

VINCENT P. HAUSER

L E A R N I N G



courtesy Texas Historical Commission

Hill County Courthouse, Hillsboro, Wesley Clark Dodson, architect, 1890.

H I L L S B O R O

On New Year's Day 1993, the Hill County Courthouse in Hillsboro, Texas, was destroyed by a fire that began in the third-floor ceiling, probably in some electrical wiring. The blaze quickly consumed the structure supporting the clock tower, which collapsed into the lower floors; by morning all that remained of the building was the limestone exterior walls. A structure that had stood since 1890 was gone in 12 hours. That this courthouse is being rebuilt at a cost of nearly \$10 million prompts a serious look at the response of the Hillsboro community and others to this event.

Remodeling Woes

The fire in Hillsboro, a community of 25,000 people 35 miles south of Dallas, could have happened anywhere. A century of deferred maintenance, changing programmatic demands, and shifting demographics has exacted a heavy toll on old Texas public buildings. The preservation community was alerted to such problems in 1983, when a dramatic fire broke out in the Texas State Capitol Building in Austin. Fortunately the fire was contained, but it exposed the vulnerability of the heavily modified and unsprinklered building. Some of the Capitol's grand spaces had been filled with a warren of offices, complicating already questionable emergency exit schemes. Ceilings had been dropped to conceal water-damaged plaster caused by leaky roofs and to accommodate new air-conditioning equipment. In other areas, literally layers of dropped ceilings had been filled with wiring, and vertical shafts had been crammed with ductwork, wiring, and piping, much of it abandoned during successive remodelings. The Texas State Capitol, like the aging courthouses throughout the state, had been transformed into something resembling a Dagwood sandwich left in the refrigerator a bit too long.

Until the 1980s, the dangers lurking beneath "modernization" simply had not been noticed, and since then dwindling budgets have strained the creativity of even the most resourceful county judges, commissioners, and maintenance staffs. The expensive restoration of the Capitol, completed in 1995, indicated all too clearly the scale of resources needed to address similar problems around the state. In late 1991, a new opportunity presented itself in the form of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, known by the acronym ISTEA (pronounced "ice tea").

Setting the regulatory language aside, the act was intended to support a broad range of initiatives originating in the community and to broaden the definition of transportation beyond highways — a hopeful and significant prospect. During the course of Texas's ISTEA projects, the Texas Highway Department's name was changed to the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), symbolizing cultural changes within the agency itself. Community initiatives replaced TxDOT mandates, a priority

unheard of a decade before.

The ISTEA legislation was seen as a potential windfall by preservation groups, including the Texas Historical Commission (THC). While administrative changes after the 1992 elections and slow development of regulations delayed implementation for nearly two years, departments of transportation in Texas and throughout the country have since been working through this shift in focus to community-based initiatives. From a financial and cash-flow perspective, ISTEA contains a few twists as well. Just as the initiatives are community based, so is the fundraising obligation. ISTEA provides no grant funds in the traditional sense, only reimbursements for funds already spent. Communities must raise the cash first, then request commitment of ISTEA funds for reimbursement after a project is completed. Only 80 percent of expenditures are reimbursable.



Hill County Courthouse, ca. 1972.

A Tradition of Preservation

There is a great deal of charm in the notion that the Hillsboro community banded together in a fit of goodwill just to rebuild the burned courthouse. However, real commitment to preservation in Hillsboro began in 1981, when the town received funding from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to participate in the Texas Main Street Program. Like all community-initiated efforts, this one was fraught with politics, but it eventually succeeded because of the determination and skill of tenacious volunteers. Hillsboro's Main Street Project allowed for the gradual cleaning, painting, and restoration of historic buildings surrounding the courthouse square. Shoppers have discovered the charm of old Hillsboro, and, even though some people feared "that giant sucking sound" of jobs leaving the community, downtown redevelopment complemented the growth of the community as a whole. In the meantime, a preservation ethic took root in Hill County. Without this decade-long previous interest

in their built history, Hillsboro citizens' desire to rebuild the courthouse might never have been realized.

After the fire, while the smoldering remains were still being hosed down, fundraising efforts to restore the courthouse got under way. Donations and commitments of support came in a continuous stream. Singer Willie Nelson, Hill County's most famous native son, headlined a benefit concert within months of the fire. The THC helped fund investigations, coordinated by the Dallas architectural firm ArchiTexas, to determine the structural integrity of the masonry shell. After the surveys and studies were completed and reconstruction of the courthouse was deemed feasible, fundraising efforts began in earnest. In the first funding year of ISTEA, 1993, Hillsboro received a commitment of almost \$7 million in ISTEA monies, in addition to insurance proceeds, state grants, and the returns from local fundraising efforts. With construction cost expected to exceed \$10 million, the Hill County Courthouse is being rebuilt. *(continued)*

1. Lampasas County Courthouse, W. C. Dodson, architect, 1893; 2. Bandera County Courthouse, B. F. Trester, architect, 1890; 3. Presidio County Courthouse, Marfa, Alfred Giles, architect, 1886; 4. Wise County Courthouse, J. Riely Gordon, architect, 1896; 5. Roof detail, Hill County Courthouse; 6. Coryell County Courthouse, Gatesville, W.C. Dodson, architect, 1897; 7., 8., and 9. Hill County Courthouse after 1993 fire.



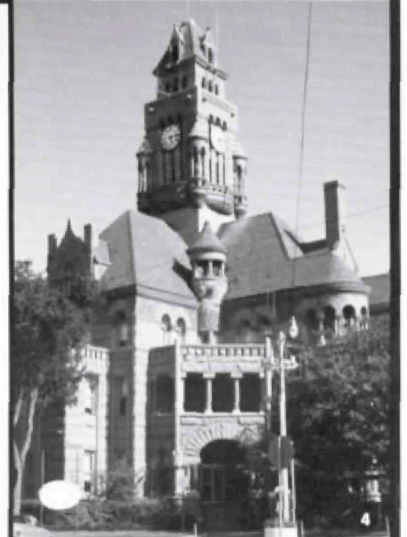
ISTEA in Texas

Fourteen other courthouse restoration projects are taking place in Texas, accounting for nearly \$7 million in ISTEAs funds. In addition, ISTEAs is funding a THC effort to document historic courthouses called the Texas Courthouse Alliance program. In part as a result of the Hill County fire, there is a sense of urgency about this documentation project. Records produced will be similar to those of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), the federal program that has been effectively abandoned due to lack of funding.

County agencies and state universities are lending support where they can. Project director Teresa O'Connell and her staff are developing a CAD-based set of documents for several courthouses to serve as a standard, and a Web site database is expected to be up and running in spring 1997. Even though the last round of ISTEAs applications was awarded on August 28, 1996, unused funds may be available next year. In addition, the last session of the Texas Legislature endowed the Preservation Grant Trust Fund with \$2.5 million dollars; the 1997 interest than can be distributed will be more than \$200,000. These funds, while not available to the ISTEAs program, will be appropriated to designated private and public buildings in Texas and will be administered by the Texas Historical Commission.

The Hill County Courthouse restoration is one of the grandest and most visible of Texas's ISTEAs projects, but an impressive range of smaller efforts includes rebuilding brick streets in Jefferson; restoring the T&P Warehouse in Abilene; building new hike-and-bike trails across the state; rehabilitating the Port Isabel Lighthouse; establishing the San Antonio Missions Trail; and restoring the historic suspension bridge across the Rio Grande at Roma. In August 1996, projects totaling almost \$11 million were approved for Houston, including the second-phase restoration of the San Jacinto Monument (Alfred C. Finn, architect, 1935-38), construction of several hike-and-bike trails, and restoration of Union Station (Warren & Wetmore, architects, 1911).

These are important and worthwhile projects, but what will happen when the money is gone next year? If local initiatives continue, the best intentions of the ISTEAs legislation will have taken hold. The condition of public architecture reflects both its status in our public consciousness and our financial ability to provide proper maintenance. Like a family making budget decisions, communities will have some hard choices to make. But the choices are interesting ones, and they have been placed in local hands, giving us all an opportunity to ponder what in our physical environment we really value. ■



Community-Based Initiatives

Signed by President George Bush in December 1991, ISTEAs provided more than \$15 billion for transportation-related projects through 1997, including \$3 billion for enhancement of intermodal transportation activities. Texas was allocated more than \$120 million. The list of approved enhancements included:

- facilities for bicycles and pedestrians
- acquisition of scenic easements and scenic or historic sites
- scenic or historic highway programs
- landscaping and other scenic beautification
- historic preservation
- rehabilitation of historic transportation facilities
- preservation of abandoned railway corridors
- control and removal of outdoor advertising
- archaeological planning and research
- mitigation of water pollution due to highway runoff.

