

**‘Know El Paso’
CITY STOLE COUNTY SEAT**

By Art Leibson

EPT 8/31/46

Old-time residents of Ysleta still remember the “big swindle of 1883” when the county seat was moved from Ysleta to El Paso to start the building boom in the Pass City. They remember they were not only outsmarted in the election that year, but clearly outvoted.

Ysleta had called the election under a law allowing a vote every 10 years to locate the county seat. El Paso was growing fast and Ysleta hoped to be able to hold its position for at least 10 more years by calling an election before up-and-coming El Paso could corral the county vote.

They failed to reckon with the pioneer spirit and ingenuity of their rowdy neighbor to the west. El Paso needed a whopping vote to win the county seat—and she got a whopping vote!

As a matter of record, El Paso voted between three and four times its population in the 1883 election. Every Mexican within a dozen miles of the border was rounded up, voted and then kept out of Ysleta until the polls closed.

By the time Ysleta realized what was happening, and began scouring the countryside on both sides of the Rio Grande for extra votes, it was too late. The damage was done.

The “floaters” themselves may not have been enough to swing the election, but the San Elizario voters made it certain for El Paso by voting solidly for the change. They still smarted under what they considered Ysleta trickery in taking the county seat away

from San Elizario, and welcomed the chance to turn the tables.

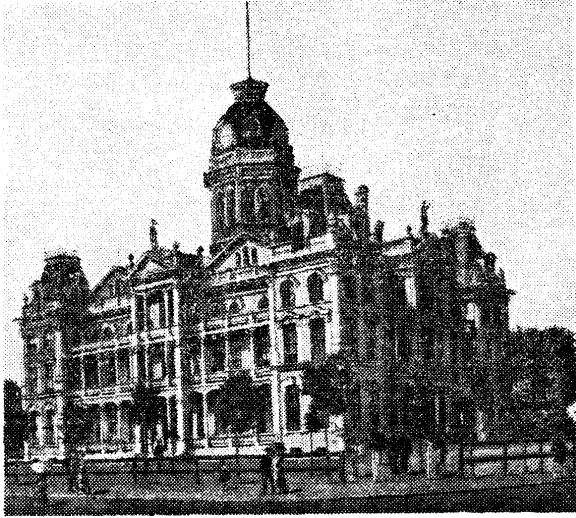


MYAR'S OPERA HOUSE, with a seating capacity of 1000, stood on the site of the National Theater, a low dive. The house was built in 1887 and was considered one of the finest between San Francisco and Chicago. Four large stores occupied the ground floor.

The following decade saw building mushrooming all over El Paso. District Judge T.A. Falvy immediately announced that El Paso would build the finest county courthouse in Texas, and two years later it was completed. The building was located in the center of the block now occupied by the County Building,

Falvy decided the boom town needed a fancy ballroom, and since there was none available, the 34th District Court was designed for this purpose, as well as justice, and some of the fanciest balls between 1885 and 1900 were given in the courtroom.

Two alabaster statues of “blind justice” were hoisted to the porticos and stood there until the building was razed. Buried away in a basement, one was later resurrected and placed in the yard at the east end of Liberty Hall where, weather-beaten and often abused, she stands today



IN 1885 El Paso County Courthouse, "finest in all Texas," was built on the site of the present structure, two years after the county seat was moved here from Ysleta. Facing out on two sides of the building were statues of Justice, mounted on porticos. One of the alabaster statues has been resurrected and now stands in the grounds at the east end of Liberty Hall.

The El Paso Herald had started publishing March 27, 1861, and a week later the first issue of The El Paso Times rolled off the press.

Grand Central Hotel built on the site of the Mills Building and in front of the old Ponce de Leon corral where the Plaza Theater now stands, was a flourishing hostelry in 1883 until destroyed by fire in 1892.

In 1887 culture came to El Paso in Myar's Opera House, replacing the National Theater, a low dive, and regarded as the finest opera house between San Francisco and Chicago. The building, with a capacity of 1000, was located in the middle of the 300-block on South El Paso Street.

\$250,000 FEDERAL COURTHOUSE ERECTED

A \$250,000 Federal courthouse erected soon after the county seat moved to El Paso, on the corner of Mills and Oregon Streets.

El Paso boasted loudly of its new "Government building." It had not only an elevator, but steam heat!

There is considerable argument as to the oldest downtown building now standing. W.W. "Billy" Bridgers scoffed at the suggestion that it is the building now containing Payless Drugs, at the southwest corner of El Paso and San Francisco Streets, known to have been standing in 1887.

"Why I put the plumbing in that building myself, when I was 16 years old," Billy remembers, "and there were several already built that are still standing. Most of them have been remodeled until you wouldn't recognize them, but the original walls and foundations are there."

"I know this will bring up criticism," Bridgers said, "but to my recollection the oldest building in downtown El Paso today is the one at the northwest corner at of West Overland and. El Paso Streets. I'll bet you those old adobe walls are still there!"

In 1888 Lucius M. Sheldon finished the Sheldon Block, containing 140 offices and 11 stores, and in keeping with everything else done in El Paso in those days, it was "the finest office building in the West." Nothing small-time about pioneers!

"El Paso even had an outdoor theater in the 1880s. Before the Federal building, with its solid copper tower, was put up, the site was occupied by the Airdrome Theater with only the sky for a roof.

In 1894 Hotel Dieu was completed. The county jail was already located where the

city jail is today, and five years later, in 1899, the City Hall was built. The El Paso Times was then on South Oregon Street, occupying what is now the Labor Temple. Here, in a few years, crowds would gather beneath the balcony to hear telegraphed reports of championship fights. The announcer would bark his report over a microphone, race back to the telegraph operator, and return with the results of another round.

Popular Dry Goods Co., at the corner of El Paso and West Overland Streets was known as “La Popular.” It operated its wholesale and retail business there until 1912 when it bought the two-story corner of Mesa Avenue and San Antonio Street for \$230,000.

For the seller, Masonic Lodge 130, the sale was a triumph of shrewd business. The lodge had constructed the building in 1901 at a cost of \$45,000.

Probably the most unusual structure put up in the city—and it could happen only in El Paso—was the spite building at Mesa Avenue and East San Antonio Street, torn down to give way to the Lerner Shops in 1944.

The building, on a lot 15x20x35 feet, was known as the Little Caples Building: Richard Caples had tried to induce his neighbor, W.A. Morehouse to join him in building a modern business block, or sell to him so he could build. Morehouse refused and Caples put up his tiny structure, solely to annoy Morehouse. The plan backfired and the building was a “white elephant” from the day it opened to the public.

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