

The Past is Still Visible: the Fey & Braunig Building

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He paused for a moment before beginning the climb up the stairs to his studio. He could not remember how many times he had walked up this same flight of stairs over the past forty five years. Granted, he still loved his work; the opportunity to help people capture a special moment in their lives; the excited faces of a new bride and groom, a cheerful and plump new baby or an event unfolding outside his studio window on the courthouse square below.

However, while his job never grew old, his body did and after sixty two years behind his trusty Emil Busch camera, he believed the time had come to retire. "The best laid plans of mice and men", he thought to himself as he placed his foot on the first step. He could not bring himself to retire now; America was on the brink of war and he had been bombarded by military enlistees and their families for portraits. "How can I retire now, who would take these boy's pictures" he thought as he began the climb to his studio.

Step by step, he climbed up those familiar stairs and reminisced back to 1895 when his in-laws had sold this lot to him and his friend and partner Pius Fey. He smiled to himself when he remembered how proud they had both been and how proud he still was. Even today, folks remembered that their building had been the first building west of the mighty Mississippi that was built purposely for use as a photography studio.

Shaking his head as to clear his thoughts, Henry reached the top of the stairs. Time to get to work; people were waiting....

Henry Jacob Braunig was born in Meyersville, Texas on April 1, 1861. When Henry was two years old, his father was killed, a victim of the Civil War. His mother remarried Charles W. Nau and Henry was raised in Yorktown, Texas. Young Henry left home as age 14 and went to work in a dry goods store in Cuero, Texas. While clerking, Henry met Pius Fey a traveling photographer who headquartered in Cuero. Fey suggested that Braunig accompanied him on a trip to the hill county as his apprentice and in 1878 a partnership and lifelong friendship was born.

Fey remained in Cuero, while Braunig set up shop in Hallettsville. In 1887, their first permanent studio was located one block east of the courthouse square

replacing a large tent that served as a temporary site. This building was located north of the present day Hallettsville Lumber Company. The lumber for their first studio was hauled from Cuero. The partnership proved to be so successful that Fey and Braunig decided to erect a new building designed especially for their business.

In 1890, the partners set their plan in motion. On March 26th, they purchased part of Lots 2 and 4 in Block 7 from J. P. Morris. At the time of purchase, the lot was occupied by a rock store building being used by Mr. Price as a bar room. On March 1, 1895, Fritz Lindenberg and his wife sold part of Lots 2 and 4 in Block 7 to Fey and Braunig. The Lindenegs were Braunig's in-laws; Henry had married their daughter, Mary Ida Lindenberg, on April 10, 1888.

The local newspaper broke the news that the partners would build a brick store in the spring. The old rock building on the lot which was now occupied by Leopold Silber's saloon, would be torn down and replaced with a two-story brick of handsome design, with a glass front specially arranged to suite the firm's stationery and book business. The upper floor, which would serve as their photographic studio, would have large windows and skylights to take advantage of the natural light.

The contract for the building was awarded to Mauer & Wesling who had also served as the architects. It was announced in the local newspaper that the work of removing the old building and laying the foundation of the new would begin in late April or early May 1895. The front of the building will be Illinois and Elgin fancy red brick with chipped rock trimmings.

In May, Messrs. Mauer & Wesling let the contract for tearing down the rock building and doing the woodwork for the new Fey & Braunig building to Leopold & Hannig. Everyone in town knew that another old "landmark" was about to disappear. The old rock building set for demolition had been built by Fritz Lindenberg in 1876 and was the scene of a number of incidents that belonged to Lavaca County history.

Work progressed all summer and an announcement was printed in the local newspaper that on or about September 1st, the business house now occupied by Fey & Braunig located one block east of the courthouse would be available for rent. It was later rented by Mr. M. F. Nau, of Yorktown, a half brother of Braunig. Nau opened a tin shop and hardware store in the building.

In early September, after a week of hard labor, Messrs. Fey & Braunig had settled into their elegant new brick building. The newspaper declared it to be undoubtedly the finest in the city. It went on to state that the style of

architecture was quaint but attractive. The work reflects credit on Messrs. Mauer & Wesling. The woodwork was done by Leopold & Hanning and is of a high standard of excellence while the brush work done by Louis Mohrman is artistic. The counters are being made by Mauer & Wesling are the most artistic pieces of woodwork ever attempted here. Hallettsville is proud of the Fey & Braunig building and wants more like it.

From floor to ceiling, under and on the counters, in the garrets, everywhere, every nook was filled with school supplies, stationery, slates, books, pencils, inks etc ready for sale.

Now, thought Braunig, as his last morning appointment descended the stairs, it is time for a break and a quick bite of lunch while I have a moment to myself. As the crowd noise from the square filtered up into his studio, Braunig could not help but think of the years that he had shared this building with Pius Fey. Pius had been his mentor and his best friend. Even when he and Fey had decided to end their partnership in 1909, after 31 years together, they remained the best of friends.

After becoming sole proprietor of his business, Braunig continued to be one of the outstanding photographers of his era. His photography studio and stationary store downstairs operated in the Fey & Braunig building for another 36 years.

However, when Braunig decided to delay his retirement in 1940, disaster struck when Hallettsville was inundated with flood waters from the swollen Lavaca River. Until the great flood of July 1940, Braunig had every plate he had ever made properly marked and recorded so that he could make copies at any time.

As he studied the rays of light dancing in the windows of his studio, it saddened him when he allowed himself to think about the "flood". What a monumental disaster that had been he thought. All those plates ruined after so many years of work. I had been so careful to save and mark each one, and now they were practically all gone.

As the courthouse clock struck one, Braunig eased himself out of his chair. He stopped for a moment and allowed himself to slowly look around his studio. Well, Pius, he thought, we did a good job. This building has served both you and I well and hopefully will remain a part of the courthouse square for many years. Sometimes, I wonder if anyone will even remember that I was ever here. No matter, I am here now and my first afternoon appointment is coming up the stairs. He smiled as the young couple entered his studio....

On December 7, 1945, Henry Jacob Braunig died at the age of 84. He was still working in the studio just days before his death. It was reported that as death approached, Braunig told his children “If I had an opportunity to live my life over, I would want it exactly as it was”.

“Great minds are related to the brief span of time during which they live as great buildings are to a little square in which they stand...”