Photo by Jacob A. Sweeten

The original wooden Gem County Courthouse (located at Third and Commercial Streets in Emmett) burned down in 1920. Because of the county finances and later in part to the depression, the county offices, including court proceedings, were housed in various locations around town until the new courthouse was finished in 1939. During that time, the county depended on residents to donate chairs, desks, and cabinets to furnish the offices.

WPA Project Built a Home for Justice in Gem County

Jacob A. Sweeten
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"With rooms and vaults built to order, modernistic furnishings and a beautiful building the [Gem] county officials will find themselves surrounded with a new dignity and a higher, more active prestige," said the Emmett Messenger newspaper on July 27, 1939, just days before county officers made the move into the *almost* completed Gem County Courthouse.[1]

Jacob A. Sweeten

Rent for the old county quarters would have been due August 1 and the county was interested in saving money, so the move would occur even if the building wasn't completely finished. The installation of landscaping and concrete walkways outside, and the placement of some furniture inside remained to complete the new courthouse and county offices building.

The county's offices had existed as a vagabond, moving from one "make shift quarters" to another since the old courthouse burned down almost twenty years before. The new courthouse, though, had fresh walls that were "finished in beautiful shades of light brown and ivory and concrete steps . . . covered with hard composition board and trimmed with metal." Plumbing, heating, and lighting were "of the most modern order."[2] The outside was constructed in concrete, which was scored to resemble blocks, and then sandblasted to give it its appearance. It didn't matter that this building was a smaller replica of the Weiser Courthouse in Washington County; Gem County now had a permanent place for its offices.

The basement contained the offices of the sheriff and probate judge, jail, kitchen

Gem County Courthouse

Construction start: Late summer 1938

Construction finish: July 29, 1939

Building cost: $70,000

Architect: Frank Hummel; David Richardson (contractor)

Architectural style: Spare and Classicizing Art Deco, Modern Movement

Key people: County Commissioners George Davidson, Fred Baisch (also did most of the landscaping), and Lew Matthews

and heating plant. The top floor contained the court room, judge's chambers, jury room and the school superintendent's office. The main floor contained other offices including the county clerk, treasurer, assessor, commissioners, county attorney, and surveyor. The layout hasn't changed too much over the years. The sheriff is still in the basement, but the jail moved into a larger building behind the courthouse in 2001; the basement space is now used mostly as storage. Some of the county offices have outgrown the building with the department of motor vehicles and planning and zoning relocated to annex buildings across the street.

Gem County had tried unsuccessfully in 1924 to issue bonds and finance the building of a courthouse.[3] However, there would be no new courthouse until the United States' Works Progress Administration (WPA) program. For those who don't know (including myself, who is old enough to remember disco, but not old enough to remember Kennedy), the WPA was the largest of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal," ambitious because it was intended to produce jobs for unskilled workers unemployed from the depression, including the construction of public buildings and roads. The WPA became unnecessary around 1943, in most part because of World War II - causing men going off to war or going into the factories (along with the women) to earn a living.

It was customary for WPA projects to be partially financed by the local county where the work would be performed. The total cost of the building project (designated project number 1089-F) was $70,000 and Gem County financed a portion of the cost through a bond measure voted on by the citizens totaling $37,500.[4] In 1948, the principle and interest was paid back.

County Commissioners George Davidson, Fred Baisch, and Lew Matthews were the drivers behind the new courthouse and David Richardson from Caldwell was hired as contractor. Commissioner Fred Baisch was also responsible for the installation of most of the courthouse's simple and dignified landscaping, which was brought in from John Carnefix's nursery in Fruitland. The original site, purchased by the County years prior, although surrounded by maples and fruit orchards, had been nothing more than a rough lot full of weeds and crossed with footpaths. Various shrubs and trees were brought in including Colorado and Norway Spruce, junipers, European white birch, Japanese Cherries, flowering quinces, moss and red flowering locusts, and linden trees.[5] As the story goes, Fred was so passionate about the landscaping that, even after he finished being a commissioner, he came before the county officers to request that he be allowed to continue to care for the shrubs and trees. "'How much will it cost?' inquired the guardians of the public coffer. 'I'm not asking for a job,' Baisch responded. 'I'm only asking for the privilege of helping take care of those plants. They mean a lot to me. It won't cost the taxpayers a cent. I feel that by pruning and shaping those trees and bushes, I can give something of myself to the people of Emmett and Gem County.'"[6]

Photo by Jacob A. Sweeten

The 30-ton M4 Army tank that sits in front of the courthouse was placed there in 1958 by the Emmett Veterans of Foreign Wars as a memorial honoring veterans of World War II and later Vietnam. The veterans had their first application submitted to the Army for the tank rejected; it received approval on their second application. The tank was originally going to be placed on the fairgrounds near the armory, but it was then determined that the courthouse lawn would be the better location as a courtesy to the VFW.

The courthouse, "two floors on a high basement," was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 because of its Architectural Significance of traditional single-entryway motif (Art Deco) like the Morris Hill Mausoleum and the John Regan American Legion Post.[7]

About the time the courthouse was added to the register, attorney Tom Arkoosh, came into the valley that had been labeled the "Gem of the Payette" and the "Gem of Plenty" because of its fertile soil. "Small courthouses create the legal culture people live in," Tom says.[8] In this case, the culture mimicked the county and the valley's description of "Gem."

When Tom moved to Emmett, he said it was the people in the valley that made the difference to his new practice. Tom recounted the story of the time he was filing some records at the Magistrate Court when a gentleman seen outside the window of the courthouse slipped and was injured. The town doctor was in court that day with a trial going on, a trial that just stopped mid-argument so that the doctor could attend to the injured man. "That's how small towns work."

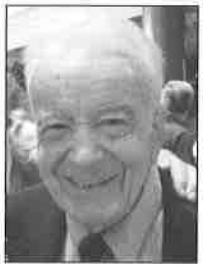
> *"I feel that by pruning and shaping those trees and bushes, I can give something of myself to the people of Emmett and Gem County."*
>
> - Former Gem County Commissioner Fred Baisch

Tom also remembers Thelma Kolodziej who was the Clerk of the Court at the

time. "I introduced myself as having previously worked in the federal courts," Tom says. But Thelma responded that state courts were different. Tom says he learned more from her about how things worked in state courts than anything he learned in law school, lessons he still remembers and practices today.

Thelma served as Clerk and otherwise worked in the courthouse for more than 35 years. She made certain to remind me that it was a service for the people of the county and that it was the people who made her job special. Thelma's husband adds that when Thelma was elected, and reelected over the years, there was a lot of competition, but that the people kept electing her back into service. Thelma frequently offered entry level clerical jobs to young people, training staff on their way to other careers. "She never took vacations and often worked Saturdays and Sundays," Thelma's husband says.[9] Thelma joked that she only retired from serving as Clerk because she was old enough and her husband wanted her to.

No article about the Gem County courthouse would be complete without including attorney Louie Gorrono, a fixture in this community. Tom recounts that when Louie found out that Tom was practicing in Emmett, Louie took Tom to lunch to welcome him to the valley and offered his friendship and support. Tom jokes that he can't remember who paid. "Louie was always very helpful and kind. Always had jokes and was fun to be around."



Luis "Louie" Gorrono

Everyone in Emmett knew Louie, and Louie seemed to know everyone in Emmett. In a legal matter "people wanted Louie on their side."

- H. Ronald Bjorkman

Tom recalls his first case in front of Magistrate Judge Perry, with Louie on the opposing side. Tom had prepared so much for the hearing and when it came his turn to argue, he gave it all he had. When Tom was finished, Judge Perry looked to Louie and said, "Louie, what's the law on this?"

Ron Bjorkman, an attorney in Emmett for over 30 years, remembers Louie that same way. Everyone in Emmett knew Louie, and Louie seemed to know everyone in Emmett. In a legal matter "people wanted Louie on their side."[10]

I never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Gorrono (he passed away in 2010), but it quickly became apparent as I transitioned my practice to Emmett that Louie had a way and a sway in all legal matters. His time, along with those others who served in and out of the courthouse created the legal culture for the people of Gem County. As time moves on and as new attorneys, clerks, and judges take their place in the courthouse, the history of service should remain, a reflection of its people, the "Gem of the Payette."

About the Author

Jacob A. Sweeten *is an attorney with Capitol Law Group, PLLC and practices in the areas of real estate, business, tax compliance, and estate planning. He recently transitioned his practice to serve the people of Emmett and Gem County after practicing in Boise for three years. Originally from Salt Lake City he graduated from the University of Dayton School of Law, but missed the mountains and moved back West. He is licensed in Idaho and Utah.*

Endnotes

[1] *Emmett Messenger, July 27, 1939.*
[2] *Id.*
[3] *The Emmett Index, June 26,* 1924.
[4] Ruth B. Lyon, THE VILLAGE THAT GREW (Lithocraft 1979)(available at the Gem County Historical Society and Village Museum).
[5] *The Emmett Index, September 16, 1948.*
[6] *Id.*
[7] *See Application for addition to Historic Register.*
[8] Interview with Tom Arkoosh (September 14, 2010).
[9] Interview with Thelma & Frank Kolodziej (September 14, 2010).
[10] Interview with Ron Bjorkman (September 15, 2010).

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