

Belle of Rogers County

It's March 1907, and John Melville Bayless, an entrepreneur, and businessman in the area, breaks ground in Claremore, Oklahoma. He's building a home for his family to settle into, and the groundwork for the house is laid in Indian Territory. But in eight months, it will rest in Oklahoma, one month after President Roosevelt issues Presidential Proclamation 780, declaring it the forty-eighth state. The Victorian, Painted Lady-style mansion will stand three stories tall, be framed with four towers, and even have woodwork shipped from the St. Louis World's Fair. It's the Belvidere Mansion, and with time, it will become known as the Belle of Rogers County.

During his time in Claremore, Bayless was sure to leave his mark and show his worth. Having moved his family from Cassville, Missouri, to Sulphur, Oklahoma, and finally to Claremore in 1900, Bayless saw financial opportunities in the Indian Territories due to the presence of the railroads.

"He was a banker from over in Missouri; he also acquired the right of way for railroads," said John Cary, volunteer director of the Belvidere Mansion. "If a town didn't have a railroad, but it needed a short spur [line] built, he would acquire the right of way, and if he thought it was a good deal, he'd basically hang onto part ownership of it in exchange for his work acquiring the right of way. Otherwise, he would just ask for payment. But anything real estate related, or anything bank related, he was involved in."

He chose Claremore over Tulsa because it had two railroads instead of Tulsa's one.

Upon arriving in Claremore, he already had the construction of the Cassville & Western and the Arkansas & Oklahoma Railroads under his belt. Along with the development of Belvidere Mansion, which cost him somewhere between \$25,000 and \$50,000, or roughly \$800,000 to \$1.5 million when adjusted for inflation, he would also go on to build the Windsor Opera House, the Claremore Athletic Association, and the Sequoyah Hotel, which housed the Bank of Claremore. Out of all of these structures, the mansion is the only one to remain fully intact today. The tragic irony is that Bayless wouldn't live to see his home completed. In June 1907, he suffered a fatal Appendicitis attack and died

prematurely. His wife, Mary Melissa, and their seven children would, however, go on to live in the mansion until 1919.

By 1926, the mansion would house new residents when the Bell family purchased it. The 9,000-square-foot building was repurposed into a complex with twelve apartments on the second and third floors. However, when most of the family who owned it passed away, and the rent from the tenants wasn't enough to keep it going, the mansion fell into disrepair in the 1980s and by the 1990s, it was all but deserted. Fortunately, in 1991, the Rogers County Historical Society, led by President Wanda Moore, purchased the property and began restorations.

"She saw the building and decided that it was a building that needed to be saved. She was a local dynamo who was able to find people who were interested in helping her," said Cary. "We had a local pediatrician who headed up the effort

and cosigned a mortgage to borrow money to buy it for \$75,000. It was in very poor condition. We don't get any federal, state, or local funds. All of the money we've been putting into the building [is from] donations and fundraising; some people have even left money to the Belvidere Historical Society in their wills."

The Belvidere Mansion — aptly named "Belvedere" meaning a building with a view — currently rests on the corner of 4th Street and Chickasaw



Avenue in historic Claremore and is safely listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Because of its age, maintenance is a constant priority. Upkeep and maintenance gets paid thanks to donations from people around the community, especially those who donate following the daily free tours around the glamorous home. The third-floor ballroom is rented out monthly for special events like proms and weddings, and the first floor is rented out to a restaurant called The Pink House, which has been voted "Best Place to Have Lunch in Claremore" by the Claremore Daily Progress.

John Melville Bayless did not get to enjoy the fruit of his vision, and his family only resided at the home for a little more than a decade, but sometimes, if we are lucky, our work and dreams live on beyond us. Over a century later, the mansion continues to overlook the city of Claremore, and is a reminder of one industrious man and his short time in Oklahoma.