

The World's Smallest Skyscraper

In 1919 a new building appeared at 701 La Salle Street in bustling downtown Wichita Falls, Texas. The dimensions were unique, if not downright strange. The building stood forty feet high at four stories and measured ten feet wide and sixteen feet long.

Close inspection revealed solid, competent construction but the questions of who built it and what was the purpose still began most lunchtime conversations, until an interesting discovery was made. Turns out, the building was built illegally and the man who erected it, skipped town.

The framework for construction of the world's smallest skyscraper began in 1906. Gus Newby built a two-room building along a two-block alley between Ohio Avenue and the railroad tracks bordering downtown.

For thirteen years the building sat quietly. In late 1918 Newby rented one of the rooms to six businessmen. JD McMahon was one of the six. McMahon was a loudly confident Amarillo contractor, always working a deal for his next big project.

His fellow renters took note of McMahon's attempts to secure investment in a new building. The project was rather impressive, a state-of-the-art skyscraper with offices, retail space and apartments. Sounded promising and McMahon seemed to be lining up investors, although he continued to be vague as to the location.

One morning a construction crew and materials appeared in the vacant lot next to the two-room Newby building. Mabel Jones, Newby's niece from Oklahoma owned this section of land. It looked as though Mabel was following her Uncle's lead and constructing herself a building connected to her Uncle's two-room structure.

In a short time construction was complete. The first floor had a single door and no windows. The upper floors each had a single large window facing the alley and stairs, which were more like ladders, connected at the rear of the building.

As the oil boom waned so did investors in McMahon's latest project. He packed his things, bid his fellow renters a good day and left town. For months following McMahon's departure his former fellow renters would take occasional calls from an investor inquiring as to the whereabouts of a grand, state-of-the-art skyscraper. The renters didn't have an answer.

Finally, during one of the calls a renter with construction experience asked the curious investor for the building specifications. He wrote down the description and didn't think much of it because the City of Wichita Falls did not possess a forty-story tall skyscraper that was one hundred feet wide and one-hundred and sixty feet long.

The investor swore the building was at 701 La Salle Street in Wichita Falls, "Right in the heart of the downtown. I even saw a sketch of the city skyline and this building was right there, prominently featured, very impressive." the investor testified.

The renter knew La Salle Street. He should because a few years earlier the two block alley, where Gus Newby had built his two-room building, had been renamed, La Salle Street. He found the building at 701, measured it, ran the numbers, ran them again and burst out laughing.

You see the building he found and measured was connected to Newby's. It was Mabel Jones' building only it wasn't Mabel Jones' building because she didn't build it. It was JD McMahon's beautiful new state-of-the-art skyscraper, built as promised but not to the square foot. The smooth talker with a Texas drawl had built his skyscraper to the square inch.

McMahon was never seen in North Texas again. No one ever determined how much money he pocketed or the number of investors who traveled to Wichita Falls to see their state-of-the-art skyscraper rising high in the sky, all four stories of it.

