

**Walks through History
Downtown McGehee
Begin at the Missouri Pacific Depot, 100 S. Railroad Street
September 13, 2014
By: Rachel Silva**



Intro

Good morning, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of downtown McGehee. First, I’d like to thank the Desha County Historical Society for co-sponsoring the tour and providing water and boxed lunches. And I need to recognize a short list of people for their help with the tour—

Susan Gallion

Jack May

Gibbs and Anne Ferguson

Bobbie Lehman

Jane Lucky

Carolyn Smith

Roseanne Marin (sp?)

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth two hours of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you’re interested.

There are nine National Register-listed properties in McGehee, and we'll see five of them today. Plus, we'll talk about other historic buildings as well as significant structures that are no longer extant.

Brief History of McGehee

McGehee traces its origin to 1878, when the Little Rock, Mississippi River & Texas Railway came through the present town site. Abner McGehee, son of early settler Benjamin McGehee, then owned about 240 acres of wooded land in the area and granted the right-of-way to the railroad. Abner McGehee also sold timber from his land to the railroad for crossties and the construction of bridges. In the late 1870s McGehee opened a commissary, sawmill, and cotton gin. A post office was established, and in 1879 McGehee became the first postmaster. In 1887 the Little Rock, Mississippi River & Texas Railroad was acquired by Jay Gould and became a division of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad. Completed in 1906, the Memphis, Helena & Louisiana Railroad went northeast from McGehee through McArthur, Rohwer, Kelso, and Watson to Helena and Memphis. From McGehee, railroad transportation was available in four directions. You could go to Little Rock, Memphis, Tallulah, and Alexandria, LA.

In 1904 Abner McGehee conveyed about fifty acres of land to the Iron Mountain Railroad for the construction of switch yards and railroad shops. Feeling certain that this would ensure the settlement's importance along the railroad line, Abner McGehee surveyed and platted the town of McGehee. He named the east-west streets for trees (with the exception of one called North Street), and the north-south streets were numbered. More people moved into the area to be near the railroad, and in 1906 the town of McGehee was incorporated. In addition to the railroad, agriculture has always been important to McGehee's economy. Cotton continues to be the main crop, but rice and soybeans are also grown.

Individual Properties

Missouri Pacific Depot (National Register-listed 6/11/1992)—

The current Mediterranean-style depot was built in 1910 to replace an earlier wood-frame depot on the same site. Like most depots constructed by the Iron Mountain/Missouri Pacific line during this time period, the McGehee Depot features red brick walls with cast-stone lintels and sills and a cast-stone belt course, widely overhanging eaves with triangular knee braces, a red tile roof, and a shaped parapet on the east side. [The Iron Mountain was a subsidiary of the Missouri Pacific Railway, and in 1917 the two merged to form the Missouri Pacific Railroad.] At one time, there were nine regular passenger trains through McGehee in a 24-hour period. One of those trains was known as the “Owl” because it made a round-trip to Warren at night. I’m guessing this is how McGehee High School got its mascot (the owl). Regular passenger service stopped about 1965. The depot is now a local history museum.

Railway Eating House/Van Noy Eating House (NR-listed 1/24/2011)—

The Railway Eating House, also called the Van Noy Eating House (and in railroad lingo, the “beanery”), was built in 1906 by the Iron Mountain Railroad to provide passengers with a convenient place for a good meal. Before dining cars were common, trains stopped on a regular basis for food. The most famous company to operate eating houses was the Fred Harvey Company, whose Harvey Houses fed railroad passengers throughout the American Southwest. In the early twentieth century, the Missouri Pacific Railway and its subsidiary, the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern, contracted with the Van Noy Railway Hotel and News Company out of Kansas City to operate hotels, eating houses, newsstands, and cigar stands along its route. The Van Noy Company provided services for Missouri Pacific until 1923. Eating houses were later operated directly by the railroad. Sometime between 1928 and 1944, a covered walkway was constructed to connect the depot and eating house.

The railway eating house is now home to the World War II Japanese American Internment Museum, which was dedicated on April 16, 2013. The museum interprets the experience of Japanese Americans at the Rohwer and Jerome relocation centers in southeast Arkansas during World War II.

Walk south on Railroad Street about ½ block

Site of 2-story railroad office—

The Iron Mountain Railroad established a division point at McGehee in 1905 and constructed a two-story, wood-frame building south of the present-day depot to house railroad offices. By 1912, the building was also occupied by the Western Union Telegraph office, and by 1928, it was the American Railway Express. The building remained at Railroad and Pine streets until the 1950s.

Site of roundhouse—

The Iron Mountain Railroad constructed a roundhouse and shops at McGehee in 1905 on land acquired from Abner McGehee the previous year. The 15-stall roundhouse with turntable, machine shops, car shed, platforms, storage rooms, paint shop, wash room, and two 35,000-gallon fuel tanks were located to the east of the main line tracks, opposite the depot and about even with Pine Street. At one time, the railroad shops employed 250 to 300 men who worked three 8-hour shifts. 12,000 freight cars came through the yards every day. The Missouri Pacific Railroad closed its shops at McGehee in 1954.

YMCA (no longer extant)—

About 1910 the Iron Mountain constructed a 2-story YMCA building on Railroad Street between Cedar and Beech. Dormitory rooms were located upstairs, and a restaurant and pool hall was downstairs. By providing a safe place to sleep and some clean entertainment, the railroad hoped to keep its employees out of saloons and brothels.

Historically, commerce was centered along Railroad Street (sometimes called Main Street on old photos) on blocks near the depot. It wasn't until about 1920 that a substantial number of commercial buildings were constructed on First Street. And, in the early years, Crooked Bayou, which runs north-south between First and Second streets, was much bigger. Footbridges were constructed over the bayou to allow access to the residential part of town, and boats were used to cross the stream in high water.

**Photo of businesses on Railroad Street between Pine and Orange (now Seamans), ca. 1915.

**Photo of the railroad shops, looking southeast, ca. 1950.

Walk north on Railroad Street to park

Site of Greystone Hotel—

The 2-story, Colonial Revival-style Greystone Hotel was built at the northwest corner of Railroad Street and Seamans Drive in 1911. Hotel rooms were located on the second floor, and the hotel lobby, restaurant, barber shop, and coffee shop shared the first floor with Wolff Brothers Department Store. Mr. and Mrs. Sam Wolff, a Jewish couple, owned and operated the department store. They also had stores in Dumas, Tillar, Lake Village, Natchez, MS, and Lake Providence and Winnsboro, LA. The Greystone Hotel building spanned the entire width of the block and had a second entrance on First Street. In the 1920s, a 2-story building was constructed just to the north of the Greystone and also housed hotel rooms upstairs and retail on the first floor (Safeway Grocery on the First Street side). In the early 1930s, a 1-story building was constructed to the north of the hotel annex and housed a cotton factor office and Ruskin's 5 & 10. Sadly, these buildings were destroyed by fire on March 26, 1978.

**Photo of the Greystone Hotel, ca. 1950.

The 1912 Sanborn map shows the oldest part of the Greystone Hotel, then two wood-frame boarding houses, and then the 2-story brick and stone telephone exchange building. Interesting story—About 1900, Abner McGehee built a 2-story home on this block, a little bit north of the depot facing the railroad tracks. Prior to that, he lived in a house on the west side of Second Street, just north of the 1937 post office. But he wanted to be closer to his commissary business. In his new home, Mr. McGehee rented rooms to boarders, mostly men working for the railroad. His wife, Jennie Dickinson McGehee, served meals for their guests. The McGehee family moved to Little Rock in 1905 in order to give their children better educational opportunities. Coincidentally, they lived at 1315 Scott Street in Little

Rock, which is right next door to the house I toured last Friday. The old McGehee home later served as an annex for the Greystone Hotel and stood on this block until the 1920s, when it was demolished to make way for the 2-story brick addition to the Greystone.

Another house, located between the McGehee home and the original Greystone, was a boarding house operated by a Mrs. McGraw (who later married Bob Finley). It was demolished sometime between 1915 and 1920.

So by the 1930s, you had the enlarged Greystone Hotel, a 1-story building that housed Ruskin's 5 & 10, and then an empty lot where people parked their mules, wagons, and later, cars.

White building—

Constructed ca. 1925. In the mid-20th century, this building housed the bus station (Continental and Greyhound lines) on the Railroad Street side, and Kratzer's Hardware on the First Street side. W. A. Smith later bought the building and expanded his hardware store.

Vacant lot to north of white building—

Site of the old 2-story telephone exchange building. By 1940, it was Smith Hardware, owned by W. A. Smith. Mr. Smith sold all the materials used to build the Rohwer Relocation Center. This building stood until about 1970.

Building at SW corner Railroad & Oak streets (Salvation Army)—

Built ca. 1930. Had one storefront facing north on Oak Street and one storefront facing west on First Street. The Oak Street storefront was Model Dry Goods, and the First Street storefront was Mullis Grocery. Ms. Maxwell later moved the Model Dry Goods to the First Street side. The building was later the Wallace brothers' law office.

North side of Oak Street, near tracks, facing south on Oak—

Site of the McGehee Estate Commissary and Warehouse. The building was standing until at least 1928. It was gone before 1944.

Walk west on Oak Street to First Street

Vacant lot at NE corner Oak and First—

Site of a 1-story building that housed Selman's Grocery and Firestone. To the north of that was the Nickel House hamburger joint and bar. It had a white entrance and a black entrance and two counters with one waiter in the middle. The McGehee Estate Cotton Gin was located at the southeast corner of First and Holly streets (a Citgo station is now there). All of this was demolished about 1965 to build the current Human Services building, which was originally Safeway Grocery.

Water tower—

The City Waterworks and Electric Light Plant was located at the northeast corner of First and Holly streets by 1915. The current water tower may date to the original waterworks. An office for the waterworks and light plant was located on the current site of the H&R Block building. By 1928 the city-owned electric plant had been purchased by Arkansas Power & Light, which then had an office there. The building north of the water tower is old but has been altered. It was the White Swan Steam Laundry, later City Laundry Company.

Old Sportsman's Center Building at NW corner First & Oak—

Built ca. 1920. Mullis Grocery was also located here at one time. From the 1940s until about 2000, this was Sportsman's Center. At that time, the store moved into the green metal building up the block and remained open until about 2011.

There were a couple historic buildings north of the buff brick building—one of which was Kvaternik "Quarternick" Liquor, owned by Croatian immigrants.

Vacant lot at southwest corner First and Oak—

Site of a 1-story building that housed West Brothers Department Store and later, Dollar General. On September 20, 1975, a fire broke out in the building, and tragically, three firefighters were killed trying to extinguish the blaze. David R. Dupwe, III, Walter Russell Leonard, and Michael James Hunt lost their lives. A

memorial plaque is located in the Japanese Water Garden at the southwest corner of First and Seamans.

Walk south on First Street

1-story commercial building on west side of First Street—

Built ca. 1955. The Model Dry Goods store was also located here, after its earlier locations across the street.

Vacant lot to the south—

Site of Morgan & Lindsey's 5 & 10 store.

1-story buff brick building with 2 storefronts—

Built ca. 1945. The northern storefront (right) was Tom Johnson's Arts and Crafts store, which sold things like ceramics and model airplanes. The south side (left) was Howell Drug Store.

Malco Theater—

Built in 1950. Excellent example of an Art Moderne-style movie theater with an unornamented, smooth brick and tile façade and original doors, ticket window, and movie poster cases. It is missing its original marquee. Like all movie theaters in the South, the Malco had segregated seating. The black entrance was on the right, and black people were allowed to sit in one half of the balcony. Today the theater is privately owned by a church group. They still show movies and plays there.

**Photo of Malco Theater, probably taken soon after its completion, ca. 1951.

Park—

Remember that the Greystone Hotel building came all the way to First Street and had an entrance over here, and so did Wolff Brothers Department Store. Birch Jewelers was located in a small storefront between the west entrance to the Greystone and Wolff Bros.

Vacant lot at NW corner First & Seamans—
Always been vacant.

Seamans Drive—

Seamans Drive was originally called Orange Street. It is the dividing line between north and south on all numbered streets (i.e., North First Street is north of Seamans, and South First Street is south of Seamans).

Well-known attorney Pinckney Seamans and his wife, Zura Mae Brannon Seamans, lived at Orange and 4th streets until 1940 when they sold their home to the Baptist Church for a parsonage. Their son, Glen Guy Seamans, who was one of 10 children in the family, was killed on July 5, 1941, at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, and was the first casualty from Desha County during World War II (before Pearl Harbor). The name of Orange Street was changed to Seamans Drive in his honor. On October 25, 1950, the American Legion Auxiliary of the Claude E. Jaynes American Legion Post No. 79 dedicated a living memorial to the 73 Desha County men killed in World War II by planting a crepe myrtle for each one of the men along Seamans Drive. See the plaque at the corner of the park.

Look at SW corner of First & Seamans—

**Photo of the 100 block of S. First Street, looking from the second floor of the Greystone Hotel building, ca. 1945.

As you can see, this block was packed with historic buildings. They are all gone now. The west side of the block developed between 1915 and 1920 and included businesses like the Reliable Pharmacy, Hailey's Accounting, Stone Jewelry, the Ritz Café (early location), Wolchansky's Clothing, Sterling 5 & 10, and the Wolfe Building was at the northwest corner of First and Pine and housed several things, including Dr. Myer's dental office, Dr. Moss's doctor's office, attorney's offices, the USDA, and Selective Service.

Cross over to stand near Japanese Water Garden, dedicated to Japanese-Americans relocated to Rohwer and Jerome during WWII.

East side of 100 block of S. First Street (block with the new post office)—

The east side of this block developed during the 1920s and early 1930s. Businesses on this side of the street included McGehee Bank (in the Bank Building at the southeast corner of First and Seamans), Royal Café (open 24/7), Rex's Barber Shop, Fleisig's New York Store, Beck's Drug Store (which was connected to Beck's Liquor Store on the Railroad Street side), Baker Hardware (in a 3-story building, built ca. 1925, only building in town to have an elevator, building also housed the Army/Navy recruiting office), and Isadore Small Dry Goods.

Veteran's Memorial—dedicated on July 4, 2011

East side of 200 block, S. First Street—

This block developed about 1915. It was also full of historic buildings. Occupants included Isadore Marcus's Eagle Store (Mr. Marcus measured his customers' feet carefully and asked if you wanted to wear your new shoes home or take them in the box...if you elected to wear them home, he quickly pointed out that they would no longer be new...Marcus also had numerous "going out of business" sales), Peter's Sandwich Shop (which had a boxing ring in the back with gambling), Jones Furniture, the Garland Hotel (2-story, at the northeast corner of First and Cedar), Roswell Bakery, and Crow-Burlingame.

West side of 200 block, S. First Street—

McGehee City Jail (NR-listed 1/21/2011)—

The McGehee City Jail was built in 1908 and was originally part of (or adjacent to) a larger 2-story City Hall/Fire Station building on this corner. The jail has three cells, all with metal doors. Most people who spent time in the city jail were arrested for things like theft, public drunkenness, domestic violence, and disturbing the peace. And most people didn't spend more than a couple nights here. More serious offenders were sent elsewhere. This building served as the city jail until a new municipal building was completed at the southwest corner of Oak and N. Second streets in 1936 (municipal building is no longer extant).

Walk west on Pine

Southeast corner Pine & Second—

Site of the American Legion Hut—The McGehee Post No. 79 of the American Legion was organized in 1919 by a group of World War I veterans. They named their post in honor of Claude Edwin Jaynes, who was killed in the line of duty in France on July 23, 1918. The legion hut was built at the southeast corner of Pine and Second streets in 1926. The building was demolished in 1983.

Walk north on Second

Southeast corner 2nd and Seamans—site of the Ritz Theatre, which was built in 1928. The Ritz burned about 1975.

N. Second Street, going north from Seamans Drive—

West side—Griffin-Culpepper Funeral Home—new building on the site of two old houses. The ca. 1930 2-story Dyer Funeral Home would have been in the parking lot just north of the current Griffin-Culpepper building.

On the other half of the parking lot and maybe part of the Western Auto building, there was the ca. 1925 2-story Doris House (which was an annex/overflow for the Greystone Hotel), and was later the Shepard Hotel.

Western Auto (old part)—built in late 1960s or early 70s?

Western Auto (new metal buildings)—built on the site of the 1935-36 McGehee City Hall/Fire Station/Jail Building. The municipal building was constructed with funds from the Public Works Administration (PWA) during the Great Depression. The PWA is different from the WPA, but they were both New Deal agencies.

East side—McGehee Transmission—was built ca. 1950 as a Lion Oil service station.

Cross Oak Street

West side—McGehee Post Office (NR-listed 1/19/2010)—

The old McGehee Post Office was built in 1937 and was designed in the Colonial Revival style by Louis A. Simon, supervising architect for the U.S. Treasury Department. In 1963 an addition was constructed on the north side of the post office. This building served as the post office until 1999, when a new building was completed on First Street.

McGehee's first school was started about 1903 in a wood-frame building on this corner. It was also in the same building that in 1905 Rev. J. L. Cannon organized the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. In 1907 the Methodist congregation built a wood-frame church on this site. **Photo taken during the 1927 Flood, looking west on Oak Street. You can see the old Methodist Church on the right side of the picture (which was here on the site of the post office) and the 1927 Methodist Church in the middle (which was built just in time for the Flood at the northwest corner of Third and Oak; no longer extant). Also, recall that Abner McGehee's first residence was located north of the old post office. It stood until about 1942.

East side (NE corner 2nd & Oak)—

Built ca. 1945. Dairyland Ice Cream. The company made their own ice cream and served it in little cups. They also delivered ice cream throughout the region.

202 N. 2nd—

Built ca. 1945, has new façade. May have been a location of Safeway and later a Christmas gift shop?

204 N. 2nd (now Lisa's Floors & More)—

Built ca. 1945. Kroger and later Sears.

West side—

Built ca. 1965 by the *McGehee Times* printing company. Clazier's Clothing was located in the north end of the building.

East side—Desha Lodge 643 F & AM—built ca. 1965. Roman brick and glass block.

West side—

211 N. 2nd—built ca. 1970. P & S Drug.

House—Smith Law Office/Desha Abstract & Title Co.

East—210 N. 2nd—old USDA office; now insurance.

SW corner N. 2nd & Holly—

Jalisco's Mexican Restaurant—used to be the Ritz Café (a later location), run by Mr. Kvaternik "Quarternick", a Croatian immigrant.

SE corner N. 2nd & Holly—City Service Station

NW corner N. 2nd & Holly—

McGehee Bank—built 1959-1960. McGehee Bank is a direct descendant of Citizens State Bank of McGehee, which was chartered in 1917. In 1929 Citizens State Bank became First National Bank of McGehee and in 1931 became McGehee Bank & Trust Company. On December 4, 1960, McGehee Bank moved from its location in the Bank Building at the southeast corner of First and Seamans to its new 13,200 square foot building at 2nd & Holly. The new building cost \$800,000 and had 3 levels (a basement and two levels above ground). In 1970 an addition was built on the north side of the new bank building. This is an excellent example of Mid-century Modern architecture with a low, horizontal profile; decorative concrete block; and steel frame construction with glass curtain walls.

Cross to the north side of Holly at the 4-way stop and walk west on Holly

North on N. 3rd Street—

NE corner 3rd & Holly—Southwestern Bell Telephone Company building, constructed 1958.

310 N. 3rd--Dyer House, nice example of English Revival style, built ca. 1950.

NW corner 3rd & Lynn—

St. Mary's Catholic Church—built in 1956. St. Winand's Parish was established at McGehee in 1906 by Father Matthew, and a church building was dedicated in 1908 at 405 N. 3rd Street on land originally used as a small Catholic cemetery. A rectory was also built here in 1908. In 1915 a Catholic school and convent were constructed. The school was taught by nuns from St. Scholastica Monastery at Fort Smith. A new school was built in 1928 and is still extant (red brick building on Lynn Street). In 1946 the front wall of the old church was torn down and rebuilt with two front towers. The church had been damaged by the 1927 Flood, and the project also increased the square footage of the church. In 1956 on the Golden Anniversary of the Parish, a new church building was constructed and was named St. Mary's Catholic Church (had been St. Winand's). A new rectory and additional housing for nuns and priests were also built at that time. The current church (1956) was designed in a restrained version of the Gothic Revival style and features the bell from the Catholic church at Napoleon (the first Desha County seat; washed into the Mississippi River in the 1860s and 1870s).

Walk west on Lynn

Ranch-style rectory, ca. 1956

St. Winand's Catholic School, 1928. Operated until 1972.

Behind the school—additional housing for priests/nuns, ca. 1956

Walk south on 4th Street

First Presbyterian Church—GO INSIDE (Jane Lucky, Carolyn Smith)

Built 1950-52. A Presbyterian church was organized in McGehee in 1911, and a church was erected near the northeast corner of 4th and Holly streets, facing south on Holly, in 1914-15. The current church and education building were constructed in 1950-52 and were designed by well-known Little Rock architect John Parks Almand, who was the lead designer of Little Rock Central High School.

The children's Sunday School class collected money for the building fund, and they were told that 5 cents bought a board. The first service was held in the new sanctuary on July 27, 1952.

Cross Holly Street and continue south on 4th

SE corner 4th & Holly—

Temple Meir Chayim "Myer Kie-am" (NR-listed 4/22/1999)—GO INSIDE
(Roseanne Marin)

Built in 1947 to provide a place of worship for Jews living in McGehee, Dermott, Eudora, Lake Village, and other towns in the region. Although Jews have always been a minority in Arkansas, they have a long, rich history in this state and have played an active part in Arkansas's civic and economic life. Religious persecution and legal restrictions prompted waves of Jewish immigration from central and eastern Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of those people ended up in the Arkansas Delta, peddling goods and eventually opening stores of all kinds. Jews in McGehee and Dermott met in private homes and other buildings to hold religious services and provide religious education for their children. In 1947 the regional Jewish community decided to build a temple in McGehee. No architect was hired. The plans were drawn by McGehee merchant Sam Wolchansky, who visited several other temples and churches to get ideas. The temple features Romanesque Revival-style elements like rounded arch window and door openings, as well as a Mission-style parapet on the front façade. On the outside front wall, above the front door is a Tablet of the Ten Commandments from the Temple Beth El Emeth, which was built in 1872 at Camden. Temple Meir Chayim was dedicated on May 1, 1949, with Rabbi Ira E. Sanders of Little Rock delivering the sermon.

Desha County Branch Library, McGehee—dedicated April 5, 1970

Dr. Moss Memorial Clinic—

Built ca. 1950 as a medical clinic for Dr. Moss. Great example of Art Moderne-style architecture in McGehee. Curved walls with glass block, low horizontal orientation, flat roof, smooth façade.

Desha County Court Building, McGehee—

Two efforts to move the Desha County seat to McGehee failed, but in 1953 a court district was formed at McGehee and included McGehee, McArthur, Kelso, and Watson. A district courthouse was built in 1955. The building is still used for juvenile cases.

Bicentennial Time Capsule—placed here by the McGehee Women’s Club and will be reopened on July 3, 2076.

Cooperative Extension Service Building—

Old telephone office, then the county health office, now the extension service

Point out the Baptist Church at 4th & Seamans—current sanctuary was built in 1977. We’ll talk more about the Baptist Church in a few minutes...

Walk east on Oak to Methodist Church

NW corner 3rd & Oak—

First United Methodist Church—The current structure was built in 1954-55. We already talked about the Methodist Church. The 1907 church building was at 2nd & Oak on the site of the 1937 post office. In 1926-1927 a new church was constructed on the present-day parking lot at 3rd & Oak (**Picture of the 1927 Methodist Church in your packet). One service was held in this church before the 1927 Flood, and the building always had a distinct smell after the Flood. The current Gothic Revival-style building was constructed in 1954-55, and an education building was added in 1976.

Walk south on Third Street to Seamans

First Baptist Church—

A Baptist church was organized at McGehee in 1909 under Rev. Nick Denson. In 1913 the first church building was constructed near the northeast corner of 4th and Seamans. A buff brick church building was constructed in 1928-29 to replace the earlier structure, and an education building was completed in 1956. The 1920s church was demolished in 1976 to make way for the current sanctuary, which was built in 1977. The 1956 education building is still extant but has a 1970s veneer on the Seamans Drive side.

NE corner 3rd & Seamans--

St. Paul's Episcopal Church—built in 1955. Restrained Gothic Revival-style design.

Walk east on Seamans back to the depot

Questions?