

HILL COUNTY CELL BLOCK MUSEUM

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This is the third jail, erected in 1893 at a cost of \$26,170 exclusive of architect fees. The architect was Mr. W.C. Dodson of Waco, Texas who also designed the courthouse, built in 1891. The construction is load bearing masonry laid in common with a limestone band running laterally around the building. The walls are 18" thick and the roof is steep gable with brick battlements completely around the perimeter. It is situated on state highway 77, the former main route from south to north Texas, traveled by many settlers, desperadoes and even a few politicians.

The front portion of the building was used as living quarters for the Sheriff's family and consisted of three bedrooms upstairs and entry hall, living, dining rooms, pantry and kitchen on the first floor -- the kitchen also serving to prepare food for the inmates, which was passed through a slot in the wall to a deputy for distribution to the prisoners. Diets varied depending on county budgets, but research indicates a main staple of beans and cornbread eaten only with a spoon.

The cell block area floors and ceilings are concrete over steel barrel vaults for strength and security. With outside doors and shutters of $\frac{1}{4}$ " steel this is the strongest building in the county. The water supply came from a well near the present Pecan tree in the yard and outhouses and stables were at the rear of the lot. The prisoners toilet was a chamber pot until the 1920's brought plumbing, sewage and electricity. The lightbulbs were encased in a cage, and in the women's section were padlocked to prevent their destruction. Prior to electricity light was provided by coal oil lamps carried by the deputies. The half-moon portion of the interior barred doors gave protection to the deputies while observing the inside of the rooms, and also served

as a convenient resting place for the coal oil lamps.

The entire building is labor intensive, being built by hand, as no power tools existed at that time. The cell blocks were joined together and doors hung, using hammer, tongs and red-hot rivets heated by coal fires. Heat for the entire building was provided by a coal burning furnace in the basement, the heat rising through vents in the walls by gravity flow. The cell locking system is manually operated. Prisoners were taken in and out through the double steel doors of the sheriff's office where they were booked for the crimes committed. Note the worn depressions in the limestone steps outside the office area. In restoration work, the original hod carrier used to carry bricks, was discovered wired to a rafter over a bedroom in the sheriff's quarters, indicating that was the last portion completed.

In the early days, each county carried out their own executions. The last legal execution in Hill County occurred on a gallows outside the death cell on March 18, 1899. It was conducted by Sheriff Tom Bell. In 1924 the Texas legislature passed a law that all executions would take place in Huntsville at the state penitentiary.

The only known breakout from this jail occurred on March 23, 1933 when Raymond Hamilton, member of the notorious Bonnie and Clyde gang, broke out with bank robbers J.B. Stephens and David Cates. He had been convicted at the courthouse for murdering local citizen John W. Bucher on April 30, 1932 -- the first murder committed by any member of that outlaw gang. They overpowered the deputies, stole a car from a gasoline station across the street, and taking some guns from the jail, headed toward Whitney. Sheriff Jim Freeland and deputies took off after them, and after a shootout, brought them back within 90 minutes. Hamilton later was transferred to the Eastham prison where he escaped again, killing a guard in the process. When recaptured he was tried, sentenced and executed in "Old Sparky" the electric chair at Huntsville. He was

20 years old when he died. Pictures from the Sheriff's file are on display elsewhere in the building.

Another well-known person who spent the night here was a rock singer picked up for D.W.I. and known for recordings such as Hound Dog and Blue Suede Shoes, etc.

In the large room at the rear, the cell blocks were two stories high with a cat-walk around three sides -- much like the prisons at Alcatraz and Sing-Sing. In order to utilize space, these have been removed along with some others, but a section adjacent to the Sheriff's office has been preserved for display. The solitary confinement cell, also known as "the hole," has been retained. In it's ceiling is a ring, from which a prisoner dangled until deciding to behave. Grim, painted black and with musty, stale air, many a prisoner quickly changed his attitude.

This jail, condemned for further use as such by Federal Judge Sarah T. Hughes, was in use until mid-1984, when the new facility was completed. If you have any questions, the Docents on duty are happy to oblige. We hope you enjoy your visit.