

Museum News: The Last Courthouse Squirrel

By Bill Smith, Curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

For years Mrs. Donna Smith, Deputy Clerk in the Terrell County Clerk's Office, would look out the small window by the copier as she made copies and watch two little brown squirrels frolic on the Courthouse lawn. Donna was a nature lover and liked to keep track of the flora and fauna of the Courthouse environment. She would often call the staff's attention to their antics, and when time would allow they would crowd the window to watch the show.

Then, one year, only one squirrel showed up and Donna assumed that something...predator, old age or accident...had taken the little squirrel's partner. Now, it seems unusual that we live in an area where squirrels are present but not too abundant, and you do see them run across the highway occasionally as you are driving away from town. I live close to the big hill that protrudes out into town, sometimes known as Hominy Hill or "Old Baldy," and I have seen the odd squirrel scampering across the mountainside, but usually, you just don't see them running in town. They seem to avoid us like the plague.

When my wife and I lived in Illinois in the early '70s our little town was full of squirrels and they were very entertaining little rascals. The local squirrel in our neighborhood was constantly being chased by the neighbor's beautiful black and white cat. Mr. Squirrel easily outdistanced the cat every time. But, one day the cat had the advantage and as he made his last pounce, Mr. Squirrel whirled around, stood on his hind legs, raised both front paws high over his head in a menacing gesture and lunged at the cat. You could almost see the cat's jaw drop in fear and amazement, then, he took off across the lawn with the angry Mr. Squirrel in hot pursuit. Somehow he thought running up a tree would save him, but up went Mr. Squirrel, literally hot on his tail. In a moment there was a crash of limbs and twigs and they fell onto the lawn in a ball of brown and white and black fur, tumbling, over and over. By now, the cat was squalling hysterically, in total terror. There was a break in the action for a moment, and the cat took off in a black and white blur. Mr. Squirrel sat back on his haunches as the cat departed to the next county. He was gone several days, but we never saw him chase Mr. Squirrel again.

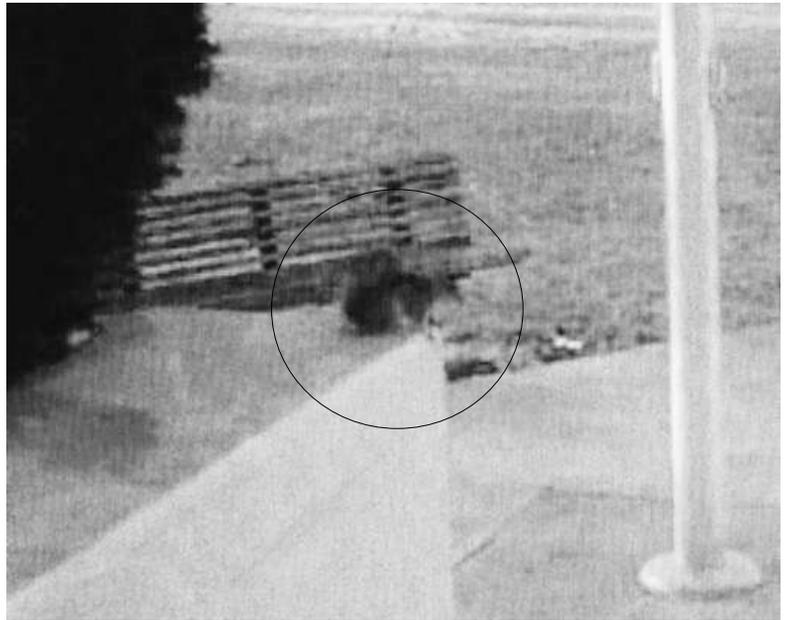
My job often took me to the nearby town of Olney, Illinois, famous for its all-albino population of white squirrels. It was kind of creepy seeing these little white ghosts running rampant in the streets and on the power lines, their pink, beady little eyes shining like demons.

But, out here in our part of the Trans Pecos we have the rock squirrel, which comes in three sub-species, ours being the light grey or beige variety. And, our personal population at the Courthouse was now down to one, the Last Courthouse Squirrel. He/she frolicked on the lawn as usual, climbed the trees and gathered pecans for daily consumption and for winter storage, seemingly unfazed by the loss of its partner.

Then, one day shortly before the Centennial celebration in 2005, a very distraught citizen walked into the Clerk's Office. "Miss Martha!" (That's how we talk at the Courthouse...Mr. Bill, Miss Martha, Miss Veronica, etc.) "I just killed a squirrel! Lord! It's like running over a baby!"

Now, this was not some wimpy little Casper Milquetoast, this was a big, strapping man, and he was beside himself. Amazingly tenderhearted for such a big scrappy guy, he was almost in tears.

After much breast-beating on his part and much consolation from the ladies in the office, he regained his composure and left in better shape than he came. As he left, the clerks went to the window for a look-see and sure enough, out on 2nd Street in front of St. James Church, there lay the deceased, sprawled on its back with its tiny arms raised to the sky in a defensive gesture, deader than a doornail. The Last Courthouse Squirrel of Terrell County was no more, and no other has taken its place.



Like a proper UFO photo, the only known photo of the Last Courthouse Squirrel, taken shortly before its demise.

Courtesy of the Terrell County Clerk's Office



Famous Olney, IL, white squirrel.

Courtesy of ci.olney.il.us