

**Sandwiching in History**  
**Roundtop Filling Station**  
**Trammel & Roundtop roads, Sherwood**  
**November 7, 2014**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



**Intro**

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of the Roundtop Filling Station. Most of you know about the suspected arson at the Roundtop last Sunday morning. The damage to the building’s exterior was relatively minor, considering what could have happened. I am extremely glad to be here today! There has been an outpouring of support for the project in the past week, and the Roundtop’s restoration will go forward!

I’d like to thank Darrell Brown, chairman of the Sherwood History & Heritage Committee; Philip Quandt with Taggart Architects; and Sandra Taylor Smith, director of the NLR History Commission, for their help with the tour. Also, I’d like to thank Mr. Trini Escovedo, who lives across the street, for allowing folks to park on his property.

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you're interested.

The Roundtop Filling Station was built in 1936. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2008 with statewide significance for its association with the development of Arkansas highway culture, and because it is the only known example of this type of filling station left in the state.

### **Architecture**

The Roundtop is an example of Mimetic or Novelty architecture, which describes buildings designed to mimic unconventional shapes, or objects associated with their function. This was typically done to attract customers and became very popular for roadside architecture during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, a coffee shop might be shaped like a giant coffee cup, or a diner might be shaped like a giant hot dog. In the case of the Roundtop, the station's whimsical design was intended to get the attention of motorists traveling along U.S. Highway 67 (now Roundtop Road).

Interestingly, the Roundtop was not alone in this approach to filling station design. Many small, independently owned gas companies opted for uniquely shaped stations, rather than adhering to a standard corporate architecture like larger oil companies. In the early 1920s, the Gay Oil Company of Little Rock (owned by T. J. Gay) sponsored a filling station design competition, and well-known Little Rock architect John Parks Almand won the contest with a mushroom-shaped design. Almand actually patented his filling station design, which was visually attractive to customers and ideal for small, urban lots. One of his mushroom-shaped stations was built in 1923 on W. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in Little Rock, in what is now the flower garden just north of the State Capitol. While the Roundtop is significantly different from Almand's stations, it was designed with the same principles in mind—to have a strong visual impact on passersby and fit on a small lot.

## History of the Roundtop

### *Sherwood*

Present-day Sherwood began as a rural community called Sylvan Hills. The area was very sparsely populated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Early settlers John and Annabelle Lea reported an abundance of wildlife, including deer, bears, turkeys, wolves, and wildcats.

Real estate developer Justin Matthews, Sr., organized the Justin Matthews Company in the 1920s to oversee development in Park Hill and Sylvan Hills. Justin Matthews designed and built the Sylvan Hills Golf Course in 1927 to provide upscale recreational opportunities for the residents of Park Hill. Of course, Matthews also envisioned residential development around the golf course in Sylvan Hills. A September 1928 advertisement in *The Homemaker* magazine read, "Park Hill and Sylvan Hills constitute the most complete high class development in the State. In five years nearly seven million dollars have been put into homes, schools, country club and the installation of city conveniences in these developments. Park Hill offers you beautiful close-in homesites overlooking the two cities; Sylvan Hills offers close-in country estates of any size with city conveniences. Before you select the site for that home of your dreams, see these *beautiful developments.*"

The Matthews Company built a few houses in the late 1920s south of the golf course, but the Depression hit and stalled residential development in Sylvan Hills.

In late 1947, a group of area residents met at the home of Dennis and Ailene Duran to discuss the formation of a civic club. A public meeting was held on January 2, 1948, at the Wright Grocery Store, located at the corner of Oak Hill and Country Club. Representatives from Cammack Village, which had incorporated in 1943, were invited to speak about the incorporation process. Sherwood officially incorporated on April 22, 1948.

Because the new town had no budget, two area home demonstration clubs organized the first Miss Sherwood Contest to raise money. The women raised \$600 for the town council, which immediately discussed issues like garbage collection, insect control, public bus transportation, vaccinating and tagging dogs, oiling streets, and law enforcement.

In July 1948 the council purchased a 16' x 16' surplus building from Camp Robinson for less than \$100 to serve as the first city hall. It was located where Delmont Park is today (Delmont & Sherwood; first city hall burned in 1989). That same month, Sherwood passed Traffic Ordinance No. 1, which mandated a 25 mph speed limit throughout the entire town. According to a special census in September 1948, Sherwood had a population of 714; all white.

The City of Sherwood has grown significantly in area and population over the years. In 1975 Sherwood annexed the area along Trammel Road, where we are today.

### *Roundtop*

Once located on a well-traveled section of U.S. Highway 67 between St. Louis and Little Rock, the Roundtop Filling Station was built in 1936 by the Justin Matthews Company for Pierce Oil. The Pierce Oil Company was one of the "baby Standards" that followed the 1911 breakup of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Trust. Each of the "baby Standards" was awarded former Standard Oil territory. Pierce Oil operated in southern Missouri, Arkansas, western Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.

The Pierce Oil Company contracted with the Justin Matthews Company for the filling station project. Justin Matthews's resident architect, Frank Carmean, may have designed the Roundtop, but we can't be sure. Local builders C. C. and Powderly Eubanks constructed the Roundtop while working for the Matthews Company.

Historically, the main octagonal room housed the counter and cash register, as well as refrigerated coke cases and candy and cigar stands. The arched openings to the west of the octagonal portion did not have doors. It was an open breezeway leading to the public restrooms. The women's restroom was on the north side of the hallway, and the men's on the south. The back room was used for storage of equipment like tires, oil, and tools. The original concrete gas pump island is still located on the east side of the Roundtop.

For the better part of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Roundtop Filling Station had the only modern restrooms on Highway 67 between Searcy and Little Rock. Former Arkansas Governors Carl Bailey and Sid McMath, as well as country music singers Johnny Cash and Conway Twitty, frequently stopped at the Roundtop. When the current location of U.S. 67/167 opened between North Little Rock and Jacksonville in the 1960s, the old route past the Roundtop became less traveled.

#### *W. D. "Happy" Williford and His Service Station*

Wallace David "Happy" Williford was born on June 28, 1918, at Jacksonville, Arkansas, to Earnest and Eric Williford. He had two older siblings—a sister, Warrine, and a brother, Kyle. Williford attended Jacksonville Public Schools and was president of his senior class. He got his nickname because he was happy. He was always smiling and had something nice to say to everyone. In 1936 Happy Williford was a senior at Jacksonville High School and worked for a Pierce Oil filling station in his hometown. When the Roundtop opened, the Pierce Oil Company asked him to operate its new station. Williford agreed and worked at the Roundtop before and after school. During school hours, Williford paid other men to run the station for him but had difficulty finding someone who would work for \$3.50 a week.

Pierce Oil charged Williford two cents per gallon of gas sold. When it opened, the Roundtop did not have electric gas pumps. Gas had to be hand-pumped into the glass bowl before filling each car's tank. In 1940 Pierce Oil was purchased by the

Sinclair Oil Company. Electric gas pumps were installed at the Roundtop about 1941.

About 1943 Happy Williford married Sarah Marie Dawson, and the couple lived down the street at 814 Trammel Road. The Willifords had three children—Wallace David, Jr., Judy, and Vicki.

In the early 1950s, Sinclair sold the Roundtop to the Phillips Petroleum Company, and the station became a Phillips 66. Happy Williford bought the Roundtop in 1957 for \$8,000. Business was good, and Williford opened another station at the foot of the Broadway Bridge in North Little Rock (near present-day Dickey-Stephens Park). By 1958 he operated a station at 923 E. Broadway in North Little Rock called Happy's Service Station. Williford leased the Roundtop to others during the 1960s and early '70s. By 1962 the Roundtop sold DX gasoline. In the mid-1970s, Happy Williford returned to the Roundtop and operated it exclusively until 1981, when he retired and closed the station. At the time of its closing, the Roundtop was a Sunoco station due to the Sun Oil Company's acquisition of DX.

Although Williford tried to sell the Roundtop in the late 1980s, the buyer couldn't come up with the money. George E. Brown purchased the Roundtop in 1991 and planned to renovate the station, but it didn't happen. Mr. Brown died in 2000. In 2003 his heirs donated the Roundtop to the City of Sherwood. But the abandoned filling station had deteriorated considerably by that time. And because it was not secured, people could access the interior of the building, making it the target of vandalism.

### *Road to Restoration*

A few years after the City took ownership of the building, Sherwood city councilwoman Becki Vassar and code enforcement officer Scott Kelley led the effort to have the Roundtop listed in the National Register of Historic Places (2008).

In 2010 the Roundtop was featured in “The Last Ride,” a movie about Hank Williams, Sr., directed by Arkansas native Harry Thomason. The movie crew did some work to stabilize the building.

In January 2013 Sherwood Mayor Virginia Hillman asked Darrell Brown to chair the first Sherwood History & Heritage Committee. Brown, along with Kelly Coughlin of the Sherwood Chamber of Commerce, worked to raise money and increase public awareness in a renewed effort to save the Roundtop.

During this time, several articles about the Roundtop appeared in local and statewide newspapers. Happy Williford’s daughters, Judy Williford Jacobs of Fayetteville, Arkansas, and Vicki Williford Teague of Savannah, Georgia, saw one of these articles and contacted Brown. As it turns out, Happy Williford and his wife, Marie, moved in 2007 to Savannah. Marie Williford died in August 2007, but Happy was still alive and well. Darrell Brown was able to send questions about the Roundtop to Williford through his daughters and learned more about the building’s past.

In May 2013 the Roundtop was named to the Historic Preservation Alliance of Arkansas’s Most Endangered Places list, bringing more attention to the property.

In June 2013 the City of Sherwood received a Historic Preservation Restoration Grant from the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program in the amount of \$50,000 for the restoration of the Roundtop. The match money for the grant was provided by donations and funds from the City of Sherwood and the Sherwood Chamber of Commerce. Philip Quandt with Taggart Architects in North Little Rock prepared plans for the building’s restoration, and PDC Construction of Little Rock was hired as contractor.

Phase I of the project began in April 2014 and consisted of securing and stabilizing the building, replacement of almost every stud in the building due to extensive termite damage, replacing the concrete floors, and a new roof.

The City was awarded a second grant from the AHPP (\$78,000) in July 2014 to complete Phase II. The second phase consisted of the following:

New Plumbing & Electrical

HVAC (Heating, ventilating, and air conditioning)

Repair of exterior stucco

Repair of interior plaster

Windows (insulated wood-frame windows in the original window openings)

Doors

Trim

Paint (painted with Sinclair colors—white with red and green accents)

In addition to cash donations, the Roundtop project has benefitted from some major contributors like Fraley Roofing of Sherwood (donated labor and materials for the new roof), Arkansas Air Flow of Sherwood (donated labor and materials for the new HVAC system), Floyd and Darren Brown (made the replica Pontiac weathervane for the roof and frames for new signage), and Mark Osborne with Southern Coating and Nameplate of Sherwood (donated signage that will be placed at the building).

When finished, the Roundtop Filling Station will be used as a substation for the Sherwood Police Department.

New layout for building--

Octagonal room will be office space for police.

Roll-up doors allow the City to secure the breezeway openings, or open them to provide easy access to the new ADA-compliant restroom, which will go in the old storage room on the west end of the building.

The original restroom spaces will be storage closets.

Phase III of the project would include installation of a wheelchair ramp, completion of the restroom and plumbing, and exterior site work.

### **Williford's Death**

Happy Williford was very excited to hear about restoration efforts at the Roundtop. He routinely told his neighbors in Savannah that his filling station was becoming a “national park.” Williford died on March 8, 2014, at the age of 95. Although Darrell Brown never actually met Williford, Williford’s children asked Darrell if he would lead the memorial service because their dad wanted to be buried in Sherwood, and they no longer had family or a church in the area. Darrell agreed, and on March 13, 2014, a memorial service was held at Griffin Leggett--Rest Hills Funeral Home and Memorial Park in Sherwood, where friends and family gathered to remember Happy Williford. After the service, Williford’s family toured the Roundtop.

### **More restoration details**

The wooden birdhouse on the roof that was installed in the 1990s was removed and will be replaced by a metal weathervane designed to look like an old Pontiac emblem.

Next tour is December 5 at the Joseph W. House House, 2126 S. Arch, Little Rock.