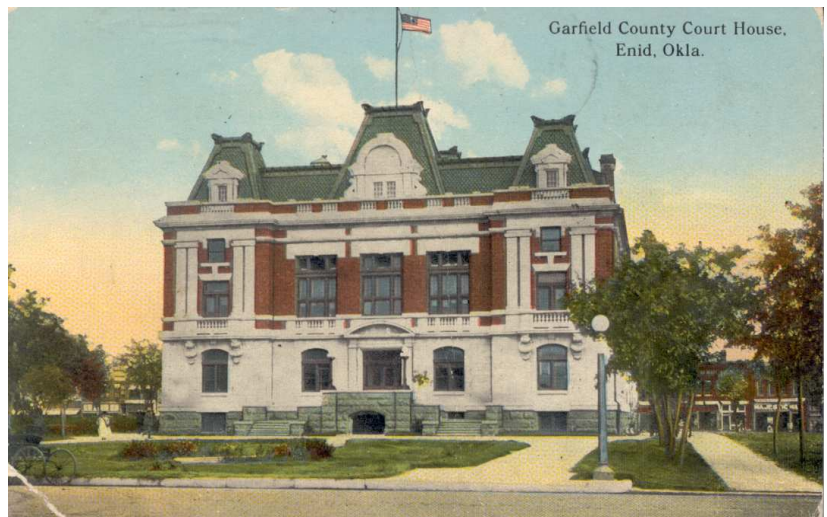
However, the farmers did take time off from harvesting to vote, and their opposition was so strong that in the 30 rural townships in the county, only two voted in favor of the new courthouse. The two favoring it, adjoined Enid.

However, Enid carried the day with the vote being 2,216 for and 1,970 against.

The county attorney, Daniel Huett, was directed to obtain a deed to the four-acre tract. The federal government had held title, and the deed was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt, August 22, 1905.

An architect was hired and with parking no problem in those days, the commissioners voted to locate the new courthouse in the center of the Square, with entrances on both the east and west sides. Thus, Broadway was to be closed.

Construction took over a year, the cornerstone being laid June 18, 1906, and the courthouse officials moved in during July 1907, an important year for Enid.



The commissioners called for bids to be on file not later than November 28, 1905. There were seven bidders, and prior to the formal opening of bids the seven happened to find themselves together. They decided that they might as well find out who had the low bid and each wrote out his bid.

A Guthrie contractor was the low man, his bid being \$100 below O.A. Campbell of Oklahoma City for \$90,000, the next low bid.

Campbell decided that he had lost the bid so he left Enid.

The remaining six then staged a celebration at the expense of the successful bidder, all visiting one saloon after another. Prior to statehood, Oklahoma had legal saloons.

The celebration moved along the streets and their hilarity attracted the attention of the people as well as the Garfield County commissioners who inquired who the men were.

They were told that it was the bidders who would build the new courthouse and that the successful bidder had chosen this method to celebrate.

Commissioner H. C. Davis, who sternly disapproved of the use of intoxicants, told the other commissions that he would never vote to let such a man build the courthouse no matter how low his bid. When the bids were opened, it showed that this man was the low bidder. The commissioners agreed with Davis and the contract was awarded to Campbell, who earlier left for home.

Oklahoma became a state, Phillips University was started, and the county had a new courthouse. In addition, the seven-story Stephenson Building at Grand and Broadway was built.



Court House sat in the center of Broadway. The Stephenson Building (East of Courthouse) is shown on the left of this photograph taken in about 1910

The night of January 29, 1931, was a busy one for fire buffs.

The Enid Morning News said of the night:

“Red skies and shrieking fire sirens proclaimed here last night the gutting by flames of the Garfield County courthouse, terror to the prisoners in its jail and the blazing destruction of a grain elevator.”

The elevator fire was first. The elevator was opposite the Rock Island railroad station and was reported to have been the oldest elevator in Enid.

The press account noted that the blaze burst through the roof and thousands “raced from all quarters of Enid towards it.”

It must have been a fire worth going to it. The News said that it had “too good a start.” Approximately 20,000 bushels of grain were burned. The blaze threatened another mill nearby.

“Embers fell thick upon its roof and flames licked futilely at the huge concrete elevators, which the company had built next to the old elevator. A steel smoke stack fell with one side of the old elevator, upon the roof of the mill and the roof burst into flames.”

“The streams of water checked these flames,” the News noted.

Meanwhile, Rock Island switch engines were busy going into the heat and smoke and brining out freight cars which were by the burning elevator.

“Thousands breathlessly were watching the fire department’s fight with the flames at the elevator

when the courthouse fire was observed. Almost in a body they swarmed in motor cars and afoot to the courthouse square and their numbers were enormously swelled by other thousands who raced to the scene from all quarters of Enid," the News said.

The fire had begun in the jail and a woman trusty called the fire department.

The flames quickly consumed the jail, but all 42 of the prisoners were lead to safety by other prisoners and volunteers off the street.

"One of the prisoners was held as a hero for his efforts in rescuing many of the others, but he would later be charged with arson in setting the courthouse on fire. He was never prosecuted on the charge, however."

All of the prisoners assembled on the courthouse square and they were taken to the city jail. The 189th Field Artillery sent over blankets for them and a mattress company supplied mattresses.

Volunteers worked to save the valuable courthouse records from the danger of destruction by fire and water.

All of the records in the building were saved. However, in moving about during ensuing years, one volume of the county commissioners' proceedings became lost.

Garfield County awoke on January 30, 1931, to realize that its courthouse had been severely damaged. The state fire marshal would later condemn it.



Photo taken on January 30th, the morning after the fire from the law office of H. G. McKeever located in the First National Bank Building Northeast of the Square. (Courtesy of Clark McKeever)

County officers moved into the livestock pavilion near Convention Hall until November, 1931, when they moved into the Broadway Tower. The jail went in a building at Park and Grand.

"With 1931 being in the heart of the Depression, it was no time to start building a courthouse. The commissioners had announced that the county fair would not be held for lack of funds and the bounty for coyotes was lowered from \$3 to \$1."

In June of 1931, the commissioners did advertise for bids on the removal of the gutted courthouse.

The next official action came in July of 1933 when the commissioners called a vote for two mills to go with the \$84,000 they had received in insurance, and the federal government promised to help in con-

structing a new courthouse.

Then the battle of where to locate the new courthouse reopened. The City of Enid had succeeded in getting Broadway opened through the Square, and it was about to let the building ago up in the center and close the street again.

“The county commissioners took the easy way. They announced that in addition to the Sept. 26 mill levy vote, there would be a separate ballot with these choices for the location: North block (where it is now), the center (closing Broadway) or the south block (where the post office and library are located today).”

Enid voted solidly for the north block, but the rural areas wanted it back in the center where it had stood for nearly 30 years. The vote was 3,600 to 2,400 for the center.

The mill levy was approved 3,885 to 931.

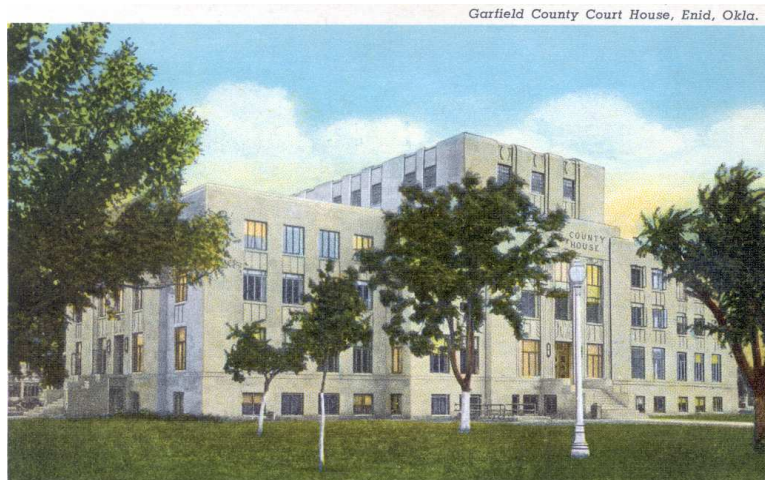
The commissioners asked for bids in December, 1933, but all bids exceeded \$200,000 the maximum they had placed on building it, so the bidders were asked to withdraw their offers.

In 1934, the City of Enid filed a suite asking for the condemnation of the center of the Square so that Broadway would remain open. They offered the county \$25,000 for it.

“Another suit was filed in the Oklahoma Court of Tax Review on the mill - levy vote, and the city asked the Oklahoma State Supreme Court for an order halting the commissioners from building in the center pending the outcome of its original suit.”

The federal government had promised \$49,000 to help build the project. In April, one day before the deadline the U.S. government had given to start the project or lose the \$49,000, the county commissioners and the city jointly agreed to halt all litigation and build in the north block.

The Masonic Lodge conducted a cornerstone laying ceremony in Aug. 15, 1934. Construction was completed in 1936.



Current Court House (1936)

The Oklahoma Guide to the Sooner State says of the white Texas sandstone building:

“Modern and functional in design, its utter simplicity makes it one of the most notable architectural achievements in the state.”

“Other notable features include the historic murals on the first and second floor which were done by the late Ruth Monro Augur who took 20 months to complete them in a project sponsored by the Garfield County Commissioners together with the Works Progress Administration.”

At the time Miss Augur was painting them in the mid-1930's, they were the largest such murals in America.

“The Explorer’s Trail” which shows Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and his expedition crossing he Cherokee Strip in June 1841, has been widely reproduced.

The others trace the history of the Indians, the cattle drives and the opening of the Cherokee Strip, many of the events which surely passed over the historic Square.



About the Author: Jack Castleman was a long time reporter for the Enid Morning News and the Daily Eagle from _____ to his retirement in _____.

WPA Court House Murals: Artist, Ruth Monro Augur

