

EL DORADO



THIS REGION'S recorded history began in the fall of 1541 when Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto passed through what is now Union County in search of gold. He and his troops spent the winter near the Ouachita River in the Indian village of Autiamue (thought to be populated by a Quapaw branch of the Dakota tribe). Three centuries later in December of 1843, a 160-acre tract in the newly formed Union County of the new state of Arkansas was named "El Dorado", literally translating from Spanish as "the golden one," and referring to the legendary city made of gold. According to historians, the three state-appointed local commissioners, Major John R. Hampton, Robert Black, and Green Newton, had accepted the land deed from homesteader Matthew Rainey, carved it into town lots, designated it as the county seat, and named it El Dorado after Hampton's suggestion that it meant "gilded" in Spanish. (Hampton later became a state representative, then a state senator, then president of the senate and on to acting governor).

One local myth attributes the town's name to the slang expression used by wagon trains going westward: "Where're you going? To your El Dorado?" -a reference to the legendary Spanish American city of untold riches, sought after 16th century explorers. The most colorful and least-repeated tale claims the name had to do with a strong drink, which could be obtained at

first settler Matthew Rainey's store or the El Dorado Bar. Whichever is true, the town of 3,000 lived up to its name when, in 1921, the discovery of oil - "black gold" - transformed the community into a teeming boomtown whose population swelled to 30,000 by 1925. Within the first two years, 56 wells were producing a staggering 50,000 barrels per day.

"...the town thronged with a seething mass of conglomerate humanity... diamonds and costly furs rubbed elbows with oil-soaked khaki."

Prior to the oil boom, city promoters described El Dorado as being void of enticing saloons, gambling dens, and dance halls, any of which would divert the minds of young ladies from their work or corrupt young boys. Recruiters touted El Dorado as a good town full of good people, good churches, good business advantages and a good school. In 1910, one resident observed that El Dorado was a young town beginning to accept such progressive changes as electricity, running water, and sidewalks; that there was an aristocratic vein running through its citizenry, favoring cultural and artistic pursuits.

The oil boom, however, inalterably changed the city. According to one account, the town

"thronged with a seething mass of conglomerate humanity...diamonds and costly furs rubbed elbows with oil-soaked khaki." Legitimate business folk were joined by an influx of gamblers, moonshiners, dope-sellers, ladies of the evening, thieves and murderers who transformed areas of the city into colorful and sometimes violent little enclaves known as Pistol Hill, Shotgun Valley, Chicken Farm, and the infamous Hamburger Row. Tales are still told of pistol-packin' White Hat Annie, of mules drowning in the city's muddy streets, and of rivers of oil streaming through the city's natural valleys-so convincing that nightflying waterfowl would mistake the glistening mass for a watery resting place.

Famed billionaire H. L. Hunt started his oil empire while living in El Dorado when he won an interest in an oil well in a poker game (see #11 Hamburger Row account). This was the start of Mr. Hunt's oil fortune. He and his family lived here until they moved to Tyler, Texas in 1932 and then on to Dallas in 1939.

In direct proportion to "undesirables," the number of El Dorado's faithful swelled, forcing virtually every major church to build a bigger, and usually more magnificent, house of worship.

As the initial frenzy of the boom slackened, permanent building began. Strained beyond

capacity, many downtown structures were razed and rebuilt because of their inadequacy to meet the oil boom's demands. A growing timber industry, poultry production and chemical plants joined oil as important additions to the city's economic base. However, the oil boom of the 1920s and the considerable wealth it brought to the area continue to distinguish the city in most Arkansans' minds. Much of the city's extant brick-and-mortar history dates from those hectic years. Its oil boom architecture is symbolic of the city's past, present, and future prosperity. Although influenced by the well-intentioned fads of interim eras, it has survived.

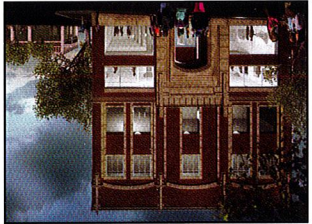
Enjoy your walking tour of downtown El Dorado and delight in the spirit of our city's heritage.

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15 MCWILLIAMS FURNITURE COMPANY BUILDING

215 S. Washington Avenue

Gothic Revival, built in 1928 by Peters and Cramer



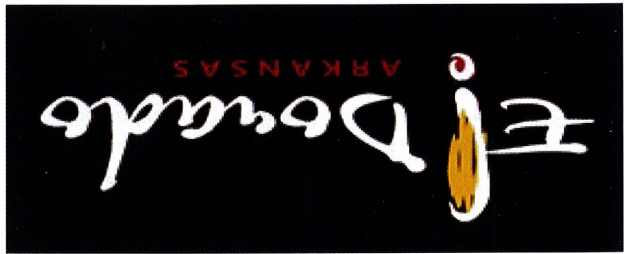
Revival structure continued in operation as the McWilliams Furniture Co. for 50 years, until 1978. It has much in common with contemporary Collegiate Gothic buildings in its combination of brick patterning and stone and concrete elements. Modern for its time with large store front and warehouse type windows, the Gothic revival elements are the prominent stone entry and embedded concrete finials high up on the Washington facade which wrap the corner onto the Locust St. elevation. The McWilliams Furniture Company Building will be included in Phase 2 of the Murphy Arts District with art studios and exhibitions of photography, painting, and sculpture from leading museums around the country.

CITY OF EL DORADO
HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
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El Dorado AR 71730
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Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
CERTIFIED LOCAL GOVERNMENT GRANT
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A special thanks to all who have contributed to this brochure. We have researched all information and tried to be as factual as possible. Please let us know if you have more historical information or photos for future reprints by calling City of El Dorado Historic District Commission at 870-862-7911.

SOURCES:

As We Were in South Arkansas, John Ragsdale 1995
History of Union County Arkansas, J. W. Green 1936
Dates and Data of Union County Arkansas, Anna Cordell 1984
Then and Now: A Guide to Historic Union County, George Arnold and Shea H. Wilson 1994
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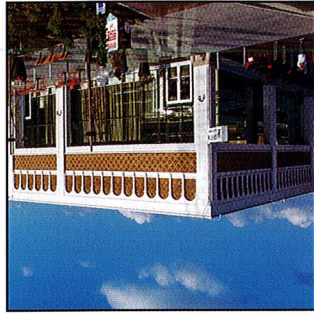


HISTORIC DOWNTOWN
WALKING TOUR

16 GRIFFIN AUTO COMPANY BUILDING

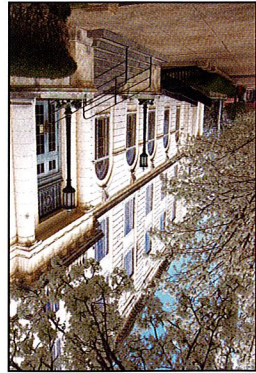
117 E. Locust St.

Early Commercial style structure with Mediterranean



National Register of Historic Places, 2001

Built in 1928 by Griffin brothers William, Tom, and Carl who started out in the delivery business in El Dorado in the early 1900s, the car dealership included an open-air filling station (now the Griffin Restaurant dining area), an auto showroom, and a repair shop. The Griffin Building is a reminder of the transition from the horse and carriage to the comfort of the automobile, especially as El Dorado grew from its agricultural beginnings into its oil economy in the 1920s boom period. The building's need to accommodate the automobile resulted in its wide spans on the north and west elevations and its overall functional massing, but with patterned brick designs and white terra cotta adornments of large square columns and pilasters and a blind arcade of Corinthian colonnettes above. Inside, the ornate tile wainscot and floor design and other original architectural features created an atmosphere of luxury for car buyers. In 1960 the auto company relocated, and the structure has since been used as a building supply store, for selling boats, and as a glass and mirror company. With the opening of the Murphy Arts District Phase I in 2017, the Griffin Building now includes The Griffin Restaurant and MAD Music Hall. Also a part of MAD Phase I are the adjacent 8,000 sq. ft. MAD Amphitheater and Playscape to the east.



17 UNITED STATES POST OFFICE/FEDERAL BUILDING

101 South Jackson Avenue

Built in 1931

Classical Revival by James Wetmore

In 1846, El Dorado's first post office was at Jefferson and Cedar.

President Polk personally appointed resident Christopher C. Rainey as

has become many location, 1870 -

115 N. Jefferson on the east side of

town square, in 1880 - 203 E. Main,

in 1889 a block and a half from the

square on South Jefferson, in 1897 -

116 E. Elm (a building still standing

and now occupied by Elm Street

Bakery). In 1921, the Post Office

relocated to the Trimble Building, 214-216 E. Elm at the

intersection of Elm and Hill (now a parking lot) to

accommodate oil boom's population boom until 10 years later

when its present building was constructed at 101 S. Jackson.

The site in 1846 was a two story house built by charitable

masons for the Male Academy taught by a Mr. Day.

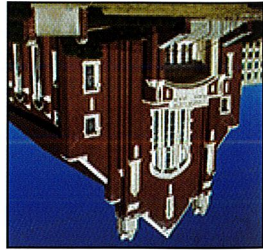
18 FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

300 East Main Street

Built in 1926

Gothic Revival by R. H. Hunt & Associates

National Register of Historic Places, 1991



Rev. W. S. Lacy organized the

First Presbyterian Church in late

1845. In March 1846, the church

held its first services in a small

frame building across from the

Presbyterian Cemetery on South

Washington Avenue, with 12

original members. The

membership grew steadily until

1862 when a storm leveled the building to the ground and all

of the able-bodied men and boys left for the Civil War. The

church disbanded and the church bell was given to the

Confederacy to be melted down into cannon balls.

Ruling Elder Newton Gilbert Hammond was one of the ones

who helped reorganize the church in 1868 following the civil

war, meeting in members' homes until a small frame chapel

was built in 1872, on the northwest corner of the intersection

of Main Street and Hill Avenue. From 1897 to 1898, a

structure was built on the southeast corner of the current lot

and was used until the oil discovery hit. Within four days of



19 NEWTON HOUSE MUSEUM

540 N Jackson Avenue

Built in 1849 by John Newton

National Register of Historic Places, 1974

the church announcing its plans for a new building in 1924, \$104,000 was raised. In 1926, the original brick sanctuary and education wing were completed and the Women's Auxiliary had raised \$20,000 for its Moller pipe organ. The congregations have since added a chapel and education addition (about 1954) and a playground was added in 1998 to celebrate the church's sesquicentennial (150th) anniversary.

Built in 1849 by John and Penelope Newton, this house is "one of the finest Greek Revival structures in the State of Arkansas" says Architectural Historian Wilson Stiles. A local newspaper was quoted in 1884 of saying that it "was one of the finest buildings in our town". Originally the home was located at 200 E Peach Street (now Murphy USA corporate headquarters) and in 1910 was moved about 200 yards to its current location. The home was owned by the Newton Family until it was sold in 1898. Listed on the National Register, the Newton House Museum is owned and operated by the South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society and is the only pre

Civil War home in El Dorado that is open to the public. The grounds of the Newton House Museum host the Annual Mayhaw Festival on the first Saturday in May.

20 GALLERY OF HISTORY

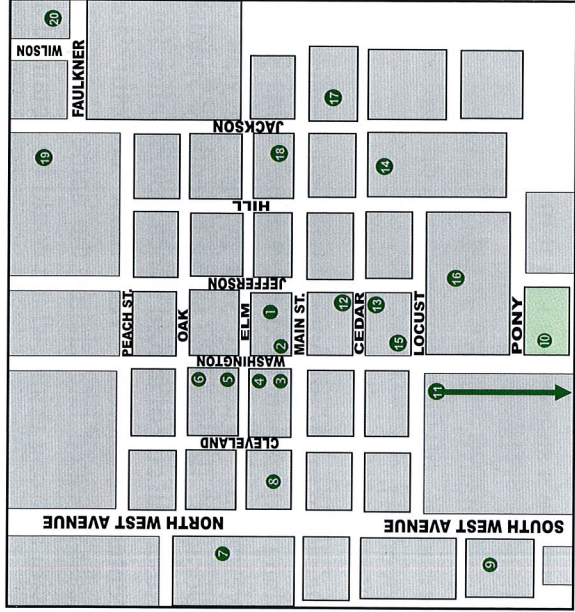
UNION COUNTY SPORTS HALL OF FAME

412 E Faulkner



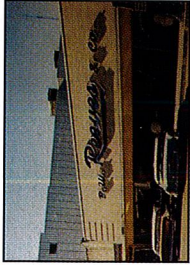
Not a historic structure but this structure is full of history. The Gallery of History and the Union County Sports Hall of Fame tell the stories of the people that lived, worked & worshiped in all the other buildings on this tour. The Union County Sports Hall of Fame offers a look into the many notable sports figures from this area as well as a broad knowledge of sports history in the

The Gallery of History (operated by the South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society) provides visitors a view of south Arkansas past in multiple exhibit areas filled with artifacts and stories using innovative techniques and technology to engage guests.



4 B. W. REEVES AND COMPANY

116 North Washington Avenue
Site owned by Hutton Nobles & Family
1879 to 1982 (in business 103 years)



Although its façade is no longer there, the store B. W. Reeves and Company story is an integral part of downtown El Dorado history.

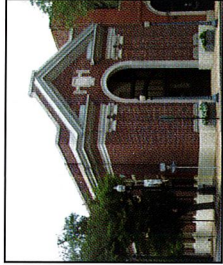
Orphaned by the Civil War, B. W. Reeves Sr. and his brother and sister walked from Thomaston, Georgia to Three Creeks, Arkansas (just south of El Dorado) in 1865. In 1879, his business partner W. D. Gresham bought the land for this site from Judge Emon Mahony and they opened a general store called Reeves and Gresham. (One account said that R. C. Van Hook had a drug store there prior to the Civil War.) Later Reeves bought out his partner's interest in the store. When the oil boom hit in the early 1920s, he shifted his merchandise from mostly agricultural to upscale clothing and accessories. In 1924, the store sold more Stetson hats than any other in the U. S. Three generations of the Reeves family ran this community-oriented business successfully while also serving on many civic organizations to develop El Dorado.

5 BANK OF COMMERCE BUILDING

200 North Washington Avenue

Built in 1919

Classical Revival by unknown architect
National Register of Historic Places, 1982



Civic leaders B. W. Reeves, T. H. Norris, J. H. Lewis, J. E. Culp and Albert Rowell organized the Bank of Commerce and the construction of this building. In just two years of the oil boom prosperity from 1921 to 1923 the bank's assets grew from \$800,000 to nearly \$3 million, and the directors voted to join the National Bank of Commerce charter. The bank operated from this location until 1973, when it moved a few blocks north. Six years later, the building's current owners Richard and Vertis Mason re-stored the exterior to its 1920s appearance.

6 LION OIL BUILDING

FIRST FINANCIAL CENTER

Washington Avenue at Oak Street

Built from 1926-1927

Venetian Gothic with Art Deco accents
By Mann & Stern of Little Rock

National Register of Historic Places, 1986



Designed to accommodate the bustling oil community's financial needs, this limestone façade building is the tallest in El Dorado at eight stories. Colonel T. H. Barton established the Exchange Bank in 1924, and later became president of Lion Oil Company. The building housed his petroleum company and bank until the 1970s. (Fun fact: Lion Oil is a palindrome --- spelled backwards it is still Lion Oil.) In 1993, the Exchange Bank moved a few blocks north, changing its name to Citizens First Bank and is now named Regions Bank. The historic building was renamed First Financial Center in 1998.

7 MUNICIPAL BUILDING/CITY HALL

204 North West Avenue

Built from 1927-1928

Art Deco by Mann & Stern of Little Rock
National Register of Historic Places, 1986



City Hall was originally located at the corner of Cedar and Cleveland, but the swelling population of the oil boom necessitated this "newer" structure that cost \$125,000 in its day. Its central tower and marbled lobby are the most impressive features of this excellent example of Art Deco architecture. Prior to

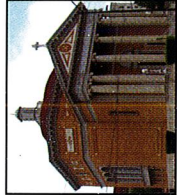
this building, on this site was the Banks Female Academy, run by Mrs. A. R. Banks from 1846 until her death in 1853. The school continued under the guidance of trustees with the pioneer family names of Goodwin, Ammons, Tatum, Cowser, Marr and Smead until after the Civil War when the Academy was moved to 300 South West Avenue.

8 FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

200 West Main Street

Built in 1922

Romanesque Revival by Dougherty & Garner, Nashville



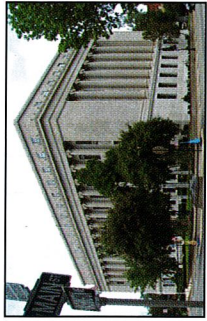
During the oil boom days of incredible prosperity and growth, First Baptist Church erected what was referred to as "one of the most imposing edifices in the state." Congregation members B. W. Reeves Sr., Sam E. Babb, R. N. Garrett Sr., Ira Hudson, Dr. J. M. Sheppard and W. I. Bell Sr. oversaw the construction details

1 UNION COUNTY COURT HOUSE

Court House Square

Built from 1927-1928

Classical Revival by Mann & Stern Architects of Little Rock
National Register of Historic Places, 1983



The original Union County Courthouse, built in 1844 at a cost of \$200 stood where Larry's Rexall Drug Store is today. As the county seat, El Dorado quickly out grew even its second courthouse (built on this site in 1848) in

the 1920s due to the oil boom's voluminous deed and title transactions. Faceted in smooth-dressed limestone, the third and current courthouse boasts 40 freestanding ionic exterior columns spanning four stories, and a richly detailed marble two-story atrium with art deco accents. The exterior medallions of the scales of justice and lanterns of light signify the search for truth. The building's largest courtroom features a walnut wainscot, trompe l'oeil painting, and scoring on textured plaster walls to resemble stone, and an ornately detailed plaster cast ceiling of gilded rosettes. Back when the square was flanked by log cabin structures, there was a large duck pond on this site. Immigrants camped on its banks. Many pioneer citizens recorded incidents where deer and even bears came to drink – and hunters would frequently bag their dinner by shooting the wild ducks that lit there in the mid-1800s.

2 UNION COUNTY CONFEDERATE MONUMENT

Main Street at Washington Avenue, Courthouse Square



Between 1861 and 1865, an estimated 1700 sons of Union County left home to serve in the army of the Confederacy. These young men fought in all major battles of the Civil War and many never returned home. This monument is dedicated to their ultimate sacrifice.

Erected in November 1909, by McNeel Marble & Granite Company at a cost of \$2850.00, the

marble statue atop the monument was imported from Italy. Funds for the monument were provided through donations by county residents under the organization of the Henry G. Bunn Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy. The columns of the monument replicate cannon barrels with cannon balls located at each corner of the upper level. Of significance, this monument was the first of its kind in the South to incorporate a monument with a drinking fountain and water display. Restored in 2012, the egret fountain is based on the original McNeel design. Evidence of the now-gone drinking fountain can still be seen on the southwest column.

At the end of the war, El Dorado was occupied by Federal troops that encamped near springs located on the north end of town (approximately 4 blocks north of the courthouse square).

3 MASONIC TEMPLE

106-108 North Washington Avenue

Built in 1924

Art Deco by Charles Watt, architect

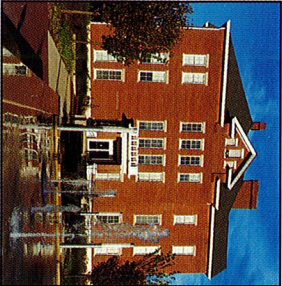


A fire destroyed the previous red brick building on this site in 1921. In 1924, the local Masonic order (named Blue Lodge, which was established in El Dorado in 1846 as the 13th order formed in the U. S.) had completed its new lodge's immense wall murals of the building of King Solomon's Temple. The murals were painted by Thomas G. Moses of Chicago; restored in the early 1970s by local artist DeWanna Womack. This charitable group's site now hosts several local Masonic orders' meetings (Not open to the public).

and it was just in time: The church's burgeoning membership doubled between 1922 and 1926. The building has since had extensive additions and renovations including the 1982 \$1.5 million facility joined by a pedestrian bridge across North West Avenue.

9 1905 JUNIOR COLLEGE BUILDING, NOW SOUTH ARKANSAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

300 South West Avenue
Built from 1904 to 1905
Neoclassical Revival by architect Charles Thompson, aided by Reverend J. F. McKinzie
National Register of Historic Places, 1978



This site has been continually used for public education since 1858. Bennett G. Clark and Sarah W. Clark decided this land in 1847 to the early trustees of El Dorado Female Institute.

In 1858 Albert Rust sold five acres more to the trustees for \$250, stipulating that the land

be used for a female academy. That year the academy opened in a two-story, eight-room frame structure and was run by Reverend and Mrs. William S. Lacy. (Early trustees' family names included Goodwin, Bussy, Ammons, Smead, Marr, Clowser, Adams, Rust, Cornish, Hampton, Heines and Hardy.)

During the Civil War, the school's assembly hall was used as a hospital for Confederate soldiers (see the monument on the downtown square commemorating the soldiers that died). In 1874, the building joined El Dorado's public school system and eventually became the school district's high school, with its first graduating class in 1896.

After the turn of the century, prominent citizens B. W. Reeves, Dr. Morgan Smith, W. H. Matthews, D. E. Armstrong, C. P. McHenry, Rev. J. F. McKinzie, Dr. W. J. Anson, Dr. J. M. Sheppard and Hugh W. Goodwin oversaw the construction and financing of a new high school structure in 1905. By 1911, the building had electricity and indoor plumbing. The subsequent years brought many changes in use for the building (a junior high, a high school, a junior college and a community college), but always for education. In 1975, Southern Arkansas University (formerly Southern State College) purchased the property and established Southern Arkansas University-El Dorado Branch the following year. In 1991, South Arkansas Community College was created as a result of the merging of the Branch and the Independent Oil Belt Vocational-Technical School in El Dorado. Today this red brick building houses administration and faculty offices for the college.

10 PRESBYTERIAN CEMETERY

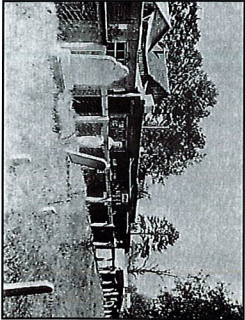
400 block of South Washington Avenue
Established in 1845; burials ceased in 1900



According to church history, "three blocks south of the Court House is a little cemetery sacred to the history of El Dorado." Title to the cemetery now rests in the name of "The Deacons of the First Presbyterian Church of El Dorado, and their successors forever." Some of

El Dorado's first settlers are buried on this site, including first homesteader Matthew Rainey and his son first postmaster Christopher Columbus Rainey, as well as other such pioneer families as the Armstrongs, Prothnos, Faulkners, Schulters, Ragsdales, Newtons, Murphys, Kinards, Busseys, Ammons and many more. One grave is surrounded by a cast iron fence and ornate gate, fashioned by Wood & Perot of Philadelphia, that is of a weeping willow tree with doves resting in its branches and lambs lying beneath its shade. Three unknown confederate soldier graves are marked with tombstones stating, "Our Beloved Confederates."

11 HAMBURGER ROW

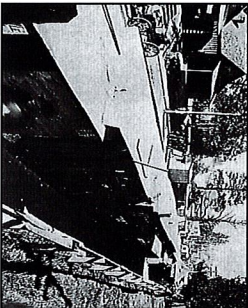


The 300-500 blocks of South Washington Avenue gained a reputation at the height of the South Arkansas Oil Boom that forever became a part of El Dorado lore. The discovery of oil on the western end of El Dorado in January 1921

by Samuel Bussey-Armstrong #1 touched off a frenzy that brought tens of thousands of investors, prospectors, and workers to El Dorado that quickly made the city the oil capital of Arkansas. Every hotel room, bed, office space, and front porch were rented out to fortune-seekers who descended upon the town.

By the end of 1921, a series of ramshackle buildings had been constructed along the 300-500 blocks of South Washington, all surrounding the Presbyterian Cemetery, serving hot meals and hamburgers to hungry oil workers, giving it the nickname "Hamburger Row." The area became famous, or infamous, for what it also offered. Speakeasies became part of the nightlife,

though it was the middle of Prohibition. Card games and gambling could be found where fortunes won in the oil fields could be lost on a throw of the dice. Famed oilman H. L. Hunt had left his farm in Southeast Arkansas to try his luck in El Dorado and reportedly won his first prized oil lease in one legendary Hamburger Row card game. Prostitution was also among the vices. Fortunetellers and con men plied their trades. Makeshift shopping centers, offering everything from hats to automobiles to oil equipment, rose and fell in a short time.



Though the easy oil money

pleased most, the seedy reputation of Hamburger

Row, within just a couple of blocks of the city's churches, offended many residents. By August 1922, the City Council voted to clamp down and clean up Hamburger Row. They shut down the shacks and removed the gamblers, liquor dealers, and ladies of the evening. The old buildings were torn down and others replaced them within a short time, but all of El Dorado still remembers the Hamburger Row legend.

12 OIL HERITAGE PARK

Northwest Corner of East Cedar Street and South Jefferson Avenue



Originally a parking lot, monuments have been added to the site over the past decade to highlight the history of the discovery of oil in the region. Bronze statues have been added of some of South Arkansas

most famous oil men. Narratives accompanied the monuments and statues to tell this story and identify the equipment that was used in the field, all of the equipment in the park were once used in oil discovery.

13 RIALTO THEATRE

117 East Cedar Street



Completed in 1929 as a vaudeville theater and movie house, this performance facility is being restored to an 850-seat hall for touring performances, music, live HD broadcast shows and symphonic performances by El Dorado's own South Arkansas Symphony Orchestra.

In addition, the stage will convert into a 125-black box for comedy, spoken word and lectures.

The renovation of the Rialto to recapture its beauty and former glory is a key component of Phase 2 of MAD/Murphy Arts District.

14 FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

201 South Hill Avenue
Built in 1922



In 1833, a small band of people here formed a Methodist congregation. Some of the first church members included the families of John H. Cornish, William Lucas, E. R. Brown, Warner

Brown, Rev. William N. Hayes and Col. N. G. Hickman. In 1845, the new Union County's first methodist church, aptly named First Methodist Church, was built out of logs on its current property on Hill Street that was purchased from Warner Brown for only \$30. He later donated additional adjoining land for a church cemetery and gave a bell as well. A second church building was erected out of lumber on the site in 1871. In 1901, congregation members C. P. McHenry, W. H. Goodwin, W. J. Miles, W. J. Pinson, H. C. Norris and A. P. Thompson along with Rev. J. A. Sage oversaw the construction of a third building out of brick. With the discovery of oil came plans for a totally new church. From 1922 to 1924, the congregation worshiped either under a white tent one block over on Jackson Avenue or in the nearby Rialto Theatre, until finally the current sanctuary structure was complete. The church has since added an educational building and chapel (1957) and its name changed in 1968 to First United Methodist Church, and the Hanna Building recreational and meeting complex (1980s).

