

## Oklahoma Heritage Center prepares for May opening

By Mallery Nagle - 3/5/2007

Eighty years to the day after the Mid-Continent Life Insurance Building opened, it will reopen as the Edward L. Gaylord-Boone Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Center.

The grand opening for the Oklahoma City landmark, 1400 Classen Drive, is scheduled for May 10. And according to Shannon Nance, president of the Oklahoma Heritage Association, the building has been restored to its original grandeur.

Purchased from the American Fidelity Insurance Company in 2001 with a \$3 million gift from Edward L. Gaylord, the 42,000-square-foot structure has undergone a transformation nearly five years in the making.

Boone Pickens later matched the generous gift to the venture. When complete, the project will carry a more-than \$15 million price tag.

"Solomon Layton built this place to last," Nance said of the original architect. "When they cleaned the marble floors, they looked as good as new. It's magnificent."

Layton also designed the state Capitol and the Skirvin Plaza Hotel.

And although the building, constructed of Indiana limestone, bronze fixtures and mahogany wood work, sports 1920s splendor, it also features 21st Century technology as the new home of the Oklahoma Heritage Center.

The first floor will showcase "Oklahoma Through its People," a high-tech, interactive exhibit which will celebrate the contributions of about 40 Oklahomans in five categories or characteristics which those who hail from the Sooner State possess.

These characteristics include generosity, optimism, perseverance, individuality and pioneer spirit.

"We have found technology that will allow you to meet people who are no longer with us," Nance said. "This is an extremely powerful way to tell a story. I think it's easier to identify with history through someone."

Nance and her committee traveled to several interactive museums nationwide to get ideas for this exhibit. Exhibit designers Northern Lights of Boston, Mass., also designed the Spy Museum and the renovation to the National Archives, both in Washington, D.C.

"We felt a strong obligation to do this right," she said. "We took two years to highlight diversity in geography, field of work and gender. We want everyone, from every walk of life, who walks in here to be able to identify with someone."

Visitors to the center also will be able to leave their own stories. Nance said people may record antidotes about their hometown, a special person or a favorite childhood memory in Oklahoma.

The center's third floor will display portraits of Oklahoma Hall of Fame members.

"This is the most significant award an Oklahoman can receive from their state," Nance said. "We finally have the hallowed halls to show them."

"We have gone to great lengths to restore the building to its original glory."

Original glory, however, must co-exist with modern-day construction standards.

James Pickel of Smith & Pickel Construction, the construction company responsible for the renovations, said updating the building's infrastructure, its safety features and making it ADA-compliant were among the greatest challenges.

"Bringing the building up to current codes, in terms of money spent, was vast," he said of the 14-month construction phase, which is 90-95 percent complete.

Although nothing was really done to the exterior, Pickel said the interior was basically gutted. Some of the marble fixtures in the restrooms, mahogany woodwork and bronze hardware were salvaged and used where they could be. Paint colors distinguish original portions of the building from renovated portions, he said.

The gardens on the grounds also have been restored. The carriage house has been replaced with meeting and event facilities. Pickel noted "great lengths" were taken to preserve the large oak trees on the property.

Members will be invited to view the renovations on May 10. Doors will be opened to the general public on May 11 and 12.

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