

HISTORY & FOLKLORE



A photo from Rosemary Laird taken in the dining area of the Martin House, August 22, 1954, celebrating her daughter’s and her great-great aunt Kaleta’s birthdays. Written on the back of this photo by Rosemary: “Gathered ‘round the famous table – From left to right: Rosemary Laird, Rennie Laird, Kaleta Lynn Rogers, Hattie Ellen Wheat Rogers, Eddie Rogers, Lawrence Scott, Guy DeVore, Tennie Scott DeVore, Nancy Vanya Smith, Kaleta Smith Wheat, Harriet Smith DeVore, Hazel DeVore Martin, Bob Martin. Seated, Nixon Smith.”

The Martin House Story

by Charles Wiggins (1992)

The years 1929 and 1930 are significant in the history of Liberty County. Many of the structures we see in the community today were built during those days, before the full impact of the Great Depression was felt in South Liberty County.

The county’s earlier courthouse, soundly constructed in 1895, was found to be too small for the increase in activity brought about in the 1920s by the discovery of vast amounts of oil and natural gas in Daisetta and South Liberty. It was torn down, and the Art Deco-style building we have today replaced it on the town square.

A high bridge over the Trinity River, originally built to allow freight-bearing vessels to pass under it, could no longer support the heavier loads of highway traffic required to supply a flourishing county and state. The bridge was dismantled in 1929, and the structure which is now used by east-bound traffic took its place.

The availability of so much used material from these projects inspired Bob and Hazel Martin, descendants of pioneer families in Liberty County, to build a home at 516 Milam Street, near downtown Liberty. Material was gathered from the 1895 Courthouse demolition; structural steel was collected from the remains of the old bridge; leftover and slightly damaged bricks and tiles were garnered from the contractor of the present courthouse; and several loads of bricks were picked up from the rubble of an early Spanish fort built in Anahuac.

Bob, a lawman and peace officer, used plans

drawn by local artist Watson Neyland, to build the Martin House. Recruiting help wherever he could find it, construction began in 1930. Relatives, such as Tom Wheat, and friends all pitched in, adding the enthusiasm and strength of youth to the project. Bricks were stacked, tile walls were plastered, and exotic wood floors were laid. The result was a style unique for 1929. The two-bedroom house includes a detached garage and enclosed courtyard. The kitchen is at the front of the house and has a large picture window over the sink. The bathroom includes a separate shower and tub, a concept that only became popular years later. The house occupies the entire width of the lot. There is no driveway access to the rear of the property, so the garage is located at the front, a significant architectural feature that lends balance to the front elevation of the house.

Erected almost entirely of “recycled” materials years before the concept was popular, the Martin House was well-built. But in the 1980s it fell into a state of disrepair and neglect while it was used as rental property. Due to filling in of the surrounding properties, the area around the house drained poorly, which caused the wooden floor sills to rot and allowed termites to thrive. In early 1991, the house gained a new lease on life, and major renovation began. Floors were removed, and the foundation was backfilled with sand. Cement was then poured over it as a sub-floor. The original wooden floors were reinstalled in the bedroom, and Mexican saltillo tile was used in the kitchen, the living/dining area, and the hallway. The flooring in the bathroom is the original tile purchased from the contractor of the 1930 courthouse and can be recognized as the same design on the floors of the courthouse hallways. The stepdown area in the den is floored with random broken brick, damaged during construction of the present courthouse.

The Martin House was originally heated with open natural gas heaters and three fireplaces. All the fireplaces are still used, but the gas heaters

have been removed except for the one in the bathroom. The windows are an unusual metal design that opens out vertically to catch passing breezes. Metal screening was mounted inside the windows to keep out insects. The windows have been sealed and no longer open since a modern central heating and air conditioning is now in use.

Wood used in the Martin House came primarily from “Ironwood,” the Smith Estate plantation near Rye. Both bedrooms have solid beams and ceilings of red gum. Walnut beams are used in the living room. Fireplace mantles are hand-hewn and hand-finished black walnut. The south bedroom floor is ash and the north bedroom floor is red gum. The boards of both floors are fastened with screws to the sub-floor. All the boards in the north bedroom run the full width of the room. Cypress was used extensively in the kitchen, as seen in the cabinet doors, as well as the hall and bedrooms, where the doors also are cypress.

Bob enjoyed a long career in law enforcement, and he was the founder and long-time chief of Liberty’s Fire Department. These interests were reflected in the Martins’ collection of unusual and significant items and artifacts that filled their home. Few of these items remain today, but exceptions include the massive table and matching benches in the living room, the fire screen in the den, and the unusual stepping-stones in the courtyard.

Bob and Hazel were avid cultivators of camelias and azaleas, and the rear of the property was known for its lushness. Other plants and shrubs of many types were carefully nurtured in their garden. Today this area remains to be reclaimed, one of several future projects. Others are the re-roofing and stabilization of the small outbuilding and replication of the potting shed pathways and fountains. Work to maintain the Martin House will continue as long as the home is used – hopefully for at least another sixty years!



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