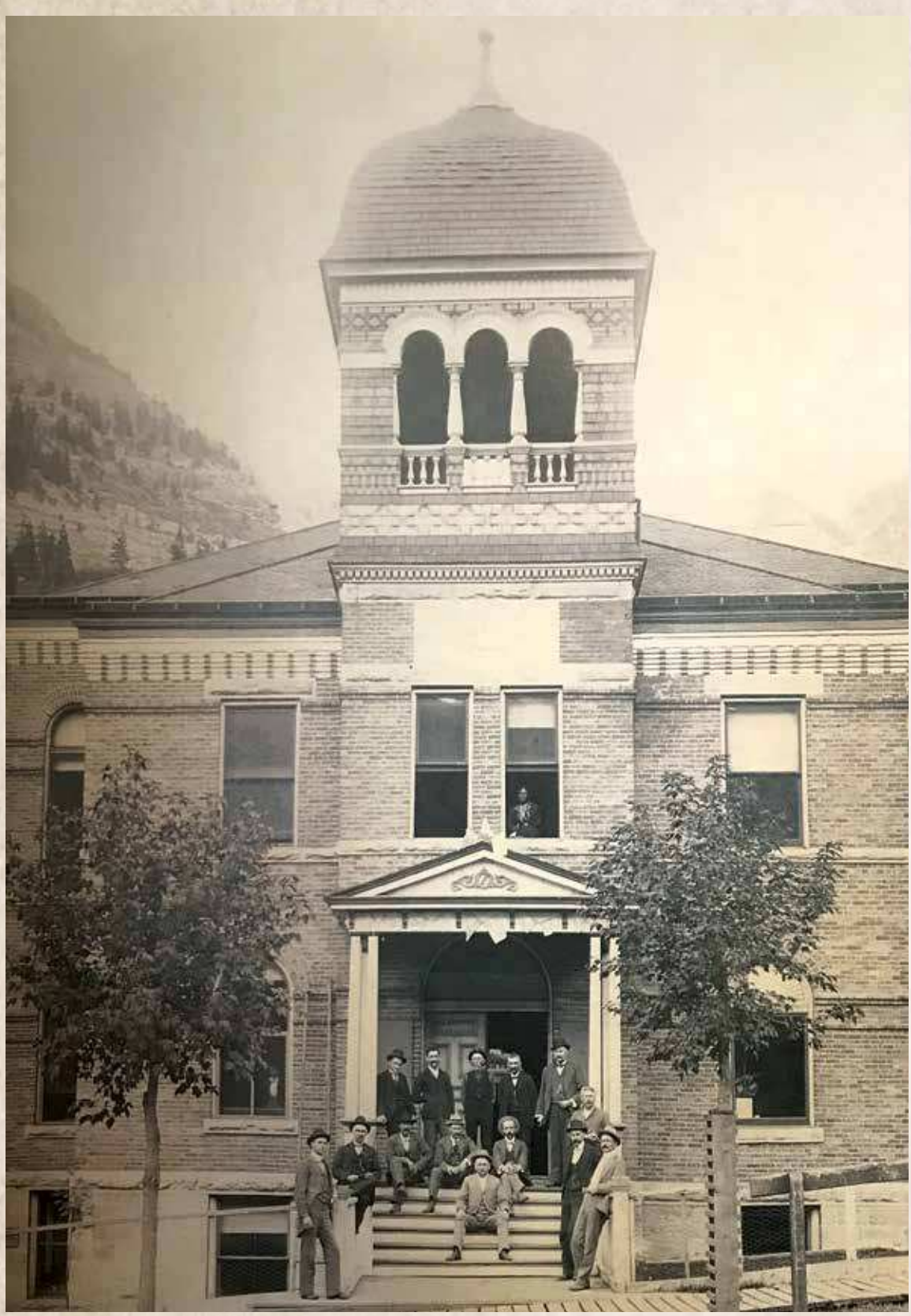


THIS OLD COURTHOUSE

IN DOWNTOWN OURAY, A BELOVED EDIFICE RECEIVES A SORELY-NEEDED SHORING UP

BY SAMANTHA TISDEL WRIGHT

The first time the Ouray County Courthouse casts its spell on me, I'm a kid with braids and braces, a Nancy Drew book from the library tucked into my blue corduroy Durango Threadworks backpack. I'm standing out there in front of the courthouse on a long, boring, slow-as-molasses summer af-ternoon, staring up at the cupola that perches atop its tower like a shingled muffin.

And I get this dizzy, queasy feeling that the whole building is falling forward. It's about to land on top of me!

It's just an optical illusion, explains my mom, who works inside the building as the county health nurse. It looks like the tower is falling forward — but really, it's the clouds that are moving in the opposite direction. I'm not convinced. But somehow, miraculously, the courthouse never topples.

Turns out, this old brick-and-stone edifice that contains the dusty records and civic heartbeat of our county is all about stability and structure. It's an edifice of order in what was once the Wild West; a monument to authority, civility, democracy.

Our courthouse tells the world: Ouray County has been here for a long, long while. We're settled in. We're here to stay.

The building has held up pretty well since it was built in 1888, serving continuously as the central hub for County government and the courts for 130 years. It's survived floods, fires, Hollywood, and my dad's 40th birthday party back in the 1980s — a rowdy mock trial in which he was found guilty of felonious balding and turning 40 without a license.

The bones of the courthouse are still in good shape, but time's passage has taken its toll. Huge scabs of red paint are peeling off the native brick exterior. The concrete steps leading up to the front porch are spawling. The roofing needs to be replaced. The retaining walls are buckling or falling over. The building is, in fact, on the brink of becoming unsafe. It has ADA compliance issues, water damage, and outdated electrical, plumbing and mechanical services.

Over the years, electrical conduits, heat registers, fluorescent lights, computer cables and other incremental upgrades have begun to obscure and clutter much of the building's dignity. And still the public demands and expects ever more modern and efficient services from its government.

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Opposite:
Town fathers gathered on the courthouse steps for the earliest known photograph of the Ouray County Courthouse, probably taken soon after its first completion in 1889. A woman believed to be Sally Boudreau is looking out the upstairs window above the portico.
(Photo courtesy of the Ouray County Historical Society)

The setting of the cornerstone was presided over by the Masons in the summer of 1888. **(Courtesy photo)**



The building has held up pretty well since it was constructed in 1888, serving continuously as the central hub for County government and the courts for 130 years.

Luckily, the old gal is about to get shored up, from the tip of her cupola to her dank, mildewed, spidery toes.

In preparation for the pending $8.2 million renovation, the courthouse has been completely emptied out for the first time ever — except, perhaps, for a few resident ghosts.

Moving and relocating was no easy task. With the arrival of a 30-yard dumpster that took up residence on the south lawn, county officials, department heads and staff began sorting and purging decades' worth of trash and treasures. The antique furniture and official records, maps and documents went into deep storage, while useless relics like floppy disks, cassette tapes and broken binders got the boot.

Finally, when they were done, county and court staff and elected officials pried themselves out of their offices and scattered to temporary quarters at several rented spaces in Ridgway and Ouray, where they'll remain until the renovation is complete — hopefully by March of 2020.

With the building pretty much empty now, everyone is on pins and needles to get this party started — especially Shawn Merrill, the project boss with general contractor FCI Constructors, Inc. He's not so worried about the work itself. He's been in charge of some other pretty complicated projects, including the recent Ouray School and Hot Springs Pool renovations.

He's thinking more about the tight timeline, and the merry-go-round of subcontractors that he will have to coordinate once construction gets underway.

FCI has been working closely with the Aspen firm Charles Cunniffe Architects — which has been involved with architectural planning and smaller courthouse renovation projects in Ouray County since 1995 — in order to finalize building plans and pricing. Construction was supposed to get underway in November, but was recently delayed because the project came in over budget. Now county officials are hunting for more money, and figuring out what, if anything at all, might be excised from the project.

Nevertheless, Merrill is thrilled to be involved.

"It's gonna be a very exciting, fun project, restoring an 1888 building that hasn't ever gotten a really nice modern upgrade," he said. "It's had a few small remodels over the years but nothing that really enhanced the character or the functionality. You don't get many opportunities to work on something that old and retrofit it for the 21st century."

Architect Marina Skyles is just as enthused. The project, she said, "is about enhancing what's there, not creating something new, because what's already there is pretty fantastic."

The courthouse and its jail are on the National Historic Register, and contribute to the Ouray Historic District. "So we are working with several government agencies to maintain the historic significance of the building, and taking off makeshift additions dating back to the 1960s and 1980s," Skyles said.

A new addition on the south side of the building will house county administration, and the county annex across the alley will be expanded to house both the Sheriff's Office and Emergency Medical Services, while the assessor's office that is currently located in the annex will move back inside the historic courthouse. Meanwhile, the former Sheriff's Office in the upstairs of the historic jail behind the courthouse will be converted into extra space for the courts.

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The exterior of the Ouray County Courthouse as it appears today.
(Photo by Eric Ming)



"Doing a project like this wouldn't be possible if the people didn't love their courthouse."



Courthouse staff dressed in period costume for the quasquicentennial celebration in 2013. **(Courtesy photo)**

QUASQUICENTENNIAL

Michelle Nauer has spent almost 40 years of her working life in the courthouse. She started out when she was just 19, back in the days of manual typewriters, and eventually worked her way up to County Clerk when her boss Addie Simm retired. She's been around long enough to see Ouray County swing from red to purple to blue in presidential elections over the last few decades, and she takes her role as the county's chief election official seriously.

"The former elected officials deeply instilled in me the importance of the history and the integrity of Ouray County," Nauer said. "I've got a lot of the courthouse in me. I'm very passionate about it."

It was frustrating to Nauer over the years to see her beloved courthouse slipping into disrepair. So she organized a 125th birthday bash for the courthouse in 2013 — its "quasquicentennial" celebration.

Ouray County staff and elected officials dressed the part, donning period costumes in honor of the day, and Masons from across Colorado reenacted the original cornerstone dedication ceremony that had been conducted at the spot 125 years ago to the day.

Ouray County Historical Museum curator Don Paulson delivered a speech, recalling highlights of the building's illustrious history, and approximately 160 community members attended the ceremony, which concluded with a silent auction to raise seed money for the building's restoration. Nauer encouraged everyone to donate a dollar for each year the courthouse had graced the county. When all was said and done, she raised over $6,000 that day for the courthouse restoration fund, which provided seed money for a $1 million grant from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs that is now helping to pay for the upcoming renovation.

Colorado's Underfunded Courthouse Facility Commission pitched in an additional $832,075.

But the $8.2 million renovation will be mostly paid for by a .55 percent sales tax approved by 59 percent of Ouray County voters in 2017. The sales tax will sunset once the project is paid for in full, or after 20 years, whichever is earlier.

In a county where it's always a gamble to place any sort of tax hike on the ballot, the level of local support for the courthouse project took a lot of county officials by surprise. "Doing a project like this wouldn't be possible if the people didn't love their courthouse," said County Administrator Connie Hunt.

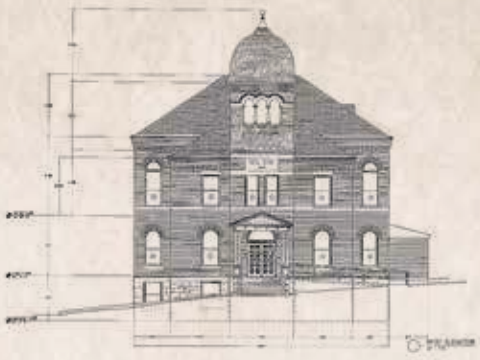
"The care and concern of the local population is pretty dramatic," Skyles agreed. "The courthouse is beloved in this community. People tell us all the time, 'We just love this building. Thank you for unveiling its beauty and not covering it up.'"

TAMING THE WILD WEST

In the early days of Ouray County, nobody thought much about the need for a proper courthouse. Everything was still too rough and new and transitory. It *was* the Wild West, after all.

But as the City of Ouray made the leap from dirty little mining camp to honest-to-goodness town in the late 1870s and early 1880s, the need became apparent.

The county offices were scattered haphazardly in rented spaces around Ouray — in Benton's Hall, just around the corner from the red light district, and in



A measured drawing of the front of the courthouse. **(Image courtesy of Charles Cunniffe Architects)**

An image of a group of men and a child also offers a close-up view of the original detailing of the front entry of the courthouse, likely dating back to 1889. **(Photo courtesy of the Ouray County Historical Society)**



Blythe Hall, on the respectable side of Main Street. The Ouray County Court was housed in an addition tacked onto the rear end of a billiard hall and bottle shop on Sixth Avenue. The jail was in a squat little wooden building on the uphill side of Fourth Street.

Certain Ouray citizens weren't too thrilled about having to go all over the place to take care of business, and they fretted about the safekeeping of the county's records. And so in 1886 they petitioned the board of county commissioners to build a courthouse:

"Public buildings should be erected suitable for courtroom and edifices for the transaction of the county business, the protection of the county records and the economic confinement of criminals," their signed petition stated. "Your petitioners believe that this can be accomplished with a great savings to the taxpayers ... and we therefore request that the question of creating an indebtedness in the sum of $20,000 for that purpose be submitted to the public at the next election."

Ouray was coming into its own. The silver camps up in the Red Mountain district were dripping with metallic wealth. The elegant Beaumont Hotel had just flung open its doors, and was lit from within like a luminous jewel box with electricity generated by the new Ouray Electric Light and Power Company. And in December 1887, the long-awaited railroad arrived.

Local residents prospered, and like their counterparts 130 years later, were happy to shoulder the proposed tax burden for their new courthouse. In April 1888, the county voters passed a bond issue for $20,000, and the project was off and running.

F.E. Edbrooke and Co. of Denver was hired to draw up specs for the new edifice. Edbrooke, a Chicago native, had come to Denver in 1879 to supervise the construction of the Tabor Block and the Tabor Grand Opera House. After wrapping up these projects, he stuck around and soon became the city's go-to architect.

Edbrooke brought a dash of whimsy and stately elegance to his design for the new courthouse in Ouray. He proposed a monumental two-story structure made of brick with stone cut trimmings, influenced by elaborate French, Italianate, and Romanesque forms that were popular at the turn of the century. The central feature of his design was a tower capped with a mansard cupola that would perch like a winsome bonnet atop the imposing structure.

The first floor would house offices for the county clerk, county treasurer, county judge, district clerk, sheriff and county surveyor, with finishings of hardwoods and Chicago Pine (pine paneling with a faux finish to make it look like oak). The second floor would be almost entirely taken up by the district courtroom — an immense space with lofty 18-foot ceilings — while the basement would be roomy enough to house the fire department's hose cart, plus the boiler room, coal cellars and City Council chambers.

The County put the project out for bids; Francis Carney got the contract. The energetic 30-something Irish immigrant had a leg up on the competition because he owned the local brickyard. Carney had already built several other brick edifices around town by then, including the Miners Hospital and the first Ouray Public School. He was also a political organizer with a gift for oratory who eventually became Lieutenant Governor of Colorado.

On Aug. 22, 1888, Ouray's Masonic Lodge presided over a ceremony for the

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The cupola is one of the most distinctive features of the courthouse. **(Photo by Eric Ming)**



laying of the cornerstone of the new courthouse. The town doctor — a local Masonic dignitary — solemnly led a procession through the streets of Ouray to the location of the ritual site.

With much pomp and circumstance, music, prayer, and speechifying, the masons buried a tin time capsule containing a recent issue of the *Solid Muldoon* with an article about the new courthouse, some county and district papers, a variety of documents pertaining to the local Masonic Lodge, a steel engraving of Chief Ouray (who had died in 1880) and some coins and cash. The cornerstone was then sprinkled with "corn of nourishment," "wine of refreshment' and "oil of joy", and set into its proper place atop the time capsule.

Nobody bothered to record the exact spot where it was placed. And nobody knows where it is today.

The courthouse was finished and occupied in March 1889 — three months behind schedule and $13,000 over budget. Soon it became the nerve center of the county, and remains so to this day.

Up until its recent closure, citizens of Ouray County have transacted their day-to-day business with the government in the very same rooms, paced the very same corridors, passed through the very same doors that were used 130 years ago. The courtroom, and the old jail building behind it which now houses a commissioner's meeting room and the Sheriff's Office, play the same integral roll in the lives of the local citizenry (both the fortunate and the not-so-much) as they did well before the turn of the 20th century.

THOSE PRESENT AND THOSE ABSENT

Walk into the courthouse today, and you can feel the residue of history settling on your skin and in your lungs. Even in the daytime, there's a quality of light hanging about the rooms and hallways that is not quite luminous — as if filtered by the breath of all the beings past and present who have passed this way.

As if, perhaps, filtered by the ethereal remnants of those passed who are still present.

The Ouray County Courthouse is said to be haunted by the benign ghost of Sally Boudreau, who often lingers on the main floor, near the rear stairwell. Boudreau appears to some people — mostly men — in a floor-length dress with her hair up. We know her name because she is believed to have once extended her hand and introduced herself.

Courthouse maintenance supervisor Will Clapsadl has had two encounters with Sally over the years. "It was a weird impression — in the same exact location both times," he said.

The first time was about 10 years ago, before the new boiler was installed in the basement. Clapsadl used to have to go into the courthouse at 2 a.m. to reset the old boiler and monitor the lines for leaks of fuel oil.

"I didn't mind doing it," Clapsadl said. But one time, he had to take his young daughter Hunter in with him. "As I started heading down the basement stairs, right in the middle there was a super, super ice cold blast of air. I could see my breath and my skin crawled. Hunter knew something was not quite right either and started screaming, 'I'm scared!' Then the cold air instantly went away. Hunter had the option of staying at the top of the stairs or coming with me, and she ended up diving into my arms. I told her, 'Let's get this done.'"

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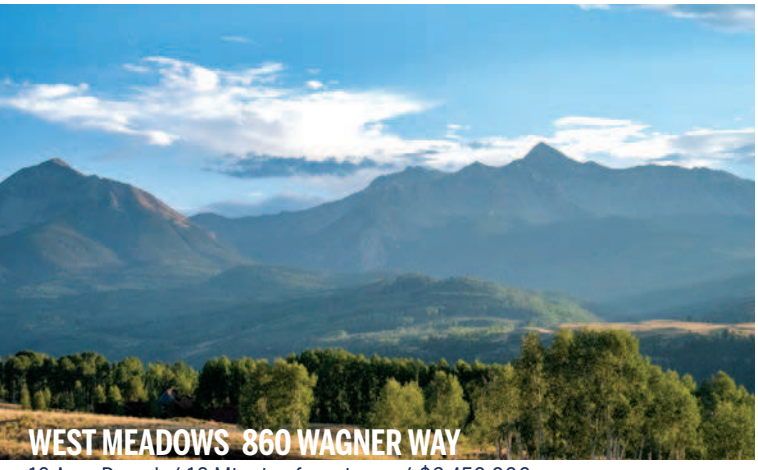
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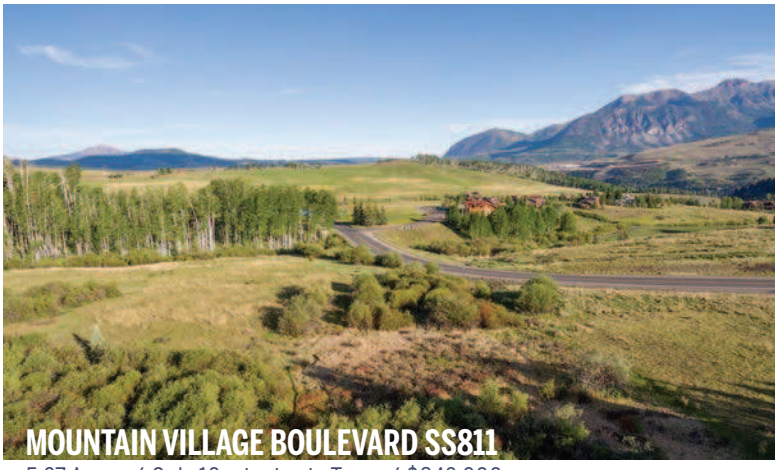
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A scene from the 1969 movie "True Grit," starring John Wayne, which was filmed at various locations around Ouray County, including the Ouray County Courthouse. **(Courtesy photo)**



The second time Clapsadl encountered Sally was the day after the voters passed the sales tax referendum to fund the courthouse renovation. "I was going in the next morning, and in the exact same spot I was hit by that icy cold air again. I whispered, 'Hey, relax, we are not ruining it, we are just fixing it back up to what it used to be," he said.

There have been other hints of Sally's presence, too, like lights that mysteriously flick on or off. And one picture is always getting tilted. "Sally is definitely there," Clapsadl said. "Some weird things have happened in there."

Sally may have ghostly company. A well-known psychic from Tuscon, Ariz. named Shirley Nelson was invited to tour the building in the 1990s. She sensed a thick and malevolent presence on the grand staircase as she went up to the courtroom, and "saw" a noose in the stairwell. "She had the chills so bad she had to stop," recalled former Ouray resident Jane Tertipes Wright, who accompanied Nelson on the tour. This was the very spot where investigators with Western Colorado Paranormal Research later captured a photograph of an orb while spending a night in the building.

There is some speculation that Joe Dickson, the killer of a Beaumont waitress named Eller Day, may have been secretly lynched in that stairwell in the 1880s, after which his body was returned to the jail, and the jail burned down.

STAR-STRUCK

The most infamous trial that ever happened in the courtroom upstairs was presided over by a one-eyed, boozy, hard-nosed U.S. Marshal and Texas Ranger named Rooster Cogburn, played by the actor John Wayne.

"True Grit" was filmed in Ouray County in 1968, when Ouray native Phil Martinez was a freshman in high school. Town was abuzz. Wayne, the film's biggest star, sometimes stayed overnight with his crew in Ouray at Twin Peaks Lodge, in Suite 24.

"He was a great, regular, hobnob-with-anybody type of guy," Martinez said. One morning, Martinez woke to discover Wayne and his wife sitting at the Martinez' kitchen table, eating *huevos rancheros* that Martinez' mother Viola had prepared.

Martinez, star-struck and in his jammies, did his best to disappear into the woodwork. The Duke wouldn't have it.

"Come here, young un'," he growled.

"He put his hand on my back and said, 'You and your best friend can eat lunch with me every day while I'm in town,'" Martinez recalled.

A catering company set up long rows of tables along Fourth Street where the cast and crew would eat lunch every day while they were filming the western's famous courtroom scene in Ouray. As soon as the noon whistle rang, Martinez and his best friend Butch Clark scooted out of school and headed down the hill to eat lunch with the Duke.

Wayne was also a regular at The Pick, a local bar where the Outlaw is now located. He played eight ball, got drunk with the locals, and handed out autographs. Martinez's dad Gilbert was assigned to informal security detail on such occasions, and sometimes helped the Duke stagger back to the hotel after one too many 16-oz. glasses of Jack Daniels.

"This man could drink," Martinez said. "He was a huge man. He looked like

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The courthouse is made of local bricks which were painted red in the 1940s. Now the paint is peeling off, exposing fragile bricks beneath. One of the most painstaking and expensive aspects of the renovation entails removing the paint and restoring the native bricks to their original condition. It could cost up to $800,000 to get the job done.
(Photo courtesy of Charles Cunniffe Architects).



At right, the view from the courthouse cupola.
(Photo by Samantha Wright)

Shaquille O'Neal. The girth of him! He was the coolest guy."

Ouray native Chris Bonatti, who was a college student at Mesa State at the time, remembers coming home to Ouray from Grand Junction to party with the "Grits" a few times while the movie's crew was in town. Her friend even ended up dating Wayne's costar Glen Campbell for a while. And her mom, who worked at The Pick, became such good friends with the Duke that he gave her his hat. It still hangs on the wall at the Outlaw.

Warren Waterman started his 46-year career in law enforcement with the Montrose Police Department the year "True Grit" was made. "The movie company hired us on our days off to do security wherever they were shooting scenes," Waterman recalled in an interview with Rocky Mountain PBS a few years before his recent passing. "Two days a week for several weeks, if we were in the right place at the right time, we got to hang out with John Wayne and Glen Campbell, eat lunch with them on the set and things like that. I got to watch a lot of the scenes as they were being filmed."

Unfortunately, he didn't get to be on the set when the courtroom scene was being filmed in Ouray. But years later, after retiring from his law enforcement career, he accepted a job as a courthouse security officer at the Ouray County Courthouse. In between ushering people through the metal detector, he'd point out the life-sized cutout of John Wayne that he had planted in the stairwell, just below the landing where John Wayne's character paused to roll a cigarette and Kim Darby's character took it away from him because he wasn't doing it right.

Waterman always thought it was funny how, through Hollywood magic, Cogburn walked out the double-doors of the Ouray County Courthouse and emerged into Ridgway's Town Park.

Word got around about Waterman, and although he has passed away, summer tourists still wander into the courthouse asking for the deputy that knew John Wayne.

BIG LOVE

Sure, it's just a government building. But everyone who knows the Ouray County Courthouse has little things about it that they love.

County Administrator Connie Hunt has a soft spot in her heart for the bricks — in spite of the fact that refinishing them may cost hundreds of thousands more dollars than was originally anticipated. The bricks will be beautiful, she says, when the old red paint is finally, delicately stripped away.

Architect Marina Skyles loves the courthouse's interior embellishments — the Chicago Pine wainscoting with its artful faux grain that makes it look like oak; the bits of historic decorative stencil that have been uncovered in the courtroom (and painstakingly replicated in the renovation); the tall arched windows with their wavy glass.

Court Clerk Jane Holmes, who has worked at the courthouse for 24 years, is enchanted by the historic court records she uncovered in the process of moving out of her office for the renovation, buried in stacks of dusty disintegrating boxes. "It felt like a privilege to be able to complete such an important task," she said.

Retired District Judge David Westfall, who sat for hundreds of hours in the courtroom over the course of his career, appreciates the courtroom's sunlit openness, "and the fact that people can walk

The Ouray County Courthouse has presided over the corner of Sixth Avenue and Forth Street for 130 years. The upcoming renovation will shore the building up to withstand another century. **(Photo by Eric Ming)**



"It's a way different atmosphere than modern courtrooms with no windows and tight security and not much history."

up the creaky stairs, open up the creaky doors, and sit in one of those creaky old fold-down chairs with the arms that sometimes fall off and clatter to the floor."

Hannah Hollenbeck, an administrative assistant to the Board of County Commissioners, appreciates the antique hardware — the hinges and door handles and the window fixtures. "They are immaculately done. Buildings aren't made like that anymore," she said. She also loves the ghost stories. Her father was a county commissioner for a short period of time, and encountered Sally once when he had to go into the building late one night to pick up a meeting packet. "He said hi, and she just disappeared," she said. "Dad high-tailed his ass out of there."

Clapsadl adores the secret parts of the building that nobody else gets to see. The charred rafters in the attic that survived a chimney fire at the turn of the 20th century. The furnace room that stays toasty-warm on the coldest winter days. And he has his fingers and toes crossed that during the course of the renovation, the lost cornerstone and time capsule will be uncovered.

Ben Tisdel, (my brother), who is a Ouray County Commissioner now, loves the cupola best of all. One of his first acts after getting elected was to decorate it with Christmas lights and a big holiday wreath that twinkled like a homing beacon in the night.

HOME ALONE

Ben meets me at the courthouse on a bleak October day shortly after the courthouse has been emptied out. We duck beneath the "Do Not Enter" tape draped across the front stairs, he unlocks the front door with his commissioner's key, and we head inside.

There are still boxes piled on dollies in the corridor. We wander around the empty offices that were once forbidden territory when we were kids. He shows me a patch of ancient linoleum that the workers uncovered beneath the antique treasurer's counter, under layers of wood and carpet. Its elegant art deco patterns are mesmerizing.

A cupboard under the stairs still has some old stuff stashed in there — manual typewriters, an adding machine, old ballot boxes.

We poke around the abandoned Sheriff's office that will soon be converted into a new auxiliary courtroom, judge's chambers and jury room.

We head down to the basement, where wires hang out like guts amidst the old dust and cobwebs. Inside the abandoned EMS quarters, corpses of dead phones are stacked on a windowsill, their ringlet cords dangling.

Then we go up to the courtroom, the scene of our father's notorious 40th birthday party, and the place that the Duke presided over with his eye patch and cowboy hat back in 1968. Its mossy-green expanse of carpet has been torn up to reveal dirty old wood flooring underneath.

We save the best for last: the cupola, of course. Up the ladder, through the hatch, and there we are, looking out over all of Ouray, its constellation of old brick buildings that pin down the history of this place — the Beaumont Hotel, the Elks Lodge, the Story Block, the Wright Opera House, the Stanislawski/Hess Block — and here, in the middle of it all, this living time capsule that we're standing on top of.

It hasn't toppled yet. With any luck, it's good for another 130 years.