

COURTHOUSES – of – CALIFORNIA

Only the title is boring. This is a beautiful, informative and lavishly illustrated picture book.

Reviewed by THOMAS R. REYNOLDS

JUST AS Chief Justice Ronald M. George is starting to beat the drums for funding to repair California's crumbling courthouses comes persuasive supporting evidence. San Francisco lawyer Ray McDevitt and the California Historical Society have published a new book, *Courthouses of California: An Illustrated History*. It is a shockingly interesting and beautifully designed book of pictures and stories about every courthouse in California – and most of their predecessors.

The Chief says \$5 billion is needed to pay for overdue repairs on the state's 451 courthouses,

many ignored by the counties since the state's still unrealized promise to take over funding. He may push for bond measures to finance the fixes.

McDevitt says – and shows – that there are some real treasures out there worth repairing and revering.

Using historical photographs and lots of them, McDevitt shows us that the first generation of court-



The 1904 Riverside County Courthouse, a Beaux Arts masterpiece modeled after the Grand Palais in Paris, was restored in the 1990s.

houses consisted mostly of simple main street buildings. Often they were existing buildings adapted for court use. Sometimes they featured one-stop shopping, with a courtroom on the second floor and a jail on the ground floor, or next door. Almost all of this first generation of courthouses are long gone.

Then, following the prosperity and growth that flowed from the Gold Rush, a second generation of courthouses was built, mostly Temples of Justice that echoed the great stylistic traditions of the past. Many were significant architectural commissions that became sour-

ces of community pride. Some were elaborate confections, with towers and sculptures and columned archways. Many were lost to “progress,” but there are, happily, a fairly large number of surviving examples. Among the most notable are the Riverside County Courthouse, a magnificently restored Beaux Arts fantasy inspired by the Grand Palais in Paris, and the old Orange County Courthouse, a Richardsonian Romanesque red sandstone pile

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The 1881 Mono County Courthouse is one of the finest 19th century court buildings still standing – and still in use.

now housing a museum, and minus its distinctive tower.

“The importance of the 19th century courthouse,” said a historian of the era, “was that it served as a political institution for making citizens.”

The modern era brought a third generation of courthouses, mostly undistinguished buildings not much different from other 20th century office boxes. And yet some of the most architecturally significant and best-functioning courthouses have come in the last 50 years. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Marin County Civic Center, for example, was completed in 1969 and includes the only courthouse – indeed the only government buildings of any kind – designed by America’s greatest 20th century architect.

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McDevitt enlivens the text with delicious tidbits. One comes from up north in Yreka, in Siskiyou County, in 1876. In April, an elk was brought to the town butcher. The townsfolk fell in love, quickly took up a collection and purchased the elk, which they put to pasture on the courthouse square. When the elk wandered away in early July, helpful locals brought it back. But the town pet didn’t

get a second chance. On July 4, 1876, it was barbecued at the county’s centennial picnic.

And this: “For over a century, the Tehama County Courthouse in Red Bluff was ‘owned’ by the county judge. This peculiar state of affairs arose from the chaotic state of land titles that prevailed in Red Bluff in its early days. All the maps were inaccurate, leading to claims and counterclaims to the town’s lots. The solution was to start over, by placing the title to all property in the town in the name of the most trustworthy person available – the county judge.”

A *Los Angeles Times* article in 1969 quoted then Tehama County Superior Court Judge Curtis Wetter: “This may be the only county in the country where the judge not only presides in the courthouse but owns the damn thing as well.”

And this: One of the Fresno County courthouses and jail were built by Charles Converse, who was also the first occupant of his jail after he was arrested for fatally shooting a man during a political rally shortly after the courthouse was completed.

And even a bit of poetry: After Black Bart robbed a stagecoach near the Russian River in Sonoma County in 1877, he left behind this note:

*I've labored long for bread
For honor and for riches.
But on my corns too long you've tread
You fine haired sons of bitches.*

After his four-year affair with the courthouses of California, ask McDevitt which are his favorites and he points to the four on the dust jacket of the book: Riverside, Mariposa, Santa Barbara and Marin. The Mono County Courthouse gets prominent play inside.

But one stands above all the others. McDevitt says the 1929 Spanish Colonial Revival Santa Barbara County Courthouse is an extraordinary building, architecturally and otherwise. People who work there love it, many others come to visit, and the entire community enjoys the courthouse and its surrounding gardens as a site of festivals and picnics.

McDevitt also finds some lessons from the past. "We're going to need to build new courthouses and expand others," he says. "We ought to set a high standard for these new buildings."

The conception of this book began in late 1997 as something of a midlife crisis for Ray McDevitt, who has practiced law for 25 years with Hanson Bridgett Marcus Vlahos & Rudy in San Francisco. He found himself working harder and harder, and making more money, yet still yearning for something more. He explored a couple of book ideas, and even took a week off to drive around and look at courthouses. He assumed there would already be a book on California's historic courthouses, as in a number of other states. But there wasn't. So he set about creating one.

"I wanted to do something that would be different from the practice of law," he says. "Already I was interested in photography and architecture and history. This book project seemed like something that would pull together those interests." His firm encouraged him, letting him go on a reduced-time schedule, with his draw adjusted accordingly.

Others he met along the way also responded positively. "Even at Kinko's, I got a lot of individual encouragement," he says. The universal response was: "That sounds great!"

But McDevitt wanted still something more.

"I really hoped to become a different person as a result of this experience," he says. "I really hoped that I would learn some new things. And I did."

"I'm just as good a lawyer, but I'm not as abrupt with



SANTA BARBARA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The 1929 Santa Barbara County Courthouse is a treasure trove of archways, towers and loggias.

people," he says. "I'm not forever barking out instructions anymore. I'm more considerate. I think it came from dealing with a lot of people who wanted to help. I was able to say, 'Please do this' and 'Thank you very much.' There was no quid pro quo nor any implicit threat."

McDevitt also had something of a family epiphany. His older daughter, Jessica, a Ph.D. candidate in history who had decided to leave graduate school, became his chief assistant on the book.

"There was some anxiety about working together," McDevitt says, "but it turned out to be a wonderful experience. Very few parents get to work with an adult child."

In his acknowledgements at the end of the book, McDevitt writes: "The single most important contribution to this book was that of my daughter... The book is as much her accomplishment as mine."

Thomas Reynolds, a lawyer and former editor and publisher of California Lawyer and the San Francisco Daily Journal, owns an art gallery in San Francisco.