

HISTORICAL BUILDING

(CURRY HALL – UNT)

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS, DENTON TEXAS

Historical Narrative researched and written by Dr. E. Dale Odom for Texas Historical Commission THC
Subject Marker Application. Denton County. 1994

Narrative for an historical marker application at Curry Hall on the campus of the University of North Texas.

Renamed Curry Hall in 1991 after extensive interior renovation, this building was known for over a half century as the Historical Building. Work began on it 1912, and it was available for use in 1913. It was of "fireproof brick, reinforced concrete and steel" and cost \$55,000 without equipment. Built primarily as a library and gymnasium, the 27,393 square feet building originally contained reading rooms, stack room, society rooms, i. e., what we would call club or organization meeting rooms today, recitation rooms, "gymnasiums, toilet rooms, etc."¹

Located on Avenue A near its intersection with Mulberry Street, the building was the third major structure constructed on the North Texas campus. It was completed when William Herschel Bruce was president of the North Texas State Normal College and F. M. Bralley was president of the Board of Regents. The former was perhaps the best-known and most renowned leader of North Texas during its history--during the 1920s local people referred to North Texas as "Dr Bruce's Normal College"--and the latter was later president of what is now Texas Woman's University. At the time the three major buildings on the campus were the Main Building, 1903, which later burned, the Science Building, 1910, razed in the 1970s

¹James Rogers, The Story of North Texas (Denton: North Texas State University, 1965), 116; Bulletin of the North Texas State Normal College, (July, 1913), 9, located in the University of North Texas Archives, University of North Texas Library.

and replaced by the present Language Building, and the president's residence, 1909, replaced in the 1960s by the present Industrial Technology Building. Therefore, Curry Hall is the oldest structure presently standing on the University of North Texas campus.²

Nevertheless, the building is distinguished by its usage rather than its age. Throughout its history it has had something of a public character, much more so than just a structure used by faculty and students for classes. First it was a library and meeting place for the debating and learned societies. But from the mid-1920s to the mid-1980s, for approximately 60 years, the building housed an unusual museum that was open to the public on weekday afternoons. What the University of North Texas ultimately came to call "The Historical Collection" was begun in 1925 by the History Department and by the E. D. Criddle Society, an historical society founded earlier by Professor Criddle. The man mostly responsible for building the collection, however, arrived in Denton in 1925. He was Joseph Lyman Kingsbury, a legendary and well-loved professor of history at North Texas, from 1925 until his death in 1949. Born in 1880 in Vermont, Kingsbury travelled Europe and other parts of the world with his missionary parents. He obtained a doctorate in history from the University of Chicago and taught several other places before he settled in Denton at the age of forty-five.³

²North Texas Daily, March 1, 1990; Bulletin of the North Texas State Normal College, (July, 1913), 9.

³Denton Record Chronicle, March 14, 1949.

In 1930 the state legislature conferred on the fledgeling museum that the Criddle Society and the History Department has started, the grand title of Texas State Historical Collection. In many ways this was a misnomer, for the collection had little to do with the state of Texas except incidentally. By 1952 the museum had over a quarter of a million articles from "every region of the globe". They included dinosaur thigh bones, a "rock" piano, i. e., 26 volcanic rocks that gave off different musical notes when struck, over 350 dolls, an 800-year old Japanese warrior coat of mail, an Eskimo kayak, and a huge eclectic collection of guns of all ages and from many different wars. Kingsbury was curator until his death in 1949; afterward his widow Mrs. Kingsbury served as curator until she retired due to ill health in 1965.⁴

Afterward the collection languished and began to become dusty and somewhat disorganized. It had no official curator, students oversaw it, and it had no strongly-interested faculty member in charge until 1970. That year Barbara Butler, a recent anthropology graduate from Southern Methodist University and an assistant professor of Sociology, began working there part-time on a voluntary basis. Named Director of the Historical Collection in 1971 she became a driving force in refurbishing and reorganizing its contents. She was able to boost legislative funding for the collection, began sponsoring lecture series and worked more closely with the public schools to showcase the museum. After

⁴Campus Chat, October 3, 1952; see also Historical Collection Scrapbook, University of North Texas Archives.

Butler departed for the University of Delaware in the late 1970s, Linda Lavender engergetically directed work at the museum until it was closed.⁵

In 1986 the university closed the museum. The artifacts were given to other museums--the Denton County Historical Museum displays quite a few of them--and the manuscripts, periodicals and other materials that made up the Historical Collection were transferred to the University of North Texas Archives in the University of North Texas Library. Meanwhile, the rest of the building, which housed the History Department offices and classrooms until 1957, had hosted classes from several different departments. During the late 1980s the College of Business Administration used about half of the building, while the remainder housed the college radio broadcasting station, KNTU-FM, and the university machine shop. By early 1990 the building had deteriorated, was in violation of two city building codes, and did not meet city ordinance requirements for accessibility by the physically disabled.⁶

In 1990 and 1991 the building was extensively refurbished inside to make offices and state-of-the-art classrooms that will be used by the University of North Texas College of Business Administration. In 1991, the University of North Texas Regents renamed the building Curry Hall in honor of O. J. Curry renowned as

⁵See Historical Collection Scrapbook, University of North Texas Archives.

⁶North Texas Daily, March 1, 1990.

Dean of the College of Business Administration from 1947 to 1969. Albert S. Komatsu & Associates served as architects for the restoration project, and the outside of the structure was changed only where it was required in order for the building to be functional. While excavating for the restoration, workers uncovered the following inscription: "The last man in this hole was Fred Clarke a Negro. May 24, 1912".⁷

Bibliography

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⁷A picture of this quote is in the Historical Collection Scrapbook, University of North Texas Archives.

State University, 1965).

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