

A group of McDonough County Historical Society members take a tour of the Schuyler County Courthouse in Rushville, Illinois, given by Judge Carson Klitz.

Leader: This is a McDonough County Historical Society summer field trip, on August the 4th, 1992. Our trip today is to Rushville, Illinois, to tour the restored Circuit courtroom in the courthouse. And also to tour the adjacent Schuyler County Museum. Our host today is Judge Carson Klitz. Judge Klitz.

Klitz: The room you're in now is the third courthouse Schuyler County's had. Our county was formed in 1825. The first courthouse when the county seat was established in Rushville was built over in Central Park. It was a log house that was destroyed by fire in about 1831. Another courthouse was built in 1831, served the county until this one was built in 1881. This courthouse is an exact copy of one in Monroe, Michigan. As a matter of fact, last week a lawyer from Michigan came through here, and he stopped and came up and said, "Your courthouse looks just like ours!" And I said, "You live in Monroe, Michigan, don't you?" And he says, "Well yes, how did you know?" And I said, "Because our courthouse is an exact copy of the one that you have." I have a picture here of the one in Monroe, Michigan, and the judge who sits in Monroe was here, oh, a couple three years ago, and spent a day just looking at this building. Our building is more original than his. His has been added to many times, and it's been prostituted. This building is in much the same condition now as it was when it was built in 1881.

Now, that didn't come about by accident, it was probably more luck than anything. But I was elected in 1980, and I knew that we ought to do something with this room. The county board had lowered the ceiling in this room. The ceiling was about where you see this row of lights, the sconce lights are, that's where the ceiling was lowered to. Of course, by doing that, you couldn't see the balcony at all and most people didn't realize there was a balcony there. I knew there was a balcony there because I remember when they lowered the ceiling. I was practicing law here when they did that. And of course, the chandelier wasn't there. It was either hauled to the ditch during the World War 2, or they melted it down and made bullets out of it. I don't know about that. But something that big, how it could get out of a building like this and leave no trace is a mystery to me. But I ran ads in the paper, I talked to any number of people. Nobody had any notion of whatever happened to the chandelier.

Now, everything that you see in this courtroom was done by somebody that lives here. All the artwork was done by a fellow by the name of Marty Trinkle, a local product, high school education, but a world of talent. And I decided we wanted to do something. So that's how I found out about this judge in Monroe, Michigan. I wrote him asking if he had any idea how the courtroom was done originally. And then we corresponded back and forth and talked on the phone, and he had no idea whatsoever. So I went to the historical society here in town, asking if they had any pictures of this courtroom, any at all. And they said no, and we looked and looked, never found any. And then one day in a restaurant a local fellow said they do have a picture of the courtroom. So anyway, I went down there and they did have a picture. And I have that picture and I'll show it to you. And I know who the people are in the picture, so I can date the picture about 1904, is when it was taken.

So you can see that Marty Trinkle has copied from that picture just pretty much what it looked like then. The walls were painted either pink or gray. Our county, frugal county, they got a deal on some war surplus

paint and they bought battleship gray paint by the 55 gallon drum, and that's what we painted the inside of this building with. All the woodwork you see was all painted many, many times, the last coat of which happened to be battleship gray. Not very attractive.

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This wood, by the way, is all butternut. Which is, in the old days, they called it white walnut. The wainscoting, the benches you're on are oak, and they have walnut ends. All the furniture in this room but for these two council tables, are original. Now, it did some doing to get that furniture back, but it is original to this building.

When we started out, we decided that we wanted it much as it was in, you know, when it was built. And I asked a fellow in Quincy who does this for a living if he would be interested in taking on the job of redoing this courtroom. When we started this out, we were only going to do the courtroom. Well, he said yeah, he could do that, and he happened to know an old fellow that could paint. Well anyway, the bottom line is he wanted \$15,000 to paint this south wall. That's the wall behind the bench. We didn't have that kind of money. The, all, the entire restoration that you're looking at, has not cost the taxpayers a dime. In Illinois, my county and yours, there's what's called a "Finance the Court System." And there's five dollars out of every traffic ticket that goes into this fund, and it's under the control of your resident judge, and I don't know if that's Henderson or who it might be, but anyway, it went under his control. So I let the money accumulate and it generates about \$6,000 a year. So I let it accumulate for a while and about 1983 or 84, we took on this project. Much of the labor, about all of the stripping you see- Now I know McDonough County went another route, but the route we took, was that most of the kids that get caught drinking a little beer or speeding or doing whatever kids do nowadays, I normally don't fine them. I don't give them any option. I give them 20 hours of work service. And the work service is stripping paint! And they've "generously donated" their time and effort to fix this courtroom much the way you see it.

The windows you see are bronze reflective glass. I don't know if you looked at them from down or not, but they're impressive glass when you get out and you can look at it. And the plan is, we want to do the entire building. And it costs about \$4,000 a corner to do that. So I did this corner, and then we did this one. Now we're gonna, we're working on this one right now, and next year we hope to do the rest of the building which is here. But it'll all have the bronze reflective glass. I do that to stay within the, you know, the budget constraints that we have, and not cost the taxpayers.

This room is 40'x60', and it's got a 21 foot ceiling. When we started, it had steam radiator heat, which is not really efficient, and it's, the hissing causes real problems with the court reporter to hear. You know, everything that happens in this courtroom is taken down and preserved. And the hissing of a radiator is probably one of the most difficult things to decipher when you're taking all this down on the machine. So we decided we'd get rid of those, so up in what we call the attic, above this room, and it's 21 foot to the ceiling, we have an attic and the attic above this room is probably big enough to shoot baskets in. It's still that much more building above this. So we put two furnaces up in the attic, and that's what you see these openings are in the ceiling. That's where we get our heat. We're not air conditioned, have no intention of getting air conditioned, but maybe when I'm dead and gone somebody will want it air conditioned. But I don't really care one way or the other. The only reason I'd be interested in air conditioning is it would

make it a little bit easier to clean. You know we're right on the main highway and we do get some, a little noise and some dust.

Well anyway, we took this project on, and the fellow by the name of Marty Trinkle was a roofer and he would roof in the summer and work up here in the winter. And he has since been hired as a full-time maintenance man. The fellow that was here retired, and so they hired him. So he's now here full time, but when it all started, he only worked at it part time. That's one of the reasons it took us so long to do this. But the ceiling was in a real bad state of repair. I could sit on the bench and I could look out and see

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the great outdoors through the northeast corner of this room. So he did all the brickwork and the tuckpointing, and that sort of stuff. And a lot of the metal in this ceiling had rusted through. So we took down a good one, took it to Quincy, and we replaced it with fiberglass. Because we couldn't duplicate this pattern. So some of that you see is fiberglass, but you'd never know it had I not told you. From that, it took two winters to do the ceiling. And the ceiling was done on a rolling scaffold, a scaffold with wheels. And we never missed a day's court. This room had to be used, and we never missed a day's court for the whole two years. It was a little bit inconvenient, but it worked out.

Now we have carpeted the room. It was not originally carpeted. The floor was in very bad shape, but because of the noise of people clomping around on a wooden floor, we opted to carpet it. But it is carpeted for that reason.

The chandelier, Marty Trinkle again, from this picture I'm gonna show you, and I might just as well let you look at that. The two pictures I'm going to show you are pictures that were taken in 1904, and the other one is the courthouse that's in Monroe, Michigan that this was copied from. Well anyway, from that picture that we're circulating, you'll see there's a little bit of the chandelier in it. Well Marty Trinkle, good artist, he drew what it looked like above what you don't see in the picture, and from that we put some numbers in it. It's a big room, so it had to be a big chandelier. And we put some numbers in it, and there was a fellow up here, a local fellow, by the name of Herb McCombs. He's a machinist. And is still here. And he was up here on his mother's estate and he said, "I can build that." I said, "Fine." And he and another machinist, name's Charles Crook from out at Pleasant View, which is east of here five miles, they built that. So the chandelier you see is brand new. Again, built with local talent.

The jury chairs you see over to my far left on that other wall, were discarded by the county board many, many years ago. Discard, given away. A fellow that was on the county board at the time by the name of Israel Bauer, took eleven of those, put them in his basement. And then he died, and his widow gave them back to us when we were doing what we were doing with this room. So eleven of those chairs came from Israel Bauer. Another one came from a fellow by the name of Bob Stauffer, who painted up here in the early 1950s. And he brought his back. The chairs have all been re-caned by a fellow that lives in this town, keeping with what I told you that it's all done by somebody that lives here. There's a multitude of talent walking around McDonough County as there is here, if you can just seek it out. And I got it all done reasonable, too, by the way.

The sconces, Herb McCombs also built those. The stairway that you came up hadn't been used since 1964. It was completely boarded off. We decided- that's the main entrance. And my office is also, what originally when the building was built, a stairwell. But it was closed off many years ago and made offices out of it. But it, we decided we wanted to fix it up for the main entrance. The people got in the habit of coming up this, the stairway on the west end of the building, and you can tell from the size of it, it was never intended for the general public to use. It was intended for the circuit clerk to use and to get her records up and down. So we've opened this one up. It took a lot of work to do that, it was in a really bad state of repair. Again, Marty Trinkle is responsible for all the work that's gone into this as far as figuring out how things go.

If you look behind me, this is all done with stencils. Most people think that this is wallpaper, but it's not. It's all hand painted, every bit of this. And if you'll look, he took his stencils, and he'd never stenciled before in his life. So he called an art supplier in Galesburg, and got some stencil paper, and he copied and cut out the stencils, and it's all done by stencils.

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But it's all, every bit of this is all hand painted. And if you'll look at the rectangles on each side of the windows you'll see that one side is six inches larger than the other. And it took some real doing for him to start in the middle of the room and make those stencils stretch out so it would fill up the gap. Now if I hadn't of told you that, you wouldn't have noticed it either, I reckon.

But he's a very talented fellow and we're lucky to have him. And it's just kind of something that evolved, we were going to do something nice with the courtroom, just something, and it just, you know, we got started in it, and the county board is super to work with. They told me really, "do whatever you want." That's what they told me, and I'll try to follow their instructions. And it's just something that the people of the community- you know, what I do for a living, most of the time I'm making at least 50% of the people mad, and sometimes I get to 100. But this is something that I've done, that I've been involved in, and I haven't had anybody find any fault with this at all. It's just gratifying to do something in your life, once, that's right. And this is the way it was, when it was built. Real close.

And the plan now is, we did this outside hall here, and we've done this one, and we're going to, you can see he's working in the hallway. Now what we want to do is, the hallway's pretty much done, and the two big white spaces on the north and the south wall, he wants to paint a mural there. Now you're probably not familiar, but on October 20, 1858, Lincoln was here and gave a real stirring speech when he was running for the senate against Douglas. And what we want, and this, he gave this speech at the courthouse that was originally in the center of the square. Our second courthouse. And there was not even a decent picture of that until one just turned up within the last four months. And we do have a nice picture of it. But anyway, he addressed the people of Rushville on that spot, and there's a stone over in the park that commemorates that. But we want to paint a mural on that wall depicting that. And that's where we are and why we're not done.

And then, when we get that done- When we started this, it's really a dirty, messy job. And I thought that the officeholders would be, tend to be upset with it. But once they saw what we'd done with all this,

they're really, really happy and now we're going to start in the offices. In fact, we've done a little stripping down there now. But we're gonna do, the hallway is the finishing project and we'll get it done hopefully this fall sometime. And then we'll start on the offices. But the plan is, we wanna do the whole building. Now you'll notice that the picture I circulated from Monroe, Michigan had a steeple on top with a clock tower. Well there was a tornado came through here in 1938, and it didn't take our steeple, but it weakened it to where the county fathers thought that it should be removed. That's why we don't have a steeple like that one. But I think I'll probably touched on about everything of significance. Do you have any questions about any of this? How we've done it, or why, or anything like that? No questions, that's good. Ma'am?

Group Member: [inaudible question]

Klitz: Oh, no. No, no. If you'll look, this is all made out of a single piece of wood. I mean, I don't, I mean that, this wood here goes all the way around over to there and it's all bent. And you can see the saw marks. They were artisans that did this, you know. They knew something about wood. And they sawed all the way around that, and bent that. I don't know if they steamed it or not, but it's all one piece of wood. No, now of course we did take all the pews out. They were taken out so we could get around on the scaffold to do this. But it's, we used the room every day. We never missed any court while we did all this. A little bit inconvenient, but it worked. Now I think McDonough County, didn't they hire some outfit to come in and renovate it, or destroy it, or.. it depends on your perspective. [laughter, inaudible speaking] But this is a real nice place to work. It, you know it really, it's just a nice place to work.

Group member: The bookcases weren't here, were they?

Klitz: The bookcases were in the treasurer's office, and nobody had any notion of where they belonged until we found

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that picture you looked at. They're in that picture and when, and the treasurer, Harold Smith, said "Well they belong up there," so he gave them back. But they were in the building, but nobody knew where they went. And there's two pictures on the wall. I suppose you've noticed that, and you noticed they're not there. And you'll also have noticed that there's a light between those pictures. In order for me to, it would cause me great problems running that wire. See these walls are probably 18 inches thick. And what they did, they just ran them on the inside of the wall and covered them with a piece of wood. I really didn't want to do that. Now those two people, I have those pictures, by the way. And one was the name of, a fellow by the name of Walker, and the other one was the name of Bagby. Very prominent politicians from this county many, many, many years ago. And I went back through the county board minutes, that's how I know who they are. I went back through the county board minutes and read until I found where the county board gave the authorizations to put those pictures in this room. And that's how I know who they are. But I still have those pictures. I'm not gonna put them in this room, but I am gonna make, reframe them, and put something under it as to who they are and their significance and that sort of thing and put them down, either downstairs or in the hallway or somewhere. But I still do have the pictures.

Group member: And then there was a door over...

Klitz: That's right. That door, when, yeah. That door they moved to my office. They did that when they, when they closed- I surmise, I don't know.

Group member: [inaudible]

Klitz: Yeah, they moved. That's the door. They moved it from there to here.

Group member: [inaudible]

Klitz: That was a jury room, and for what reason, it's a law library now. But why they changed that I have no notion. And I haven't found it in the minutes. But what they did, was they made that a solid wall and our jury room now is over on the north side of the hallway. I don't know why they did that. But maybe, unless they needed a door frame, is the only thing I can figure, a door frame for this office. But they sure cobbled her up.

But this, this ought to be preserved. You know, too often, and you can appreciate it, we try to make things modern and better. But that's not necessarily the case. The acoustics in this room are as good as the acoustics in your ultra-modern courtroom in Macomb, I guarantee you. And I remember when I was, well I was grown, but there was a group here in this town that wanted to take Central Park and make it a parking lot. I mean, they wanted to do that. And you know, I'm pretty strong about preserving what we have. You know, we've got some brick streets. They're not the smoothest nor the nicest, but they've been there a long time. And I'm just very much opposed to destroying that kind of stuff. I don't know if you have any interest in this county or not, but if you do and if you haven't been to the historical society, our historical society is probably second to none. And I say that because I'm not real active in it. But I mean, it is, it's a super interesting tour. You could spend a day in that historical society, if you have any interest in old things, or the old way of doing things, or old pictures, or have any connection with this county. There's a group that's very active in that. The historical society, basically. And then there's another group, we have on the south side of our square, it's called the Phoenix Opera House. It was very big in the early 1900s, and there's a group that's renovating and restoring that. It's a big project.

Everybody approaches things a little bit different, of course. When I wanted to put heat in this room, I went to the, all the local plumbers, and I made them bid it. And they went to their suppliers and they've got engineers, and they told us how many units and how big those units had to be to heat this room. Well the Phoenix Opera House has got a room comparable in cubic feet, and they're going the grant route. They wanted the state and the government and everybody to help them, which is all right, that's their business. But they made them, by asking for a grant, they made them pay \$6,000 for somebody to design a heating system for that, though. Just to *design* it, that's not the inspect- *design* of it. And I got our system put in for about \$6,000. But it just depends on your approach. But it's-

Group member: [inaudible; discussing Opera House]

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Klitz: This is, the group is real active and it's gonna be, they either have or are going to have an elevator in it, you know, for the handicap accessible. It'll be in there soon, or maybe it is now. But it just, you know, we've all got our things that we get interested in, and we do those things, and it's, they're really pretty active around here insofar as older things and not destroying a lot of things. But they wanted to tear down the bandstand and replace it with something modern like Beardstown has, if you're familiar with Beardstown. But they didn't get it done, and I'm glad, and I think everybody else is glad. It's a pretty central park, and the town doesn't own Central Park. That's probably the biggest reason they couldn't get it done. I told you the courthouses, two predecessor courthouses sat in the Central, the county owns the Central Park. That's probably the real reason the city, the people didn't get the park gobbled up for a parking lot, if you want to know the truth. Is there anything else? I hope I've informed you. But this has just been a real interesting project, and I'm just glad I had a part in it.

Leader: There are people in this group who have some Schuyler County connections, and after all, McDonough Country originated out of Schuyler-

[Tape glitches]

Klitz: If you have any, you know, you really should go see that historical society museum down there. It's only a block south of here. And I send everybody down there. You know, if they come here I send them down. Because it's just unbelievable what those people have done. You know they've got one room for the genealogy end of it, but it's, that building is just absolutely crammed full of Schuyler County. If you got an interest. If you don't have an interest, you wouldn't be interested in it. But it's worth your time, even if you don't have roots here, just to go see it. Because those people have done a tremendous amount of work on that. And it's all, I mean, it's all, they know where everything came from and what it is, and all about it. It's, it's just worth your time to see it. Some time on another day maybe or whatever, but it's... You won't be disappointed, I don't think.

Leader: Are there any other questions? If not, we thank you very much.

Klitz: Well it was my pleasure, my pleasure!

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Transcribed by Julia Thompson for Western Illinois University in April 2022.