

PHELAN MANSION

Beaumont, Texas

by Shannon Deason

ACCORDING TO STEPHEN FOX, in his book *The Country Houses of John Staub*, the Phelan mansion was one of the most expensive, if not *the* most expensive house built in Texas in the 1920s. John Henry Phelan made his fortune with the Spindletop oil discovery, and, in 1928, he set about to build the most spectacular house in the town of Beaumont.

His architect, Owen James Trainor Southwell of Atlanta, designed a Palladian Georgian mansion set on 28 acres at a cost of \$500,000, which included a \$25,000 pipe organ. He designed a nine-bay, two-story house built of limestone and brick with a gabled, tile roof. Centered on the main elevation was a two-story portico, its limestone pediment supported by limestone columns in the Corinthian style. Phelan named the house Caed Mile Failte, which is Gaelic for “one hundred thousand welcomes.”



Phelan mansion with St. Elizabeth Hospital behind



Phelan mansion from Calder Avenue



Phelan mansion showing side entrance to the ground floor ballroom



Front entrance



Looking south toward Calder Avenue



Portico



Balcony of second floor chapel as seen from the forecourt

The Phelan house was one of the last of the great oil baron mansions to be built on historic Calder Avenue, and Owen Southwell gave the house a spectacular setting 350 feet from the street. The interior of the house was impressive as well. The music room housed panels made in 1885 for the Hapsburg Empress Elizabeth of Austria, who intended them for the Hofburg Palace. Created by the Uffenheimer Art Studio of Innsbruck, Austria, the panels were never invested in their royal setting; instead, in 1929, they were acquired by Marshall Field and subsequently sold to Mrs. Phelan. The grandest room in the house was the 21-by-41-foot ballroom, noted for its elaborate Adamesque plaster wall ornament that incorporated architectural elements, angels, and a variety of delicate floral and

foliar motifs. The house also included an extravagant chapel that required approval from the Pope in order to build. The house was surrounded by extensive gardens and grounds designed by Dallas landscape architect Homer Frey.

In January of 1957, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word accepted the gift of the Phelan estate, which included the mansion and its 28 acres. At the time, the gift of his estate was called “the most generous philanthropic gift in the history of Beaumont,” and it came at the end of many years of giving by the Phelans. The house itself served as the convent house for the Sisters of Charity. By the time the St. Elizabeth Hospital opened its doors in the spring of 1962, the landscape of the Phelan estate had been radically transformed: no longer was



Original south gate facing Calder Avenue

Southwell's Caed Mile Failte the commanding presence on the landscape. Today the city and the hospital have grown around the estate. The house is no longer occupied by the Sisters of Charity, but is used for wedding receptions and other social engagements. The house's original sense of distance from the city is all but gone.

In spite of the modifications to the house and the reduction of its former extensive grounds to a mere 4.5 acres, Caed Mile Failte remains a testament to John Henry Phelan's desires and achievements, Owen Southwell's skills, and to Beaumont's oil-rich history.