

Archeologist finds old 'calabooses' in the county

Statewide study showcases small, old jails

Take a closer look. You might miss it.

In many small towns across Texas, there is still evidence of an old "calaboose" -- a very small jail used decades ago -- tucked away somewhere in town.

In fact, Burleson County has three of them -- one in Caldwell, Somerville and Snook.

Though no longer in use, many are still standing. And passers-by, if they notice them, get a glimpse into a very different era in Texas law enforcement history.

Before the Texas Commission on Jail Standards set regulations for incarceration, anyone arrested for any crime, misdemeanor or felony, could find themselves locked up in the local calaboose -- usually a concrete or cement structure with only one or two cells, and iron bars.

No amenities or privacy.

Many were in public areas where they were highly visible, but some were in alleys and not that obvious.

Bill Moore, a professional archeologist living in Bryan, saw his first calaboose on a hot day in August when he and Rhonda Holley were visiting Gause to look at an old house that was going to be torn down.

They decided to visit the local cemeteries and behind Coats grocery store they saw a small concrete building that intrigued them. When one of the locals told them that it was the local calaboose, they became curious about this tiny structure with metal bars in the windows and a dirt floor.

Moore has visited every one of the 254 counties in Texas, and the one in Gause is the first

one he had seen. He showed a picture of the Gause calaboose to his cousin Roger G. Moore, who is an archeologist in Houston with lots of experience in historic sites.

Likewise, Roger was not aware of these smaller jails either. Since some of these small jails have been altered and used for other purposes, it is possible to see some without knowing what they were.

The calaboose in La Grange is a good example. It has only one window, but it is not visible from the street. The metal jail door has been covered with a wooden door. From three sides it appears to be a storage building, and that is what it is being used for.

Moore became interested in learning about these tiny jails, and his initial research turned into a huge project that may last for several years.

Rhonda and Roger share his interest and have travelled with him to many of these historic sites across Texas. It was Rhonda's idea to create a website so that the information could be shared with the public, and she is responsible for it.

Visitors to www.tinytexasjails.org will see pictures of all the calaboooses visited by Moore and his friends and examples from other states and information on some that are no longer present.

During his research, he discovered three calaboooses in Burleson County.

One is located behind the old police and fire station off Hill Street, another in Somerville behind the city museum and another in Snook, located in a private

yard near the intersection of F.M. 2155 and Spur 2155.

Moore said these three are typical of what he finds around the state, and he hopes his research will offer a history lesson to anyone interested.

Local historical commissions and preservationists might also find his work interesting.

Sometimes the jails simply get torn down, or moved to private property, and are quickly forgotten.

Moore believes they can be restored, in some cases, and preserved as historic reminders.

But first, local residents have to be aware of them -- and to ensure that they are not simply destroyed.

Moore is not the only person who was unaware of the Texas calaboose. He was surprised to learn that many local residents who had calaboooses in their town were unaware of them.

He began to research maps and the Internet and he talked to members of historical societies. To his surprise, calaboooses were a common structure in Texas and other states. There is no formal definition of a calaboose. The term came from a very old Spanish word Calaboza that means dungeon or jail.

"They were very common in Texas and all over the country," Moore said. "They were very small. I think it happened when Texas was largely Hispanic. It was first called calabozas, and the term calaboose evolved from that."

When tiny jails appear on the Sanborn maps, they are virtually always referred to as a calaboose. Therefore, Moore's tentative definition is a small,

one story structure. Although they are most often found in small towns, they were also constructed in county seats, especially when there was a need for a jail while the county jail was being built or refurbished.

So far, those jails fitting the definition range from 70 to 300 square feet. The majority have one or two cells, and only one has been found with three cells.

Regarding the local calaboozes, Moore is still gathering information.

Caldwell's structure has two cells with a total square footage of about 187 square feet. Somerville's is a single room of 163.3 square feet, and Snook's, located on private property, is also one room and 72 square feet, he said.

Snook's was interesting in its own way.

It is now located in the back yard of a residence.

"While it was being used as a calaboose, it was surrounded by other buildings such as the local barber shop and lumber yard," he said. "Bill Giesenschlag's memory of the calaboose was when he visited the barber shop and from stories told to him by his parents. At the time, it was no longer being used as a jail."

Moore gave a talk in October of 2013 at the Somerville Area Museum. Among those attending were Don

"Skipper" Murray and his wife Tinka of Somerville.

Skipper Murray shared that Somerville was a rough town in those days with lots of saloons and billiard parlors, Moore said. Prisoners did not like being locked up in those tiny cells with no heat in the winter and little or no ventilation in the summer.

The Murrays were told about the Caldwell jail by Miriam Fiegenbaum. They took pictures and sent them to him.

Some other locations he plans to visit include Arp, near Palestine, moved to private property after a local resident learned it would be torn down, Camp Wood near Uvalde and Dell City by the Guadalupe Mountains.

Moore hopes that local residents in the communities will share more information about their calaboozes when they see his website.

Moore has visited 58 calaboozes so far. He is writing a detailed monograph on the calaboozes of Burleson County that will be made available to libraries, the Somerville Area Museum and the Burleson County Chamber of Commerce.

He is also writing a detailed monograph on the jails in Caldwell, past and present.

"I just want people to know about it. Someone in Caldwell might be 85 years old and say: 'I remember when

they used that as a jail.' They may have another anecdote or share another story."

Moore believes the jails tell stories about small towns.

These buildings "take you back to the days when law enforcement was totally different," he said.

The cells could house someone for the smallest of crimes, or perhaps just as a temporary holding facility for a murderer, Moore said.

The calaboozes were vital in the days before good rural roads because transportation to the county jail was not always easy, he said.

The lack of privacy and protection from the weather was likely a deterrent, he believes. The Snook calaboose has a dirt floor, no windows and no plumbing. Some had sinks and toilets and electricity, but many did not.

"Spend a hot day in August in one of these things, and you won't want to do it again," Moore said.

Moore has no timeline to finish his research. He just keeps finding them wherever he goes.

"I can't go through a small town anymore without looking for one."

Anyone is welcome to share stories or photos about the local calaboozes or any others.

Moore may be contacted at bvracrm@gmail.com.

