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The Choice correspondent

Editor’s note: This is the first in a four-part series about the sides of the Macomb square as part of a new exhibit at the Western Illinois Museum.

Think you know all about Macomb Courthouse Square? Well, think again, because the new exhibition that just opened at the Western Illinois Museum, “The Courthouse Square: A History in the Making,” will open your eyes to a whole new look at the area.

Jam-packed with intriguing photographs, fascinating artifacts, antique signs and historical objects, this exhibition graphically demonstrates how much history the square holds for this region.

Not only does this exhibit highlight the historic buildings and the businesses, it tells the stories behind the buildings, and reveals forgotten details and information that brings alive the past of the square.

Curated by Sue Scott of the Western Illinois Museum, the exhibit uses in-depth archival research to create an approachable and informative exhibition.

Scott has designed the display around a square theme, with each of the four walls holding information about one side. In the center of the gallery sits a detailed model of the Courthouse.

Guiding the visitor along each of the four walls of the gallery is a row of photographs. Dr. J.G. Ashenhurst, a dentist, who had an office on the square, took one row of photos in May 1970.

One sunny afternoon, Ashenhurst decided to photograph every shop and office around the square. Building by building, he snapped a shot of each structure. His photographs capture a moment in history of the area.

With these photographs, the visitor is lead around the square, strolling by the buildings and businesses. When viewing these images, you see the city section exactly as it was one day in 1970.

Scott took the row of photos displayed directly beneath Ashenhurst’s photographs in May 2010. She retraced Ashenhurst’s steps, and just as he had, she has photographed around the square, building by building.

A 40-year time span divides the two series of photographs, displaying the changes that have happened. It is fascinating to walk along and compare the two sets of images.

Continuing the square theme, each wall or featured “side” of the gallery has four main, square-shaped labels. One tells of the occupants of the buildings, another tells some of the stories of businesses or people connected to that side, another label notes the oral history and the last has information about the artifacts on display.

A special component to this show is oral history collected by museum intern, Lottie Phillips. She is a history graduate student at Western Illinois University and compiled the oral histories for the exhibition as her project for this semester.

Seven stations are set up around the gallery with MP3 players on pedestals. Visitors can put on headphones and hear stories from people who speak of special moments from the past. A highlight of the West Side of the display is one of the popcorn machines from the Illinois Theater. Another special West Side item is a wonderful old photograph of police officers standing in front of the city offices and the jail. Built in 1883, this building has had many uses; now it is known as Cookie’s Diner.

The museum will have an “Opening Celebration” for the exhibition June 4 from 5:30-8 p.m. The opening celebration is free and open to the public. Guided tours of the exhibition are available for groups and special programs can be arranged for school groups.

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One of the popcorn machines from the former Illinois Theater is part of a new exhibit on the Courthouse Square opening at the Western Illinois Museum.