The Toltec Club: Of Ghosts and Guests

By Heather Coons

H ave you ever felt the hair on the back of your neck rise, but when you look around, nothing is there?

According to Natalie Castillo, a law office receptionist on the third floor of the Toltec Building, working late on Saturday nights can be an uncomfortable experience.

“I feel like I’m not alone,” Castillo admitted. “I’ll see something from the corner of my eye, and I’ll turn and look, but nothing’s there.” She is not the only person to report strange happenings at the Toltec over the years.

So what went on in this El Paso building that most people do not know by name and that ghosts may still be haunting? From 1911 through 1930, the vast majority of political and business decisions affecting El Paso were made there, and every prominent guest to the area was entertained in El Paso’s Toltec Club.

Historian C. L. Sonnichsen explained in his book Pass of the North: Four Centuries on the Rio Grande that the uproar at the turn of the 20th century over gambling, dancing, saloons and prostitution caused a group of elite members to break away from The El Paso Club and start a new club for witty, knowledgeable businessmen who could lead El Paso into a new era.

Founding members declared in an article published in the El Paso Herald on Feb. 3, 1902, “We shall have a club modeled along the lines of modern eastern [U. S.] clubs … and make it worthy of the new El Paso.” This article also reported on an unusual feature of the club’s proposed “social hour”: to discuss business and personal matters, an element that was predicted to become a “popular movement in El Paso.”

Thanks to founding members W. H. Burges, T. M. Wingo, Felix Martinez, W. W. Turrent, A. F. Coles, Britton Davis and brothers J. Arthur Eddy and C. B. Eddy, the Toltec (meaning “man of knowledge”) Club was born. Members of the exclusive club for men signed articles of incorporation on Nov. 18, 1902. Shortly thereafter, ground broke for the $100,000 brick five-story building to be constructed on the site of the former First Baptist Church at the intersection of San Antonio and Magoffin Streets.

The gentlemen of the Toltec Club immediately set out to build a clubhouse that was every bit as polished as they were, with the newest and best of materials and furnishings brought in from around the world via railroad. The “flatiron” shape of the building also drew interest and to this day demands second and third looks by downtown visitors.

Leon Metz wrote in his book El Paso Chronicles that the new Toltec Building was declared to be the “brightest spot of its time in El Paso” when the doors opened formally on Oct. 14, 1910. With a high initiation fee of $100 and yearly dues of $50, membership was guaranteed to remain exclusive. The membership list of the Toltec Club read like a “Who’s Who” of El Paso society. Besides the original members, some of the more prominent members included Joseph Magoffin, founder of the first bank in El Paso and civic leader, and Henry C. Trost, the Southwest’s foremost architect, who arrived in El Paso in 1903.

The Toltec Club had one of the grandest ballrooms in the area, along with a dining room that claimed to have the finest cuisine in the country. The building featured a billiards room, reading rooms, lounging rooms and apartments for bachelor members. Members also gathered in the gaming room for high-stakes gambling, according to an article in Password by Robert M. Esch.

Members enjoyed this “civilized” gambling, but they believed that the rough-and-tumble local saloons, prostitutes and unrestricted gambling hindered the development of a progressive city. This group of prominent men was united in the desire to stop the political corruption that was rife throughout the area.

Although membership was exclusively male, the gentlemen of the Toltec Club held regular lavish events to entertain their wives, who wore formal evening gowns; tails and ties for men were mandatory. The annual New Year’s Eve masquerade ball brought much anticipation and excitement. Sonnichsen wrote that the men took pride in their annual stag dinners that were held to elect club officers, events that also demanded tails and ties.

The Toltec Club became the headquarters for the El Paso Bar Association, and they, too, held annual voting dinners to elect club officers. El Paso’s Elk Lodge 187 was also housed at the Toltec.

Not only did many of El Paso’s business and political decisions and debates and glitzy socializing take place at the Toltec Club during the early 1900s, but the Toltec Club also played a prominent role in the Mexican Revolution.

In 1910, Mexico’s president, Porfirio Diaz, was under pressure from Francisco I. Madero and his general, Pancho Villa, to resign. David D. Romo explained in his book Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923 that middle- and upper-class businessmen, politicians and intellectuals, like Mexican entrepreneur Oscar Brannif and El Paso’s own Felix Martinez, carried out peace negotiations between Madero and the Diaz Administration at the Toltec Club.

President Diaz resigned after the Battle of Ciudad Juárez on May 18, 1911, and Madero, the new president of Mexico, was honored at a victory banquet held at the Toltec Club. In the very same building that had entertained former President Diaz, Madero sat alongside his only invited officer, Eduardo Hay, and the defeated, yet dignified, Gen. Juan Navarro.

From 1911 through 1917, the most important guests in the area were entertained at the Toltec Club. Former president Theodore Roosevelt visited on several occasions and on March 16, 1911, Roosevelt was in “high spirits” and “ate heartily” at a breakfast held in the Toltec dining room, according to an article in the El Paso Times.

Gen. John J. Pershing was also honored at the Toltec Club after pursuing Pancho Villa, who, according to Metz and Romo, rented the first floor of the Toltec Club during the Mexican Revolution as his headquarters for smuggling munitions.

However, the immense power of the Toltec Club could not withstand the blow of Prohibition during which many El Paso establishments moved across the border to Juárez. America’s economic collapse during the Great Depression caused the members of the Toltec Club to close its doors in 1930.

Although lacking its original splendor both inside and out, the privately owned Toltec Building still stands in downtown El Paso across from the Federal Building. The historically significant Renaissance/Beaux Arts architectural style, engineered by J. J. Huddart, and the vastly significant social and political functions that took place inside its doors allowed it to be recorded in the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

After the club disbanded, the Toltec Building became the home of several businesses: Leo’s Mexican Food in the 1950s, the Upstairs Theater Downtown in the 1970s, Dominic’s Italian Restaurant (now at another location) and a bail bonds company on the first floor. But aside from the law office that has remained on the third floor for more than 30 years, businesses don’t stay at the Toltec. Why would such a beautiful old building stand basically empty?

Two El Paso natives, Ken Hudnall and Connie Wang, wrote in Spirits of the Border: The History and Mystery of the El Paso Del Norte that while the Upstairs Theater occupied the balcony, unexplained incidents often occurred.

When the building was completed in 1910, the Toltec Club was considered the finest social gathering place in El Paso. (Photo by Heather Coons)
tanning. Colonists cultivated grapes, apples, pears, apricots and peaches, as well as artichokes and asparagus, some of which was taken by neighboring neighbors.

But the climate was no friend to the farmers. Heat warped irrigation pipes. Floods washed away new crops. Fires destroyed farm equipment. Soon, the huge farming enterprise was overrun with debt.

The colonists also had an extensive herd of dairy cattle to provide milk for the children. High-quality cattle that filled barns and corrals gradually decreased in number as neighboring families also made off with the colony’s animals.

While the external complications were plenty, it was the internal strife that brought about the colony’s demise.

During Shalam’s conception in 1884, Newbrough was still married to his first wife, Rachel. He was granted a divorce on Oct. 6, 1886. Newbrough and Frances Sweet were married in 1887, causing dissension amongst the colonists, as well as rumors of still-love and easy character.

The well publicized trial of Ellis vs. Howland and Newbrough over ownership of the land and delay of agricultural plans also played a major role in the demise of the colony. Cutting remarks made by the presiding judge, Justice A. A. Freeman, caused derogatory publicity, and recruitment of potential colonists came to a halt.

Ultimate disaster befell the colony in 1891 when Newbrough died of influenza. Frances Newbrough and Andrew Howland attempted to revive the faded dream. In 1893 they were married to quiet sordid rumors. For almost a decade, they struggled to keep the colony going.

By 1900, Shalam was destitute. The school closed, children rebelled and colonists squabbled. They officially disbanded in 1901, with the remaining children sent to orphanages in Texas and Colorado.

Andrew Howland sold Shalam in 1907 for $60,000. He and Frances settled in El Paso, selling vegetarian snacks.

The Newbroughs’ daughter, Justine, changed her name to Jone Howland, and wrote for an El Paso newspaper.

Never reaching the hundreds predicted, the 50 children of Shalam grew up, most abandoning their Faithist training. Some found relatives, others wandered.

The Faithists of Shalam scattered throughout the West. Some started their own colonies, all to be short-lived. In 1942, Faithists led by Wing Anderson bought property in Utah and Colorado for orphanages and agriculture. Today, there are about 1,500 Faithists in the United States, and the Oahspe is still in print and available online, but very little of Shalam can be seen. Amidst cottonwood trees stands the studio, the sole surviving building, where Newbrough painted religious art while children colored at his feet.

The history of this short-lived utopian society, laced with fact and fiction, is attracting new attention. The Shalam Colony & Oahspe Museum in Las Cruces is located at 1910 Calle de Niños. T. Robin Riley, a former NMSU professor now teaching in Minnesota, has recently produced a documentary film on the colony and curated an exhibit in 2009 at the Farm and Ranch Museum in Las Cruces. Can Hollywood be far behind??