

The Museum Table - Shrouded in Mystery

Have you ever heard the question, “What’s the history of that object?” That’s a fairly common question, not only in museums but in everyday life situations as well. When entering the Research Library in the Pioneer Museum one of the first things to catch your attention will no doubt be the large table located in the north central part of the room. It seats twelve, is very ornate, and measures twelve feet in length and forty-two inches wide. A frequent question is, “What’s the history of that table?”

Based on an article about the table written by Claude Swanson in the February 1, 1967, edition of *The Sentinel*, it has a very lengthy and interesting history. According to Swanson, it was donated to the city during the tenure of Mayor W. L. Nicholas and served as a table for the Fairmont City Council for decades. Some of the mayors presiding over the table included John Gorman, E. J. “Tech” Edwards, Julius Simon, Frank E. Wade, Harold E. Wade, W. L. Nicholas, K. M. Brown, John Brandenhoff, and Dr. W. L. Webb. Those names, in and of themselves, are significantly interwoven into the fabric of our local history.

In addition, a number of justices of the peace used the table during and shortly after World War I. Those presiding as justices of the peace at the table included J. A. Everett, E. A. Luedtke, Arthur M. Nelson, W. L. Nicholas, and others.

But the question remains, “Where did the table come from?” According to Swanson, it was in the possession of Harry Serle, former Fairmont Justice of the Peace, Fire Chief, and Mayor. But, how did it come into Serle’s possession?

In a later segment of “The Lake Breezes Whisper . . .” that appeared in the February 11, 1967, edition of *The Sentinel*, Swanson quotes Ralph Parker, a clerk in the Fairmont Post Office in the early 1900s regarding its origin. Parker stated, “A Chicagoan, an actor and politician of sorts, told Rudy Henry about the table.” “I met the man – his name was O’Hara – several times in the company of Henry. He is the one who told Henry about the table, and Henry told Serle, who ‘just couldn’t rest’ until he obtained possession of it. What Serle paid for the table, whether or not he saw it before it was shipped from Chicago, I can’t recall. But, this I do remember: O’Hara told Serle that the table had been used by the city council in Chicago for many years, until the council became too big for the table to accommodate all the members around it.” Rudy Henry was a Fairmont saloon owner in the early 1900s.

Swanson estimated in his 1967 article that the table was well over 100 years old, perhaps dating back to the Iroquois Theater fire or the time when Mrs. O’Leary’s cow kicked over the lantern causing the fire that all but destroyed Chicago. Additionally he stated it was handmade, is priceless, and that if displayed in a Chicago museum it would attract thousands of visitors.

Although Swanson's analysis can well be considered subjective in nature, whether it is completely accurate or not, it certainly adds to the mystique surrounding the history of the table. Nonetheless, Swanson's accounts regarding the table reflect the most authentic documentation available.

The table was acquired by the Martin County Historical Society from the City of Fairmont in 1996 after being used in the office of the city clerk. It now serves as a meeting table for the Martin County Historical Society Board of Directors, individuals conducting research, and for any other groups needing a table of that size for a meeting in the museum.

For more information on this topic, to become a member, or to pick up some great holiday gifts, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



City Clerk LeRoy Schultz

1 Feb
1967

SERLE'S MASSIVE WHITE OAK TABLE, IT'S ORIGIN SHROUDED IN MYSTERY, IS STILL IN USE

--Sentinel Photo by Bob Schroeder





'Missing Table' Used Daily by City Clerk

1 Feb 1967

By CLAUDE N. SWANSON
Sentinel Contributing Editor

The late Harry M. Serle's massive white oak table hasn't been destroyed nor is it lost.

It reposes in the Fairmont city hall, in the vault of the city clerk, where it is in daily use.

Although it was donated to the city during Mayor W. L. Nicholas' tenure as mayor, origin of the table is clouded in mystery, obscured by the mist of years.

Ornately carved around the "border" (there must be some other name for it), just under the top, the table measures 12 feet in length and 42 inches in width. For many years — decades, in fact — it served as a table for a dozen or more Fairmont city councils. Over it, presiding as mayor, was the late John Gorman, father of Mrs. W. F. Kasper, Mrs. J. M. Wolf, Millicent, Theodore, Mark and Leo Gorman.

Then, as mayor, there was E. J. "Teck" Edwards and Julius Simon who used to meet at the corner of First Street and N. North Avenue and ask each other: "Are you going to take it this year, or do you want me to." They referred to the office of mayor of Fairmont. And it was a standing joke for years, that the two men held the mayoralty in the palms of their hands.

Following Edwards and Simon, we had Frank E. Wade, then his son, Harold E. Wade and W. L. Nicholas, followed by K. M. Brown, John Brandenhoff and Dr. W. L. Webb.

The table also was used by many of Fairmont's justices of the peace, until shortly after World War I, when they moved to the second floor of the American Legion (now Youth Center) building.

Presiding as justices of the peace at the table were J. A. Everett, E. A. Luedtke, Arthur M. Nelson, W. L. Nicholas, to mention a few.

From whence the table came is shrouded in mystery. Mrs. Frank Zalesky, daughter of Mr. Serle — who served Fairmont as justice of the peace, chief of the Fairmont Fire Department for 50 years and mayor, said she doesn't know.

"I was a young girl then," she said. "All I can recall is the mention of Rudy Henry. (Pioneer Fairmont saloon keeper, who came from Chicago and operated Fairmont's finest saloon until the town was voted dry in 1915.) "Whether he bought it from Mr. Henry, or whether Mr. Henry referred him to the people who owned it, I just don't know."

Mrs. Zalesky said her father stored the table in the basement of their home

at 231 Lake Avenue. "I recall Mr. Nicholas telling my father the city would have a plaque made, showing that he had donated it to the city, but I guess Mr. Nicholas died before he could carry out his promise."

Mr. Serle came to Fairmont in 1877 with other English colonists. "He and mother lived in India, where his father was some sort of high English official," said Mrs. Serle.

"But, when the children came, they had to get out of India because there was no place for them to be educated or cared for as they should be," she said.

"He and Mother returned to England, and when a group of 'remittance men' organized to come to Fairmont to raise beans, Dad and Mother joined them. I was born here." ("Remittance men" were, for the most part, scions of wealthy English families, many of whom were too precocious and wild — not to mention useless — to fit into life in England. Their parents put them on "remittance" — we call it "allowance" — and sent them off to America where, they hoped, the rigors of pioneer life would transform them into men of character.)

Any visions anyone may have had that the massive table served as a "festive board" for the elite of the colonists in Fairmont were dispelled by Mrs. Zalesky.

"It was too big, too unwieldy to get into our combined living and dining room," she said. "So, it was stored in the basement until my father gave it to the city."

That the table was auspicious, perhaps even famous ancestry, there can be little doubt. It is of solid construction, and today is as sound as it was when it arrived here. It no doubt served as a banquet table — perhaps in some Chicago mansion — where roast turkey on one end, roast goose on the other and a young, suckling pig with apple in its mouth, served as the "centerpiece." All this atop the finest linen and under a pair or trio of massive chandeliers with gleaming crystal pendants.

The table, no doubt, has a story to tell — if it could but talk.