

Museum discovery adds life to courthouse work



Mark Ashley

The heads of two putti, or representations of small children, that once decorated the courthouse were discovered in storage at Southwestern this week.

By BEN TROLLINGER

Ed Lansford, 83, is at pains to recall the "Massacre of 1966," the dark day when a contractor hired by the county took a jackhammer to the handsome terra cotta pediments and balustrades that once adorned the Williamson County Courthouse.

But with the \$5 million courthouse restoration project set to begin this spring, old memories are being kicked up.

Mr. Lansford, who was a professor at Southwestern University for 31 years, remembers the errant piece of terra cotta that started it all, the

one that came loose from the pediment and nearly flattened a passerby.

A pediment is a triangular space that forms the gable on a roof in classical architecture. Think of a Greek temple. If you still can't picture it, walk over to the Williamson County Historical Museum on Austin Avenue and look up.

Instead of fixing the problem, likely the result of 50 years of water damage, county commissioners declared the fixtures a liability — more ornery than ornamental — and had them removed, ground up and thrown into the bottom of a

The architect and museum director hope other pieces of the courthouse have been preserved by county residents.

gravel pit, according to Mr. Lansford.

"I'm glad to say all those county commissioners are long gone," he said.

On Wednesday, Mr. Lansford and Chris Dyer, director of the Williamson County Historical Museum, reclaimed a significant piece of that history once thought to be lost.

After driving Mr. Dyer's pickup over to a storage facility for Southwestern's Mood-Heritage Museum, they carried seemingly plain, but heavy, cardboard boxes out to the back of Mr. Dyer's truck. Inside the unassuming boxes are rare objects that may be integral in helping guide the recreation process for what has been one of the most

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Pediment pieces emerge years later

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difficult elements of the restoration.

According to Karalei Nunn, president of the architectural firm leading the project, recreating the sculptured design contained in the triangular pediments has been a struggle because they have had few artifacts to guide them.

"To date we have been relying on photos," Ms. Nunn said.

The best photos of a pediment are of the main entrance on the south side, she said. Photos of pediments on the north, east and west entrances are blurry and lacking in detail.

"The best we thought we could hope for is a great shot," she said.

After years of looking for objects

and photos to help determine the scale and the fine detail of the ornamentation, Ms. Nunn said the architects had resolved to do the best they could, extrapolating from pictures they have and using the styles of other courthouse ornamentation during that period.

Back at the county museum, Mr. Dyer is opening the flaps of the box, scooping out the wadded-up packing paper.

"Were getting down to the fabulous objects themselves now," said Mr. Lansford as he looked on.

Mr. Dyer picked up the heavy object, dust spilling to the floor, and unwrapped the plastic, uncovering the unexpected find — the head of a Putti.

You likely don't know what putti are, much less where to find them, but they were once a prominent feature of the frieze in the courthouse pediments. Used predominantly in the art of the European Renaissance, putti are representations of small, rotund children, usually naked and sometimes sporting wings.

"It's a pretty heavy baby doll," said one museum volunteer.

All that remains of these two putti are disembodied heads attached to terra cotta blocks by zinc rods. The heads were originally attached to bodies and set in the south entrance pediment.

"[The architects] are going to be very excited to see this," said Mr. Dyer, who found the Putti by chance.

The Mood-Heritage Museum, making way for archival materials, is clearing out more than 6,000 historical artifacts currently held in three storage facilities in Georgetown and Austin. About 600 artifacts will be transferred to the Williamson County Historical Museum.

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Chris Dyer

Director, Williamson County Historical Museum

As Mr. Dyer was flipping through inventory books, he noticed an entry for children's heads from the courthouse. He wasn't sure what he had found, but he had to see.

According to Mr. Dyer, it was a case of "out of sight, out of mind" — the librarian at Southwestern knew they had the objects but didn't connect them to the courthouse restoration.

This discovery has spurred Mr. Dyer to think maybe other pieces exist out there that aren't at the bottom of a gravel pit.

Much of the pediment has been lost, but as pieces of terra cotta fell to the courthouse lawn in 1966, many residents likely picked up artifacts or purchased them later at auction.

"I keep hearing that so and so has a piece of the pediment," said Mr. Dyer. "There haven't been any huge finds except for the [putti] heads. It's possible for more pieces to come in, but a huge find would be a zoom-in photo of the pediment or even a detailed drawing of the pediment."

Ms. Nunn is thrilled and encouraged by the putti. "They're really beautiful — it's a great find," she said. "It makes you think other opportunities are out there."

She and Mr. Dyer are encouraging county residents to come forward with any leads they might have for other pieces of the courthouse pediment.

At the time it was being removed, many people had an opportunity to take artifacts, said Mr. Dyer, and some may have pieces in their homes and not realize it.

"The leads from the public have been slow coming in, except for photos of the courthouse," he said. "Everyone has a photo of the courthouse. One of the best pictures of the pediment came from a postcard."



Two decorative heads that were jackhammered off in the mid-1960s were recently discovered at Southwestern University's Mood-Heritage Museum, packed in a warehouse.