

**Case # HDP-2013-0528**  
**1501 Richcreek Road**  
**McKown House**

**Back-up material submitted for the October 28, 2013 meeting  
of the Historic Landmark Commission.**

**SAVE MCKOWN HOUSE COMMITTEE**

# **MCKOWN HOUSE**

**(HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURAL DISCRIPTION)**

# **McKown House History**

## **1501 Richcreek Road**

Robert Jackson (R. J.) McKown built his one-story, brick veneered home at 1501 Richcreek himself. Although he had started as a builder of residential homes and commercial buildings, this is the only house he built in Austin. Construction began in the fall of 1951. At that time, the home was in the county and not in the city of Austin. R. J. and his second wife Thelma had previously lived at 4910 Shoal Creek Blvd. R. J. lived in this home until his death in 1957. His wife Thelma continued to live in the house until her passing in 1968 at which time their son Robert Dale McKown, who was a student at the University of Texas, continued to reside there until he sold it in the mid-1970's (probably about 1974) to Hollie Don and Bertha (Cookie) James.

Don owned a truck supply business located on Kramer Lane called Donco Truck and Automotive which he founded in 1971. Don died in 2009. In 2004, they sold the house and the new owner kept the property until 2012 when it was foreclosed on by the bank. The house and land were put up for bid earlier this year. Reportedly there were over 20 bids placed, several by individuals who wished to renovate and restore the house. However, the bank chose to accept a cash offer from a California developer which closed in 4 days even though it was not the highest offer. At this time, it is our understanding that the new owner, Ms. Smyth of Santa Barbara, California, plans to build three duplexes on the land if she gets the permit for demolition of the McKown House. According to witnesses who have been in the home recently and based on photos posted by the realtor, the house appears to be in good condition.

### **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION**

The McKown House is a one-story, irregular plan, hipped roof, brick veneered frame house with a central, partial width front gabled independent porch on square, brick piers. The central, front door has a paneled surround. There are ornamental gables on the left (east) side of the house at each corner. The main house has a combination of metal framed combination picture and casement windows and 1:1 wood frame windows in paired and triple configurations. The builder used 2x6s in most of the main house. The original hardwood flooring is of Texas pecan. There are custom solid core pocket doors with glass inlay in the dining/living room. The home also includes an original fireplace, mid-century glass transoms, a central whole house fan, and an enclosed sun porch on the east side. The original one-story rectangular side gabled attached garage on the rear and right (west) of the main house has been converted to living space. A detached one-story, rectangular front gabled garage faces west.

**R. J. MCKOWN & FAMILY  
(HISTORY)**

## **R. J. McKown and Family**

Robert Jackson (R. J.) McKown was an early roadway pioneer who started out as a house carpenter in Frisco, Texas and later in Stephenville with his three sons, Obert B. (O. B.), Austin S., and Arthur L. (Art), who were part of the family business: R. J. McKown & Sons Construction Company, one of the most prolific construction firms in Texas. The May 1954 *Texas Parade Magazine* said that the McKown's company "figures prominently in the long range highway transportation program which is the lifeblood of Texas economy". According to his granddaughter, Marilynn Goode, like many early builders and contractors, he lived a rather nomadic life in Texas for he and his family had to go where the work took them, even living in tents on the job sites at times. But he built his final home in the Crestview neighborhood in Austin.

R. J. McKown, son of John Wilson (1850-1933) and Sara Rebecca Lee McKown (1849-1913), was born in Georgia in 1882. When he was two months old his family, which was part of a 15-wagon train, left Cobb County, Georgia with R. J. and their three other children and crossed both the Mississippi and Red Rivers by ferry. Both his family and his first wife's, Susie Rebecca Collins McKown (born August 30, 1888), settled in Texas in an area known as Old and New Boston near the border with Arkansas.

At the age of 18, R. J. began building the levee and bridges along the Red River outside of Texarkana. R. J. made one of his earlier trips to Austin in 1909 when he was bitten by a dog with rabies. The only treatment center was in Austin at the Pasteur Institute at the State Hospital on Guadalupe and 38th Streets. He received daily shots, called "punches", for twenty-one days. After his treatment he would catch the trolley car and go downtown where a new bridge was being built over the Colorado River at Congress Avenue and 1st Street. Because of his work on the levee, this project was of great interest to him and he would write letters to his wife, Susie, about it. It was while he was away getting his shots that his third son Arthur was born.

Then the "panic" of 1914 hit. Even though R. J. had several contracts for houses and buildings, no one could afford to pay, so he moved his family to Dallas. He was finally forced to take the family to Frisco, Texas to pick cotton because, as his son Art put it, "My mother told my father we only had a half loaf of bread to eat." The following year he leased several acres of

land and planted cotton. With World War I, cotton became a major cash crop and he, along with many landowners, did very well.

While in Frisco, he started building homes again. After the town, whose buildings were mostly of wood, was destroyed by a fire about 1917, R. J. rebuilt most of the commercial buildings in the early 1920's, using brick this time. He also built several schools in Collin and adjoining counties. Several years ago when his granddaughter visited some of the buildings he had built in Frisco, they were still in very good condition. 1924 found R. J. in Strawn, Texas building streets for the Bankhead Highway out of the famous bricks from Thurber Brick Company.

In the late 1920's he moved to Stephenville, Texas. Susie died when they were living in Stephenville in 1930. She was buried there until her sons had her remains moved to Cook Walden Forest Oaks Memorial on William Cannon in 1989 where they and their wives were later laid to rest.

In the late 1930's, R. J. married Thelma Jo Roberts, who was born in Texas in 1907. She attended Tarleton State College and had been a schoolteacher. Marilyn thinks they met at a dance hall. R. J. loved to dance and even owned a dance hall himself for a while in Llano called "The Rambling Rose" on Highway 29.

Around 1935 they were living in Lubbock and later moved to a ranch in Llano. It was while he lived there that he built an airstrip that was used by the Air Force to train pilots in touch and go landings. That airstrip is still in use as the Llano Municipal Airport.

As dirt roads and muddy streams became a problem with automobile travel becoming more common, R. J. began to work more in road, bridge, and overpass construction. At first the roads were of brick, then later of crushed limestone with an overlay of asphalt or concrete. Initially the work was done with mules, but they were later replaced with diesel engines. Over the years, R. J. would often invent new machinery to help make the work easier. McKown and Sons was one of the first contractors to transform East Avenue to Interstate Highway 35 through Austin both north and south of downtown.

Part of the land where the McKown's Onion Creek Quarry was located near Burleson Road and Highway 183 was purchased from Mr. Carl Sundburg

and is still owned by the McKown family. This location supplied materials for the construction of the Bergstrom Airfield during World War II and roadways in Austin from the 1940's and 50's. There is even a strata of rock named for the McKowns known as the "McKown Formation" in the Onion Creek area at Pilot Knob near McKinney Falls State Park. It is even shown on one of the displays at the park. According to L. E. Garner's *An Introduction to the Geology of State Parks Near Austin, Texas* (1993), "the McKown limestone is an excellent aggregate for road-base material because it crushes easily but hardens after the grade is constructed". McKown & Sons also had a limestone crushing plant in the 1950's where Quarry Lake is located off Highway 183 and Braker Lane that was used for building many of the roads in and around Austin at the time.

According to his obituary, R. J. lived in Austin for the last 20 years of his life, which would put him in Austin around 1937 when he and his sons decided to make Austin their permanent headquarters. They continued to build many of the major roads, as well as smaller roads in neighborhoods like Crestview and Brentwood, over the next several years. In 1948, while building the 7th Street overpass for I-35, McKown and Sons started Austin Sand and Gravel Company (which later became Capitol Aggregates) on Bolm Road with asphalt and ready mix plants on-site to support their business, and also supplied sand and gravel to many of the new industries using concrete and steel to build precast products for bridges and overpasses.

Before moving into their new home at 1501 Richcreek Road in 1952, R. J. and Thelma had lived at 1812 Kenwood Avenue and later at 4910 Shoal Creek Blvd. It was probably at this time that R. J. had an office located at 49th and Burnet Road where the parking lot for Top Drawer is today.

In 1951, R. J. built his home in the neighborhood known as Crestview. He had always liked large spaces and built the house with vast, sizable rooms even though the house was only for himself, Thelma, and Robert Dale McKown, a young boy from Llano whom they had recently adopted when he was about 3 years old. According to his granddaughter, "Everything he built was always built to last for many years. He was so particular that every board had to be perfect and straight, and I know he only brought the very best products into this house since he took great pride in making everything the best possible."

For years people have admired the majestic, towering elm trees that border the property. Since this type of tree is rarely found in Austin except along waterways, it is possible that the McKowns "landscaped" their yard the way most Crestviewites did in the 1950's. They would go to a local tributary like Shoal Creek, Onion Creek or the Colorado River; decide what type of tree they liked; find an ideal specimen; dig it up; and haul it back home to plant.

Once in Crestview, R. J. and Thelma became members of the Crestview Baptist Church. In fact, R. J. donated all the concrete and labor to build the foundation about 1953. In addition, R. J. was a member of the Austin chapter of the Associated General Contractors, and in 1954 Thelma became a member of the Violet Crown Garden Club, along with their neighbor to the east, Maude Yates, the wife of Ray Yates, one of the founders of Crestview. Thelma was a part of the Brentwood Study Group and later the Hortensia (another name for hydrangea) Study Group which the fourth Tuesday morning of each month, usually at the Crestview Methodist Church and later the First Cumberland Church both on Woodrow Avenue. According to the Club records, she was one of the hostesses of the annual Christmas Party one year and of the Get Acquainted Covered Dish Luncheon another.

R. J. passed away on March 2, 1957 from heart problems. One of the honorary pallbearers was their neighbor, Ray Yates. Thelma continued to live in the home her husband had built for her and their son Dale and passed away there on April 6, 1968 of heart problems. Both R. J. and Thelma are buried at Austin Memorial Park on Hancock Drive. After Thelma died, Ethel and Alice Roberts, her two sisters who had also been schoolteachers, moved into the house and lived for a while with Dale. Dale sold the home in the mid-1970s.

R. J. was the patriarch of five generations of family members who have contributed to the growth of Austin. His sons, grandchildren (many of whom started out as "water boys" for R. J.), great-grandchildren and their children have almost all worked in some capacity to build the major roads, bridges and overpasses in Austin and the surrounding area over the course of the last several decades.

\*We are indebted to Marilyn McKown Goode, R. J.'s granddaughter and Arthur's daughter, upon whose extensive family research most of this information is based.



**R. J. MCKOWN**  
**(ACCOMPLISHMENTS)**

# **R. J. McKown**

## **Accomplishments**

Below is a chronological list of some of the projects R. J. McKown and the company he founded, McKown and Sons, were involved in. This information was compiled from newspaper clippings, contracts, council meeting minutes, photographs, and oral family histories. We thank R. J.'s granddaughter, Marilyn McKown Goode, for helping to compile this list by sharing her family records.

- 1900 Texarkana, Texas - Levees and bridges on Red River
- 1920s Frisco, Texas, Collin County and adjacent counties - Homes and Commercial buildings schools
- 1923 Cleburne, Texas - South Main Street Bridge on Buffalo Creek
- 1924 Strawn, Texas - Built streets with brick from Thurber Brick Co. (part of the Bankhead Highway)
- 1926 Stephenville, Texas - Bridge over Bosque River east of town
- 1929 Brady, Texas - Bridge over Brady Creek
- 192? Austin to Manor Highway
- 1934 Rockdale, Texas - Railroad Underpass
- 1935 Highway 81 south of Belton and the Lampasas River Bridge
- 1937 Hillsboro, Texas - Highway east of town
- 1937 Mullin, Texas - New highway
- 1938 Highway from Stephenville to Glen Rose
- 193? Llano, Texas - Air Force airstrip for training pilots (Now Llano Municipal Airport)
- 1939 Highway 16 south of Llano
- 1940 Bergstrom Air Force Base government contract for runways
- 1940 San Angelo, Texas - Bridge over Colorado River
- 1941 Bastrop, Texas - Elgin Highway east of town
- 1942 Gainesville, Texas - Camp Howze government contract

- 1945 Caldwell County - 19.146 miles of Highway FM86 and Highway FM20
- 1946 Llano, Texas - Highway 29, Pecan Creek Bridge
- 1947 Caldwell County - Plum Creek Bridge east of Lockhart
- 1948 Bastrop County - Elm Creek Bridge Highway 71 east of Bergstrom Air Force Base
- 1948 Established Austin Sand and Gravel (in business until sold in 1958 - now Capitol Aggregates) on Bolm Road
- 1949 Austin, Texas - 7th Street Overpass
- 1950 Austin, Texas - Established McKown and Sons Asphalt plant and later Plant #2 across the Colorado River (in business until sold in 1958)
- 1951 Austin, Texas - Began construction of home at 1501 Richcreek Road
- 1952 Highway 71 from Marble Falls to Llano
- 1952 Austin, Texas - Highway 81 from East 17th Street to Airport Blvd. (East Avenue conversion - later to become IH-35)
- 1953 Williamson County - Highway 183 from Leander to Jollyville
- 1953 Austin, Texas - Highway 81 (IH-35) from Airport to Highway 290
- 1953 Austin, Texas - Donated concrete and labor for foundation of Crestview Baptist Church
- 1954 Austin, Texas - Extension of Austin Municipal Airport (Mueller) runways 1,100 feet
- 1955 Austin, Texas - Resurfacing of East 8th Street from Congress to Brazos and West 6th from Congress to Colorado; 32 blocks of "Voluntary Paving" (originally owners had to pay to have the street in front of their home paved) including Justin Lane; Resurfacing of Congress Avenue; IH-35 from southern City Limits to south of St. Elmo Road
- 1956 Austin, Texas - Built first private bridge across the Colorado to connect both asphalt plants
- 1956 Austin, Texas - contract for paved areas of Northwest Park
- 1956 Elgin, Texas - 290 east of town for 12 miles