

MARTIN-RUSSELL HOUSE

I. CONTEXT

Denton is the county seat of Denton County, which the Texas Legislature created in 1846.¹ The first city lots in Denton were auctioned off in 1857.² Denton's first census in 1880 showed a population of 1,194.³ Denton's courthouse, built in 1896-97, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and has RTHL designation. The Martin-Russell house, located at 811 West Oak, is in the Oak-Hickory Historic District. Fourteen homes on Oak Street in this district have City of Denton Historic Landmark designation; two in the district have RTHL designation. The home is within walking distance of the University of North Texas, which was established as North Texas Normal College in 1890. The university has several THC markers. Many of Denton's leading citizens were building fine homes on West Oak Street (often referred to as "Silk Stocking Row")⁴ in the early decades of the 20th century, and one of the most prominent of these is the Martin-Russell house.

II. OVERVIEW

This red brick, Adam-influenced Georgian style home was designed by Fort Worth architect J. B. Davies, Sr. H. F. Davidson had the contract for carpenter work. Charles N. Davis was in charge of brick and concrete work. The house, built at a cost of \$30,000, was begun in 1925 and completed in 1927.⁵ J. B. Davies (1891-1966)⁶ designed a number of significant buildings in Texas, including the Western Union Telegraph Building (1930-31) in Ft. Worth, as well as a number of buildings in the Fairmount-Southside Historic District (National Register of Historic Places, District #98001375 and #99000565),⁷ and in Lubbock, the Carlock Building,

also known as the New Cotton Exchange Building, another building on the National Register of Historic Places.⁸

Davies built the house for Dr. M. L. Martin (1869-1941), a prominent medical doctor. This red brick Adam-influenced Georgian style home is of brick veneer, Kansas vitrified brick, rich red in color, with white stone trimmings. The brick is imprinted “VVV Brick & Tool, Noedesha, Kansas.” Outside dimensions of the house are 32' x 72'. The roof is steel, stamped to resemble tile, with baked on green enamel. The house is classically symmetrical outside and inside. With fan windows and semicircular wrought iron balconies, it is strictly rectangular in plan with a minimum of projections and a symmetrical facade. The central part projects slightly from the ends and is crowned with three dormer windows. The eaves are detailed as classical cornices. Each room except the dining room has south exposure. The only change to the exterior of the house since 1927 is the replacement of a door into a large window in the front of the east wing. The room was intended to become an office for Dr. M. L. Martin when he retired but was converted into a more ornate room after the Holford Russells bought the house.⁹

The sixteen rooms include a classical enfilade of public rooms. A Georgian staircase dominates the stair hall in the entrance, and the east, west, and left-center downstairs rooms extend the width of the house from north to south. The end rooms upstairs are also the width of the wings of the house. The butler's pantry downstairs and the four bedrooms, dressing room, linen room with cedar-lined cabinets, as well as the library with a door to the south balcony which is atop a porch are unchanged since 1927. The two and a half baths have had minimal changes. There is a full attic and a basement where the original Lennox furnace was

used for over sixty years. The detached garage, behind the house, is of the same style and cost \$2,000.

Born in Columbia, S. C., Dr. Martin was the son of Mr. and Mrs. W. N. Martin. He earned an A.B. degree from Peabody College, Nashville, Tennessee in 1892 and an M.D. degree from the University of Texas in 1899. He did postgraduate work and specialization studies at New York Polyclinic, Tulane University, and the Manhattan Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat School in New York. His obituary said that he had lived in Denton for about forty years. He married Ailsey Forester (1890-1968), daughter of a prominent area rancher, L. S. Forester of Slidell-Bolivar. The Forester Ranch has a THC subject marker (No. 1944) and is 7 1/2 miles west of Sanger on FM 455. Mrs. Martin received one-third of the ranch when it was divided in 1913. The ranch's "Two I Jinglebob" brand became well known. The ranch, which was established about 1852, is an important part of Denton County history.¹⁰ Mrs. Martin bought the property at 811 West Oak in April 4, 1919, for \$7,000.¹¹ By 1927 Dr. Martin's practice was flourishing, as was the Denton economy, so he could spend the enormous sum of \$30,000 to build a fine home.

A leader in his profession, Dr. Martin was listed in *Who's Who Among Physicians and Surgeons*, was a vice-president of the Dallas Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology, and also was president of the Denton County Medical Society. During WWI he volunteered in the medical corps. Vice-president of the First State Bank of Denton, a long-time member of the Kiwanis Club, and prominent in the work of the First Methodist Church where he served on the Board of Stewards for 40 years, he died in his Oak Street home and lay in state in the First Methodist Church. His obituary appeared on the front page of the Denton-Record Chronicle, signifying his prominence in the community.¹² He is buried in IOOF cemetery.

On March 13, 1945, Mrs. Martin sold the home to James Holford (1898-1967) and Ava Lee Russell for \$20,000.¹³ James Holford Russell was born on June 29, 1898, in Pilot Point, Texas. He received a degree in business administration from the University of Texas in 1919 and spent his life in Russell's Department Store, which had its start as a mercantile store in Pilot Point in 1897. Founded as a partnership with \$2,500 capital by his father, H. M. Russell, J. N. Russell, and O. E. Cooper, it opened on the Denton square on January 1, 1925. Mr. Russell eventually became president of H.M. Russell and Sons Co. and a partner in Russell-Newman Mfg. Co. His obituary quoted him as having said, "I never knew anything but the retail business, but strangely enough, I never wanted to know anything else."¹⁴ He married Ava Lee Mars on December 1, 1919. Mr. Russell was a regent of Texas Woman's University and was also on the Chapel Committee for the Little Chapel in the Woods at TWU, and his contribution is recorded in a stained glass window in the vestibule of the chapel. He was a member of the Denton school board and was president of the Rotary Club and of the Denton Chamber of Commerce in 1931. The appearance of his obituary on the front page of the *Denton Record-Chronicle* attests to his prominence in the community. Of his active political life, the obituary writer said this: "A friend of presidents, Mr. Russell's office wall was covered with photographs autographed by the famous, including President Johnson, President Kennedy, President Truman, and President Eisenhower."¹⁵ He is buried in Roselawn Memorial Park in Denton.

On October 23, 1967, Mrs. Russell sold the home to Dr. Jerry Don (1938-) and Dolores May (1935-) Vann for \$35,000.¹⁶ Dr. Vann was born in Weatherford, Texas, and grew up in Ft. Worth. He received B.A. and M.A. degrees from Texas Christian University in 1959 and 1960, and a Ph.D. from Texas Tech University in 1967. He married Dolores May Warden on June 12,

1958. He joined the English faculty of North Texas State University in 1964, became a Regent's Professor of English in 1990 (one of only two in the English department), and retired in 2004, when he was made Professor Emeritus. Mrs. Vann was president of the Ariel Club and was active in historical preservation. A prime mover in establishing the Oak-Hickory Street Historical District in Denton, she authored a series of newspaper articles on historic Denton homes, published in the *Denton Record-Chronicle* as part of the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration.

While the Vanns have owned the house, it has been a center of activity. In the fall of 1967 there was an open house for over two-hundred guests to view the house; this landmark home has been a party house ever since. Two wedding receptions—one for over 300 people in 1979 when Dr. Martin's granddaughter, Janet, married Willis Johnson, a prominent San Angelo rancher, in an elaborate wedding ceremony in the First Methodist Church that was a replica of her mother's wedding. That reception, of course, was also at 811. A reception for the Vanns' daughter, Vanessa, when she returned from her honeymoon with Troy Kraatz was held in the home in 1992. A sherry party, attended by over one hundred guests, celebrated Dr. Vann's retirement in 2004.

For almost forty years, Professor and Mrs. Vann have entertained University of North Texas students and others at luncheons, tea parties, sherry parties, and dinners in their home and gardens. It was an especially enjoyed destination for students and faculty from the old Sam Houston elementary school, who were in walking distance from Welch Street. There have been many entertainments with a Dickensian theme, as Dr. Vann is a Dickens scholar and founder and president of the Denton Dickens Fellowship (chartered in England in 1988). The family's Dickensian Christmases have been featured in the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*, the *Denton Record-*

Chronicle, the *Dallas-Ft. Worth Home & Garden* magazine (December 1981), and *The North Texan* (in November 1977 and Fall 1983). On December 21, 1978, NBC Channel 5 TV personality Bobbie Wygant came with a cameraman to feature the family and their numerous Christmas trees. The rather lengthy segment ran on the television station for four or five times on Christmas eve and Christmas day. When the family wondered why it ran so many times, they discovered the reason as they watched the credits: the producer was one of Dr. Vann's former students. The home was also featured in *Texas Homes* magazine in November/December, 1979. More recent articles have appeared on the front pages of the *North Texas Daily* (October 4, 2002) and the *Denton Record-Chronicle* (June 6, 2006).

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Martin-Russell House was among the first houses in Denton to receive a City of Denton Historical Marker (as Martin-Russell-Vann House). Inside and out, the house has maintained its architectural integrity, for it is as it was when it was built, with the exception of the door on the east wing that has been made into a window. It is a fine example of the design of J. B. Davies, a well-known Ft. Worth architect, who has several buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. It has been the home of three prominent owners—a leading medical doctor, a businessman who for four decades ran the most prestigious department store in Denton, and an outstanding educator—all community leaders. The Martin-Russell House maintains a rich visual contact with the past—a period when architecture was a primary means of expressing wealth, pride, ambition, and self-satisfaction. It is worthy of a state historical marker.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹Bridges, C. A. *History of Denton, Texas, From Its Beginning to 1960*. Waco, Texas: Texian Press, 1978, p. 54.

²Bridges, p. 71.

³Bridges, p. 168.

⁴*Silk Stocking Row, A Walk on Oak Street in Denton's Historic District*, a brochure published by the Denton County Historical Commission, 2004.

⁵“\$30,000 Home Recently Built Here by Dr. and Mrs. Martin,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, January 14, 1928, p. 6.

⁶Judith Singer Cohen, *Cowtown Moderne: Art Deco Architecture of Fort Worth*. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1988, pp. 20-21.

⁷See www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/tx/Tarrant/state.html and <http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us>

⁸See www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/tx/Lubbock/state.html and <http://atlas.thc.state.tx.us>

⁹Statement made to Jerry Don and Dolores Vann by Milton Martin and Ruth Martin Crary (son and daughter of Dr. and Mrs. M. L. Martin), December 25, 1967; “Notes on an Interview with Milton Martin and Ruth Martin Crary, deposited with the Denton County Historical Commission.

¹⁰*Historical Markers of Denton County*, Denton County Historical Commission, 2002, p. 19.

¹¹Deed Records of Denton County, Vol. 155, p. 558.

¹²“Dr. Martin Dies in Denton,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, September 27, 1941, p. 1.

¹³Deed Records of Denton County, Vol. 312, p. 598.

¹⁴“Russell Is Victim of Heart Attack,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, March 14, 1967, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵“Russell Is Victim of Heart Attack,” p. 2.

¹⁶Deed Records of Denton County, Vol. J, p. 438.