

NARRATIVE HISTORY – O’NEIL FORD

This narrative was written by Kathy Strauss as part of an application for a Texas State Historical Marker honoring the work of O’Neil Ford.

CONTEXT

At the time of America’s emergence from a strictly agrarian society to an industrialized nation, O’Neil Ford arose to define regional architecture in Texas and the Southwest. Ford’s North Texas roots tied him to both traditions. His use of natural materials, native arts and crafts, and his deep commitment to preserve the past with its valuable green space, eased this transition within Texas. He learned and began practicing his craft in Denton, designing municipal buildings, churches, libraries, and homes here during his 60-year career. The artistry of his work can be seen and felt throughout the city. He can be affectionately called, “The National Architect of Denton.”¹

Ford’s architecture is unique and easy to recognize wherever it is located. Ford believed strongly that he could create architectural designs that were an integral part of the environment by collaborating with craftsmen, artists, and other architects. His buildings, inside and out, are richly embellished with purposeful fixtures and furnishings that are fully integrated to the spaces they fill. The Emily Fowler Central Library in Denton, one of Ford’s designs, has carved wooden wall panels and doors, created by Lynn Ford, O’Neil’s brother. There are also ceramic light fixtures and a woven wall hanging created by Ford’s daughter, Linda Ford Winans. Ford included a quiet courtyard into his design of the library that has often been used as a place for storytelling and reading. The multilevel garden on the east side of the building is often utilized as a stage for musicians during the Art and Jazz Festival, a pragmatic use of the space of which Ford would have approved. One can find similar furnishings in other Ford structures in Denton, throughout

Texas, and even on the campuses of Trinity University of San Antonio and Skidmore College of Saratoga Springs, New York.

OVERVIEW

Otha Neil Ford was born at Pink Hill, Grayson County, Texas, on December 3, 1905. Indications are that from an early age, he was called Neil by his family.² Neil disliked his first name, and referred to himself as O. Neil in college³ and then O'Neil. His father, Bert Ford (1878-1917), was a railroad fireman.⁴ Ford's mother, Lula Belle Sinclair Ford (1882-1948), kept house and raised her family.⁵

The family moved to nearby Sherman, Texas, in 1908, where Lynn (1908-1978) and Authella (1909-1985) were born. The Ford children learned self-reliance and ingenuity from their parents and from their surroundings. Sherman was a progressive academic community where the arts and crafts were taught as an integral part of the curriculum from earliest elementary school through college. Here, Ford's skills in drafting, woodworking, and design first became apparent. He learned to apply his skills to practical things, like creating toys for his sister, and making benches and birdcages to help pay his college tuition.⁶ Belle Ford also took advantage the opportunity to learn weaving during the family's time in Sherman.

Following the death of Ford's father, Bert, in a railroad accident, the family moved to Denton. Belle wanted her children to go to college, and the North Texas State Teachers College offered a more economical course of study than the private Austin College in Sherman. She bought a house at 304 Avenue D⁷ with the railroad settlement money, and took in boarders to help support the family.⁸ Ford, being the oldest child, shouldered some of the responsibility for helping the family financially. He took odd jobs around Denton, worked summers picking cotton, and

worked in the West Texas oil fields as a carpenter.⁹ One of his jobs, cleaning and sorting bricks at Acme Brick in Denton, allowed Ford to become familiar with the building materials that would later compose many of his structures. Ford also loved to hang around construction sites to watch and to learn about construction techniques. At one such site, where the Denton Presbyterian Church (now demolished) was built in 1924, Ford had a chance to meet the architect, David Williams, who would later become his mentor.¹⁰

Ford graduated from Denton High School in 1924 and enrolled in classes at the North Texas State Teachers College, now the University of North Texas. Although the school had no formal architecture program, Ford took classes in drafting, woodworking, cabinet making, and architectural drawing. He was also enamored of Shakespeare's writing, and filled up the rest of his schedule with English classes. At the end of two years at the North Texas State Teachers College, Ford enrolled in the architecture program through the International Correspondence School of Scranton, Pennsylvania. The certificate from this well-known school was the only formal educational credential that Ford earned.¹¹

The Denton County Courthouse, designed by W.C. Dodson, drew Ford even more into architecture. His comment upon studying it was, "there is nothing so superb as architecture."¹²

There were many people in the Denton's academic community who influenced Ford in pursuing architecture. One person of note was Miss Mary Marshall, an associate professor of art at the College of Industrial Arts, now Texas Woman's University. She arranged for Ford to use the college library to read the Architectural Record, and encouraged his interest in architecture. Ford would independently design his first house at 1819 N. Bell Ave. for her in 1929.¹³

Ford moved to Dallas in 1926 and became an apprentice to architect David Williams.¹⁴ Williams recognized Ford's genius and gave him every opportunity to learn his craft. Williams moved his original office to Pearl Street in north Dallas, where it became known as "The Studio."¹⁵

Williams surrounded himself with artists and the creative elite in Dallas. Ford and his entire family were able to expand their knowledge and notoriety during those years. Lynn and Authella Ford used their talents to embellish the architectural designs.¹⁶ Ford's mother, who had moved to Dallas, taught weaving at Hockaday School and contributed some of her work for the interiors of many of Ford's works.¹⁷

Ford entered private practice in 1932 with Joseph Linz.¹⁸ That partnership lasted only one year during the Depression. He met Arch Swank in 1936 and opened an office in Dallas.¹⁹ Swank, a graduate of Texas A&M, had admired Ford's architectural work, and was anxious to work with him. From this partnership came the design for Little Chapel in the Woods in Denton, as well as the residences of Frank Murchison in San Antonio and Sid Richardson on St. Joseph's Island.

Ford was the chief architect for the restoration of La Villita in San Antonio in 1939.²⁰ He moved to San Antonio and partnered with Jerry Rogers (1939-1953).²¹ During this time, he met and married Wanda Graham (1918-2002) on August 29, 1940.²² They made their home at Willow Way in San Antonio. The Fords had four children, Wandita (1946), Michael (1947), Linda (1949), and John (1950).²³

Following World War II, Ford reestablished his partnership with Jerry Rogers in San Antonio. They first worked out of Ford's residence, Willow Way, and then set up an office at 528 King William Street.

In San Antonio, Ford was well-known for his design of Trinity University, as well as the Tower of the Americas, which he designed for the San Antonio HemisFair. Ford was involved in efforts to preserve historical buildings and to be an environmental activist. His commitment to these causes would often cause friction between him and local politicians. One such incident happened during the design of the HemisFair. Ford wanted to save some of the historic buildings and make them part of the site. He boycotted meetings and was eventually removed as the Supervising Architect of the project. Ford was also instrumental in saving the San Antonio missions and in establishing the River Walk as a center of San Antonio life.

He partnered with various architects throughout the years, and he often chose partners from within his own office. The firm of Ford, Powell and Carson was established in San Antonio in 1967²⁴ and still exists today, 25 years after Ford's death. They were consulted on the plans for the 2005 renovation of the Emily Fowler Library and the Denton Civic Center.²⁵

Although Ford never again lived in Denton, he returned periodically to design several residences, First Christian Church, 1203 N. Fulton, (1959, O'Neil Ford and Associates); the Denton Municipal Complex, 215 E. McKinney, and Civic Center, 321 E. McKinney, (1967, Associated Architects and Land Planners of Dallas, Texas); Selwyn School, 3333 W. University, (1967-68, Associated Architects and Land Planners of Dallas, Texas); and Fairhaven Retirement Home, 2400 N. Bell Avenue, (1963-65, Ford, A.B. Swank, and Roland Laney). The Emily Fowler Central Library, 502 Oakland Street, was originally designed by Wyatt C. Hedrick in 1949. Ford designed the first addition to the library in 1969, with the second addition being completed in 1981, designed by Ford, Powell and Carson. Ford's best-known structure in Denton is the Little Chapel in the Woods. Designed by O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank and built on the campus of

Texas Woman's University, it was dedicated by Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939. The Little Chapel was a National Youth Administration project that involved students in its construction.

Ford was named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1960.²⁶ He was appointed by LBJ to serve on the National Council for the Arts and was the only person to be designated a National Historic Landmark by that council in 1974.²⁷ The University of Texas endowed a chair in architecture in his name in 1982. Ford was a professor of architecture at the University of Virginia and a visiting professor of architecture at Harvard. He received honorary doctorates from Trinity University, Southern Methodist University, and the University of Dallas. He was named a distinguished alumnus from the University of North Texas in 1977. Ford received the Ruth Lester Award for Outstanding Service in Historic Preservation from the Texas Historical Commission in 1977.²⁸

O'Neil Ford died on July 20, 1982, and is buried near Mission Espada in San Antonio. He planned his own funeral, which took place at Trinity University's Margarite B. Parker Chapel.

SIGNIFICANCE

The heart of Denton is filled with touches of O'Neil Ford and his architecture. His legacy lives on in the artistic blend of natural materials, clean lines, and open spaces of his designs. The world-renowned Little Chapel in the Woods, the Denton Civic Complex, and the Emily Fowler Central Library stand as monuments to his significant impact upon this city. Denton is proud to claim O'Neil Ford as one of her "native sons."

DOCUMENTATION

¹ Maggie Kennedy. "O'Neil Ford's Denton Legacy." *Denton Record Chronicle*, July 30, 1993, p.D-1.

² 1910 United States Census, Grayson County, Texas (Roll 1556) Enumeration District 73, p. 185.

³ *The Yucca: A Chronicle of the Year 1927*. Denton: North Texas State Teachers College, p. 149.

⁴ 1910 United States Census.

⁵ 1910 United States Census.

⁶ David Dillon, *O'Neil Ford: Celebrating Place*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), p.9.

⁷ Retail Merchants' Association, *Denton City Directory*. (Denton: Lusk Printing Company, 1923), p33.

⁸ Mary George, O'Neil Ford, Architect. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), p.9.

⁹ George, p.10.

¹⁰ George, p.17.

¹¹ George, p.15.

¹² George, p.15.

¹³ *O'Neil Ford Architect: A Catalog of the Works of O'Neil Ford in Denton, Texas*. Denton: City of Denton Historic Landmark Commission, 1992, p.3.

¹⁴ Dillon, p. 13.

¹⁵ Dillon, p.14

¹⁶ George, p.20.

¹⁷ George, p. 41.

¹⁸ George, p. 31.

¹⁹ Dillon, p.31.

²⁰ George, p.62.

²¹ George, p.224.

²² George, p.76.

²³ *Texas Birth Index, 1903-1997*. (Texas: Texas Department of State Health Services).

²⁴ George, p.224.

²⁵ David Dillon, "Denton Civic Center Receives a Makeover." *Dallas Morning News*, May 29, 2005, Arts Sunday, p.6G.

²⁶ George, p.147.

²⁷ George, p.211.

²⁸ "Architect O'Neil Ford Receives Prestigious Ruth Lester Award." *The Medallion*. Austin: Texas Historical Commission. Vol. 15, no.3, May-June 1978, p.1.