



A new crown for an old friend



Those of us on campus watched for months as the roof of Old Main changed from brown to white to pink (and various combinations of those colors) and finally to red. It made some of us reflect nostalgically on the role that grand old building has played in the history of this place.

by Margaret Vaverek

Much has changed at SWT since its charter in 1899 and its opening in 1903. Yet, two things remain in the memories of all those who have passed through this school — the San Marcos River and Old Main. The river flows gently through the campus, bringing life and beauty to its citizens. Old Main sits majestically atop Chautauqua Hill, casting a protective shadow over the campus community. She, like the river, is always changing but somehow ever the same. Recent renovation of the roof has once again restored her color and brought her new life.

In the beginning

The Texas Legislature appropriated \$25,000 in 1901 for the building and operation of a “normal” in San Marcos. The purpose of normal schools was to educate teachers. Because there were already normals in Denton and Huntsville, the school in San Marcos would serve the southwestern portion of the state. And so it was that the Main was built for the new school to be known as Southwest Texas Normal School.

The architect of the building was Edward Northcraft, father of Lucy Northcraft Burleson, SWT’s first librarian. He had earlier designed the Main at Sam Houston State in Huntsville. The floor plan and design of the two buildings was identical, a similarity that helped to foster a special relationship between the two schools that remains to this day. Unfortunately, Sam Houston’s Old Main burned to the ground

in 1982, leaving the building at SWT as one of the last vestiges of the late Victorian Gothic style that characterized academic structures in the late 19th century.

Gov. Joseph Sayers laid the cornerstone of the Main on April 28, 1902. Construction of the building was difficult and costly. The legislature had to appropriate another \$10,000 before the project could be completed. Building on the hill seemed fitting enough for such a magnificent temple of knowledge, but it was the hill itself that caused considerable hardship for the builders. Several loads of concrete disappeared into subterranean caverns before the builders were able to secure the northeast corner of the foundation and proceed.

The Main had all the classrooms, offices and space needed to house the entire school in those early years. On the second floor was a large chapel used for religious programs, musical performances and special events for many years. Among the appropriations in 1903 were \$1,500 for furniture, \$2,000 for library books and \$150 for window shades to keep the Texas sun at bay.

In September 1903, 303 students and 17 faculty members entered the doors of the Main to begin classes. In 1908 a separate science building was constructed a "safe" distance from the Main, and a new library followed in 1910. Those first buildings were in the shadow of Old Main, but as the campus has grown over the years, many of the newer

facilities are a great distance away. Still, whenever alums come to campus, Old Main seems to be a gathering point and a symbol.

Historical marker

No one could have seen what the future held for this first building when the cornerstone was laid in 1902. Among the countless students she would nurture would be one who was destined to become president of the United States. In 1965 a historical marker was placed in Old Main, acknowledging for future generations the role she had played in the education of that president, Lyndon B. Johnson. By that time, a former student, John Garland Flowers, was president of the school that had become Southwest Texas State Teachers College. Helen Hornsby Crawford, the last surviving member of the original faculty, attended the presentation of the marker.

Old Main herself has changed over the years. In 1971 the legislature earmarked \$400,000 for renovation. Most of the work done was to improve air conditioning and wiring, but one special feature of the project was restoration of the high ornate ceiling over what had once been the chapel. In 1972 when the work was finished, the building was rededicated at Homecoming. Former President Johnson returned to speak about the building and watch as plaques listing the editors of the school newspaper and yearbook were dedicated. The offices of these publications have been the longest occupants of Old Main. Somehow it seems

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appropriate that the offices of the *Star* and *Pedagog*, which record the history and events of the school, should be housed there.

Major renovation

By 1983 Old Main was in need of major renovation. Among other things, an additional 6,600 square feet of usable space was gained through the creation of a third floor. The ornate ceiling restored in 1972 was repainted to match the interior color scheme. That ceiling is now a part of the auditorium on the third floor. The 1985 project has been the most extensive refurbishing to date. The work took two and a half years at a cost of

nearly \$2.5 million, but the results were stunning. Spaces were made more efficient and the historical flavor of the building was enhanced.

Old Main was dedicated again on March 30, 1985. The ceremony that day was special for many reasons. One of the men present had also been on the hill as the cornerstone was laid in 1902. Marion McGee of San Marcos was 8 when he stood with his parents and watched Gov. Sayers mark the beginnings of the school. The rededication looked to the future as well as the past. A time capsule, containing a tape by SWT alumnus George Strait and several student publications, was buried and will be opened in 2036,

the 200th anniversary of Texas statehood.

The most recent work on Old Main included repair and painting of the roof. The red color familiar to so many alumni has been restored, and the turrets and trim have been painted a limestone color in keeping with historical records of the building.

Frozen music

It seems somehow fitting that with this latest facelift for Old Main we stop and reflect on the role the stately old building has played in our life as an institution. Jessie Sayers, a member of the faculty when the school opened and sister of Gov. Sayers, wrote about Old Main in the words of the school song: "O, Alma Mater, set

upon green hills,/with the turrets pointing upward to the sky/We yield to thee our love and our devotion,/ Mother of our hopes and aspirations high."

Old Main holds a special place in the memory of all who have known her. At the rededication ceremony in 1985, alumnus Vann Kennedy of Corpus Christi spoke eloquently when he said, "Goethe has described architecture as 'frozen music.' Old Main has the power to evoke a symphony of feelings and touch the mystic chords of memory."

Indeed she does.

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