

Texas Courthouse Circuit A Spring Break Trip

This was published as an article in AAFA ACTION #44, Spring 1999, page 66.

By Lynn D. Shelley AAFA #0484

Having less than a full week of vacation and no prior plans, my husband was persuaded that we should revisit Fort Worth, TX, where we had lived from 1976 to 1981. While in this area, I could visit courthouses and collect "Alford" marriage data. Combining research with other pursuits seems to be my way of life since joining AAFA.

We spent only four days on the road to and from our home in Springfield, MO, but in that time we visited five courthouses. Each was different and unique in several ways, both in outside appearance and in the way records were kept and indexed. Actual courthouse records are a goldmine of information for the genealogist, but courthouse employees are not always especially helpful or happy to see researchers visit their facility. Most marriage records are considered public information so no privacy is involved. This is not always the case with birth and death information.

There are many kinds of courthouse records available and they differ from one county to another and from one state to another. One also has to be aware of the history of the county and its formation--were there fires or other disasters that destroyed records during certain time periods, where would one find records for persons living in that same area before the county was formed, etc. ? One also has to be aware of what different kinds of records are available and what they can add to the complete story of our ancestors. Not all of these records are indexed, but taking the time to look through records produced during a timeframe when we know our ancestor was present in that county can prove to be very beneficial.

Tarrant County

The first courthouse we visited was that in Fort Worth--the Tarrant County Courthouse, a beautiful Renaissance-Revival building constructed in 1895. I knew that there had been a fire in 1876 and marriage and probate records prior to that time did not exist. This was the most wealthy county we visited and it was obvious in the number of computers, number of personnel and the upkeep of the building and surrounding area. This was also the only one with an armed guard and an entrance arrangement like that at an airport where your person as well as all items being carried in are examined closely. There also was no listing of where marriage records could be found but the guard said they were down in the basement. Usually they are found in the office of the county clerk, although that may not always be the case. When I went in the Deed Office to ask where marriage records were located, I found that they were there. There was a marriage index on microfilm and I was given the film that I had requested (1876-1944 with names in alphabetical order) and was directed to a microfilm reader at which I proceeded to copy all the ALFORD/ALVORD and HALFORD/HALLFORD names from the index. Male and female indexes were on the same pages with males on the left and females on the right (maiden names of

females, of course). It was soon evident that only the year of the license/marriage was given and one needed to get the actual month and day from the marriage book itself (volume and page being given in the index). The problem was that all of these early marriage books were "at the warehouse," and not available to look up the records. I didn't want to request too many so filled out forms for about 10 and left a self-addressed envelope for the records to be sent to me. All of this was free which was a surprise since the cost of records available there at the courthouse was \$1 per page. I received my requested records back in Springfield three days after making the request. This was one of the more successful visits in that it yielded a great number of marriages even though I was not able to get the exact marriage dates for all of them.

[Editor's note: If you're an AAFA member from the Fort Worth area would like to help us get the records for the remaining marriages that Lynn copied, we'd appreciate it--please contact Lynn.]

While in Fort Worth and since it was only a couple of blocks away, we also visited the Tarrant County Public Library for a couple of hours to check out published Texas marriage records that might be found there. Though published records are more limited and usually only the very early ones, books are usually well indexed or in alphabetical order in the first place and making photocopies is a lot faster than copying by hand which is what I did at the courthouses.

McLennan County

We drove to Waco, the McLennan County seat, that afternoon and the next day visited that courthouse, a beautiful structure supposedly inspired by St. Peter's in Rome and built in 1901. There was no guard and in fact there were three different buildings in which courthouse business was conducted and records were kept. We went first to the Records Building, where there was a clearly marked location for marriage records given at the building entrance. Marriage indexes were separate for the sexes so I had to look in four different indexes to find what was on one reel of microfilm in Tarrant County--alphabetical listings in the books was " A-G" and "H-L ", one of each for males and females. Although an actual date with month and day as well as year was given, this was the date of the marriage license and not the date of the actual marriage. Not having enough time to look up each one, I had to be satisfied with the date of the license. The volume and page number for each marriage was given and if one went to that volume and page, one would find the date of the license, the date of the marriage and the official performing the ceremony, as well as the date the marriage was recorded at the courthouse. Because of time constraints, only if there was a question as to the spelling of a name or another question, did I actually look up the marriage data. This was my most successful visit in that it yielded the most " Alford" marriages. That afternoon we visited the Texas Ranger Museum in Waco and I was surprised to see a gun that Burt Alvord had used in his outlaw days on display with those of other desperados.

[Editor's note: Here's another opportunity to help if you live in the Waco area! We'd like to get the actual dates of the marriages that Lynn didn't have time to get.]

Henderson County

We had planned to spend the night in Corsicana, TX, which is the county seat of Navarro County, but later we decided to drive on to Athens, the Henderson County seat. We had stayed in Athens 26 years ago on one of our trips between San Antonio (where we lived then) and north Louisiana. We stayed at the same motel. The next day was our most productive as far as courthouse visits went (three in one day). First we visited the Henderson County courthouse, a 1913 Classical Revival style structure with columns across the front. We had passed this building that takes up all of the town square each time we made this trip years ago. Marriage records here were kept similarly to those in McLennan County: indexes for male and female were separate and marriage books/volumes had the actual records. However, the date listed in this index was the actual marriage date, which eliminated the necessity of having to look up each one individually. There were two indexes for the years 1850-1950 and the more recent marriages were in a separate computer-produced index. It probably took only a half hour or less to copy all the "Alford" marriages. The space available for using the books was quite limited and when another couple who wanted to look at marriage records came in, we could hardly find enough space to open the volumes.

Navarro County

We then returned to Corsicana and Navarro County where I got my first experience with finding courthouse records "way down in the basement at the back of beyond." I had previously been told not to wear your good clothes (old books being dusty and moldy) and that sometimes you were just taken to a room with boxes or shelves of books and papers and told to have at it. There was a winding, narrow staircase that took you downstairs-the marriage records were way at the back. Although there was enough room, there was nowhere to sit. There was no marriage index as such. Most of the earlier marriage books had an index in the front with only the names and the page number and then you had to look up the actual page to get the date. Later volumes (after 1915 or so) did not even have an index. I had a very disturbing experience when another researcher came in, opened several of the volumes, took out pages and went upstairs to copy them. I suppose this is what many researchers and courthouse employees do to get a copy of the marriage record, but what if they don't put it back in the right place or what if they don't put it back at all?? There is no supervision or anyone to prevent one from taking the original page and I am sure if a page is missing, there is no way to find out the information it contained unless the volumes have been published. This was obviously the least well-off county we visited, and the records had the least amount of care. This was not at all obvious from the exterior of the building-an impressive 1905 brick and marble structure that dominated what used to be square in the center of town. Lack of funds was evident on the interior, but then it is very hard to keep old buildings in top shape when they are used constantly. Also Corsicana was founded as an oil boomtown and was the site of the first commercial oil well west of the Mississippi, but today the town's major claim to fame is that it is the home of the Collin Street Bakery, famous for its fruitcakes.

Ellis County

This was supposed to have been the last courthouse visit of the trip but due to limited space in Athens, my husband sat in the car while I was copying marriages. Since we would be going

through Ellis County (and Waxahachie) on our way home, he thought we should visit that courthouse since he saw a write-up that said Waxahachie was the place where many movies had been filmed because of its wonderful 19th-century ambience and that the 1895 red sandstone and granite courthouse was unique. He was especially interested in the story of the three stonemasons brought over from Europe to work on the building during its construction. Evidently one of them fell in love with the boardinghouse proprietor's daughter and her face is found repeatedly in the stonework friezes among the gargoyles. Unfortunately this was not very obvious to us, because upon arrival, we discovered that the courthouse was undergoing restoration and was completely encased in scaffolding. It turned out that the marriage records were across the street in a Records Building.

On the way home, we passed the Bowie County courthouse in New Boston, but could not stop because we were already going to be getting home after midnight and it was 4:45 and the courthouses usually close at 5 p.m. Oh, well, I'll hit that one on another trip. At least we got some good Tex-Mex, the bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush were blooming, and success can be measured in the number of additional marriages to add to the TX list--about 225 in all. Not bad for three days work!

If you live in or near a county seat, consider taking the time to go to the courthouse and look for "Alford" records for AAFA. A little time invested by one person can be very beneficial to many. The one requirement for a trip such as mine is a patient, understanding, and very loving husband who is willing to spend HIS vacation making his wife happy. (Jim insisted that I add this!)

--Courthouse details from *THE COURTHOUSES OF TEXAS, A Guide* by Mavis P. Kelsey, Sr., and Donald H. Dyal. College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1993.