

O'NEIL FORD'S DENTON LEGACY



CIVIC CENTER DEDICATED TO ARCHITECT

By Maggie Kennedy
Creative Living Editor

O'Neil Ford could be, or probably should be, called The National Architect of Texas.

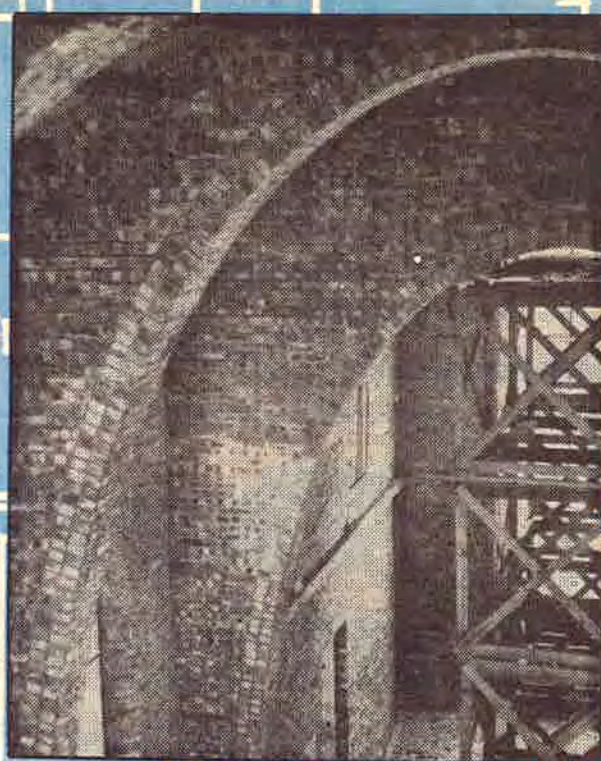
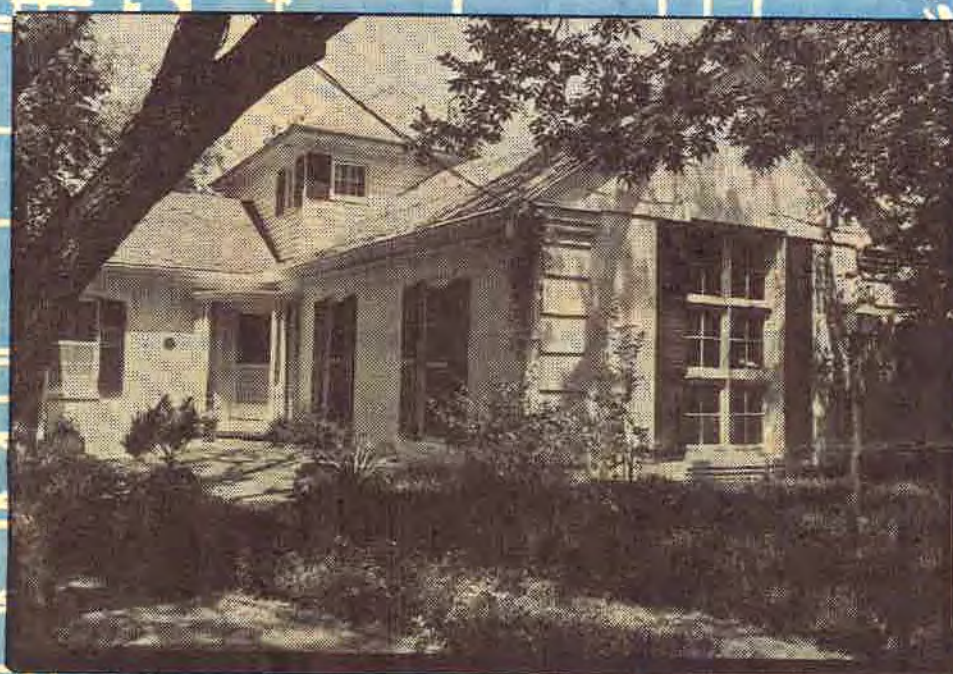
He was feisty, outspoken, a charmer of serious proportions. And, he designed homes, office buildings, schools, universities, campuses, churches and chapels, hotels and industrial complexes all over the state that reflected his love of natural materials.

Each bears his unique and innovative trademarks — warm, rather rough-looking brick, native stone, Mexican tile, weathered cedar and metal, pitched roofs. His designs are pure and unadorned with no pretense, no frills. There is immaculate attention to detail.

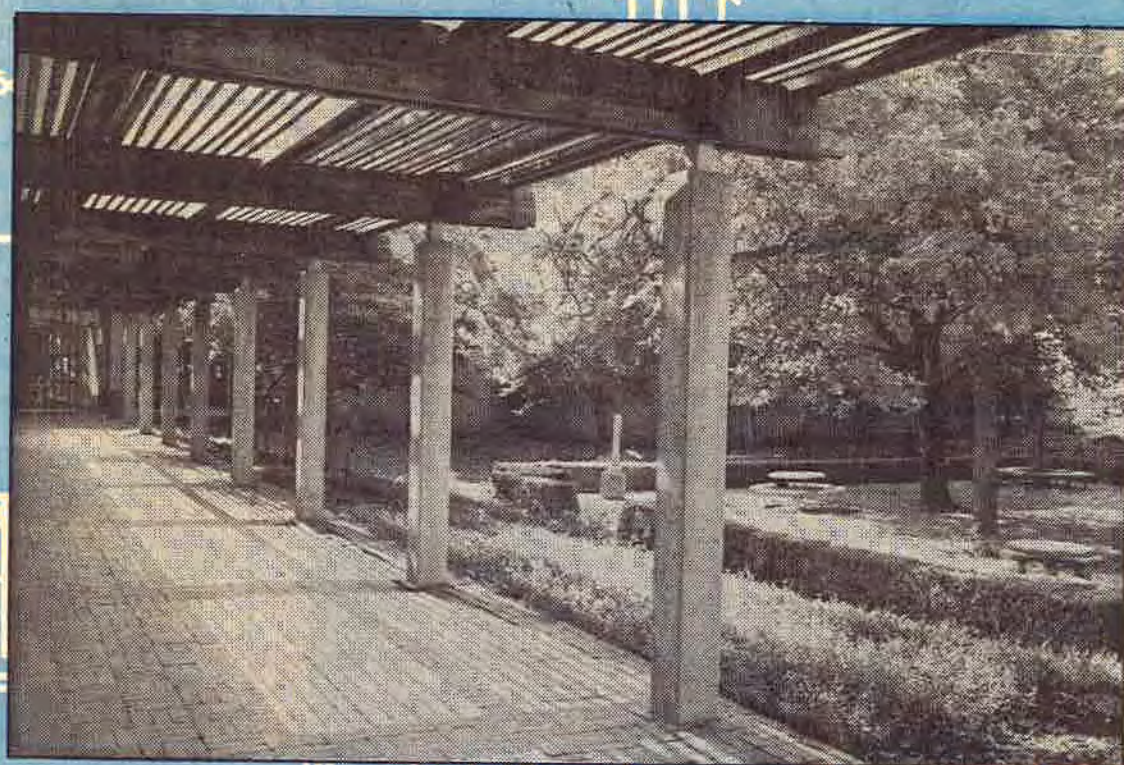
He could also be called The National Architect of Denton. From 1929 to 1981, he designed seven houses here as well as the Little Chapel-in-the-Woods on the Texas Woman's University campus (1938), First Christian Church in 1959, the Denton Civic Center complex in the mid-60s, the terminal at the city's airport in 1967, the Emily Fowler Public Library additions in 1969 and 1980, the Selwyn School in 1965-66, Fairhaven Retirement Home in 1963-65, the Gazebo at the University of North Texas in 1928 and the Open Air Theater at UNT in 1928 which was demolished in the 1960s.

See ARCHITECT/3D

Architect O'Neil Ford, above, gave the commencement address in 1977 at the Selwyn School which he designed in 1965. "As far as I'm concerned, ninth grade calculus is unnecessary," he told the 34 graduating seniors. The house, at right, was the first home the architect designed. It was built in 1929 at 1819 N. Bell for art professor Mary Marshall and is now the home of Gertrude Gibson. Ford, who died in 1982, was also considered the "father of preservation" in Texas for his work with the Alamo, La Villita and the Riverwalk in San Antonio.



Little Chapel-in-the-Woods under construction.



The courtyard of the Denton Civic Center being renamed for O'Neil Ford on Saturday.

Professor points to chapel changes

Maggie Kennedy
Creative Living Editor

Dorothy Antoinette LaSelle waved a long, thin wrinkled hand over an intricately carved beechwood pew in the Little Chapel-in-the-Woods.

"They're not supposed to be this dark," she remarked. "The pews are supposed to be straw colored, much lighter than this. Guess it's time to have them refinished."

She was sitting in a pew toward the rear of the cool, dark chapel and inspecting it like a Marine drill instructor. "It's darker in here anyway since so much of the stained glass has been replaced," she continued. "The new glass is darker than the original for some reason."

But things do have a way of changing over 55 years and Toni LaSelle has good reason to feel rather proprietary about the O'Neil Ford-designed chapel.

See CHAPEL/3D



Architects Arch Swank, retired art professor Toni LaSelle and O'Neil Ford, from left, in front of Little Chapel-in-the-Woods in 1979 during the chapel's 40th anniversary celebration.

Architect

From/1D

His homes include those at 1819 N. Bell built in 1929 (his first) for Mary Marshall, chairman of the art department at what is now TWU (the house belongs to Gertrude Gibson now); the Annie Alford home at 220 Marietta in 1939 (with longtime partner and friend Arch Swank of Dallas); the Parrill Sisters home at 1712 Highland Park Road in 1939; the Jack Johnson home at 2280 W. Oak with Arch Swank in 1938; the Roland and Authella Ford Hersh home (his sister) at 1408 Country Club Road in Argyle in 1965 which replaced the couple's first home the two men designed for them in 1939 at 304 W. Avenue D. The first Hersh home built on the site of Mr. Ford's boyhood home was demolished in 1965 to make way for UNT expansion.

This warm and funny man who died in 1982 at 76 will be honored today and Saturday in Denton where he lived from age 12 to 22 (1917-1926) and where he designed his first home in 1929 and his first major structure — the Little Chapel-in-the-Woods — which propelled him into national prominence.

"The City of Denton has renamed the civic center the O'Neil Ford Civic Complex," explained Mike Cochran, chairman of the O'Neil Ford Marker Dedication Task Force. "The city is going to celebrate and formally dedicate the complex in Ford's name. He was one of the most prominent architects in the country and arguably the most prominent architect to come from Texas. We're fortunate to have so much of his work right here."

The two-day event begins at 7 p.m. tonight with the opening of the "O'Neil Ford, A Denton Legacy" exhibit in the new East Gallery of the Center for the Visual Arts, 400 E. Hickory at Bell. It focuses on artifacts and photos relating to his design projects, his love of crafts and art, blueprints of

projects and the original full-color, full-size drawings of the stained-glass windows in the Little Chapel-in-the-Woods.

The exhibit will remain at the gallery through Aug. 13. Hours are 1 to 4 p.m. this Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday through Friday. The gallery will be closed Aug. 10.

That will be followed by the "O'Neil Ford and His Gift to Texas" symposium at 11 a.m. in City Council chambers. Bill Mercer, director of UNT's Center for Texas Studies, will lead an informal discussion with Roland Laney of Denton, a retired architect who studied and worked with Mr. Ford; architect Frank Welch of Dallas; architects Dwayne and Jane Landry of Dallas; architect Carolyn Peterson from Ford, Powell & Carson in San Antonio; and Toni LaSelle, the retired TWU art professor who directed the student design projects on the Little Chapel-in-the-Woods from 1938 to 1943.

A self-guided driving tour of Mr. Ford's work in Denton is planned from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday for those who wish to participate. Maps will be provided and guides will be available to answer questions at the Selwyn School, Little Chapel-in-the-Woods and the civic complex.

"All of this is to help people understand we have some architectural wealth in our community," said Mr. Cochran, "that we've got some cultural heritage, a valuable prize that will carry us into the 21st century."

Mr. Cochran never met O'Neil Ford but has been a Ford fan for many years. "I'm a student of architecture and I've appreciated his work for a long time," he said, adding he thinks the civic complex is perfectly suited to its site. "It provides a sense of place and the inner courtyard is an island of calm."

There's still a chance, according to Mr. Cochran, that the city will go ahead and implement O'Neil Ford's original design for the creek that me-

anders through the civic center area.

"On the master plans, he drew a series of small retaining ponds and check dams along the creek," he offered. "It's too bad the city didn't follow his plan because that concrete channel is a blight now. But there's hope. There's still a line item in the capital improvement plan for 1992-94 mentioning \$50,000 for design work and study. There's still the potential to fulfill O'Neil Ford's dream, to turn that blight into something wonderful for Denton, to build our own little Riverwalk."

"O'Neil Ford designs, particularly his early work, is timeless," Mr. Cochran went on.

Roland Laney remembers vividly his first encounter with the man who was to become his mentor, friend and boss.

"I was a sophomore architecture student at Texas A&M in 1937," he said. "I was in class working on a design project, probably a house. This character came in and started looking at our work and critiquing it. We were all really into O'Neil Ford in those days. He was standing beside me, looking at my design. I said, 'This is the way O'Neil Ford does it.' He looked at me and replied, 'I am O'Neil Ford.'"

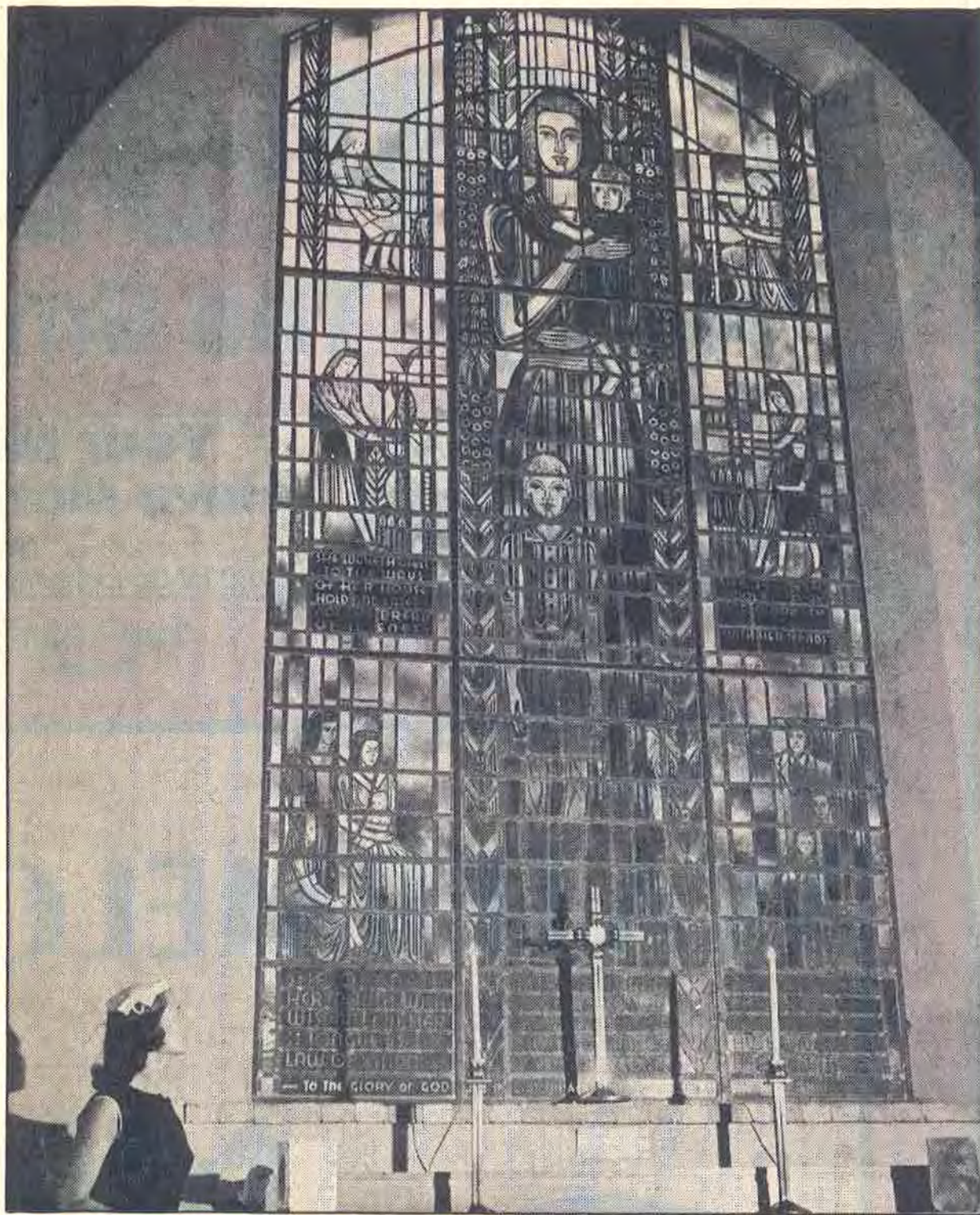
Friends and family called him Neil Ford. His real name was Otha Neil Ford.

"He didn't like Otha much," Mr. Laney recalled. By college he was O. Neil, then O'Neil after Eugene O'Neill, one of his favorite writers.

"Neil hated artifice," he continued. "He believed if it's a brick, let it be a brick. He was a craftsman. He and his younger brother Lynn used to build their own toys as kids because they didn't have any money. He took all the wood-working and metal shop classes he could in school. He was pretty disappointed with the new architects because most of them aren't craftsmen."

According to Mr. Laney, the last 15 years of his friend's career were spent lecturing, teaching and speaking. "Considering the time he spent out of the office, the company's things still have that certain touch of his."

Mr. Laney described his friend as a cross between Hill Country humorist Hondo Crouch and J. Eric Jonsson, the charming and elegant co-founder of Texas Instruments and former mayor of Dallas. "Neil didn't even live in one of his own houses," Mr. Laney said. "He and Wanda and the four children lived in his



Called "The Motherhood Window," this giant stained-glass work of art in TWU's Little Chapel-in-the-Woods was the work of students Beatrice Paschall, Helen Crain, Ivy May Chollar, Mary Ann Chadick, Billie Marie Culwell, Coreen Spellman, Lura Mae Kendricks and Marilyn Yates. The iconography is by their art teacher Toni LaSelle.

mother-in-law's home in San Antonio. It was a wonderful place, though. There was no heating or air-conditioning, just fireplaces for heat and big windows strategically placed for cross ventilation."

This "National Historic Landmark," the only individual so honored, was born in Pink Hill near Sherman, the oldest of three children. His brother Lynn was a master carpenter and woodcarver who designed many of the doors and other wood pieces for big brother Neil's homes and buildings.

The family moved to Sherman, then to Denton in 1917 when his father died in a train accident. His mother kept boarders in their home at 304 W. Avenue D, a block west of North Texas State Teachers

College which he attended for two years. However, Neil Ford didn't get his degree from now-UNT. Financial problems forced him to continue his studies through the International Correspondence Schools while working at Dyche's Corner, a hamburger stand at the corner of Avenue A and Hickory.

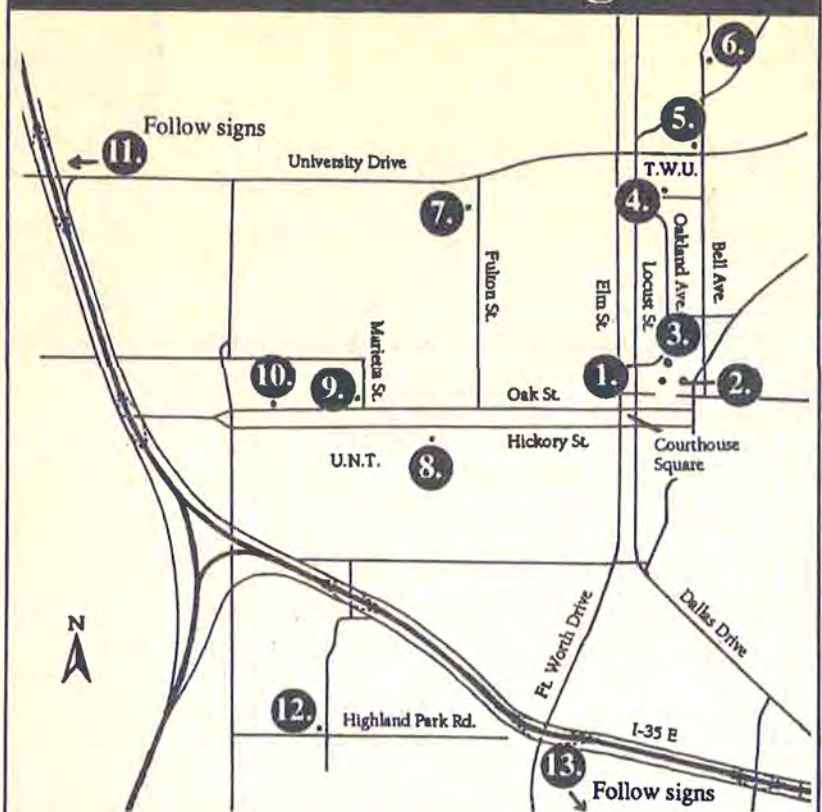
In 1926, he moved to Dallas as an assistant to architect David Williams where his first assignment was doing the drafting on the old First Presbyterian Church of Denton. It was demolished in 1965. He was still with Williams when he designed two projects for UNT that were never built — a 130-foot memorial tower and a student center.

"This correspondence school architect from Denton would

lecture at Harvard, at Cambridge, become a professor of architecture at the University of Virginia and have a chair in architecture named after him at the University of Texas in Austin," Mike Cochran wrote in the catalog he prepared for the exhibit.

O'Neil Ford has an impressive list of design accomplishments outside Denton: Texas Instruments in Richardson; University of Dallas in Irving, Trinity University in San Antonio, University of Texas at San Antonio, the La Villita reconstruction in San Antonio, St. Mark's School of Dallas, the Founder's Building at what is now UT-Dallas in Richardson, Skidmore College in New York, the Greenhill School in Dallas, the Tower of the Americas in San Antonio.

O'Neil Ford Driving Tour



EXISTING STRUCTURES DESIGNED BY O'NEIL FORD

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Denton Municipal Building | 8. The Gazebo |
| 2. Denton Civic Center | U.N.T. Campus |
| 3. Emily Fowler Public Library | 9. 220 Marietta St. |
| 4. Little Chapel in the Woods-T.W.U. Campus | 10. 2280 West Oak St. |
| 5. 1819 N. Bell | 11. Selwyn School Complex |
| 6. Fairhaven Retirement Home | 12. 1712 Highland Park |
| 7. First Christian Church | 13. 1408 Country Club Rd., Argyle |
| 1203 N. Fulton | |

Graphic by Mike Cochran and Mary Martinets

Chapel

From/1D

She was an associate art professor in her mid-30s at Texas State College for Women (now Texas Woman's University) in 1938 when she got one of her biggest teaching challenges ever — director of chapel art projects for the chapel, all of it to be done by TSCW art students. Construction began in 1938 and was completed in 1941.

"We started in September of 1938 and knew by December what we wanted," she recalled. "The project started small but grew a great deal as the girls came up with new ideas."

A core group of 20 to 35 young women in their late teens and early twenties designed the 10 huge stained-glass windows depicting the theme, "Woman Ministering to Human Needs." It was dedicated to women in nursing,

teaching, science, social service, speech, literature, dance and music. The ninth window above the entrance signifies the renewal of faith through communion with nature while the most prominent window, the motherhood window, overlooking the nave is dedicated to the ideal woman.

They also carried the work through the painting and firing of the glass. They carved the pews, laid the mosaic tile inlay, fashioned the light fixtures, wove the carpet for the nave, designed and made the massive Honduras mahogany front

doors.

By the time the chapel was finished, according to Ms. LaSelle, more than 400 women worked on the chapel. Some came for a week or two only, others just to wash glass and assist the designers. "Others said 'Oh, boy!' An important project!" she said smiling.

Now 91, Ms. LaSelle splits her time between Denton and Cape Cod where she continues to paint and do shows. She's not difficult to miss around the TWU campus either. The day we met she was covered in a loose-fitting white pants outfit,

a white knit cap drawn low over her eyes and a walking cane in her hand. After the interview, she planned to walk to the student center in the 100 degree heat until I offered her a ride.

As for O'Neil Ford, Ms. LaSelle recalled he came to the construction site frequently from his Dallas office. "He was always interested in the project and what we were doing," she said. "By the time we finished we had done 14 projects instead of the original two but he never said he didn't like anything we were doing."

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