

Tour shows hard-knock life of the incarcerated

By **BEN TROLLINGER**

For even a small tour group, the old Williamson County Jail on Main Street feels confining and claustrophobic.

“Just stop and imagine living in here for months on end. And with no air conditioning” said County Court at-Law Judge Tim Wright, who, along with other county officials, visited the historic jail on Thursday.

The public was invited to tour the jail on October 28 as a benefit for Brown Santa, the county’s annual Christmas gift drive.

It’s difficult to imagine anyone ever living at the old jail. Though the county stopped using the facility in 1989, parts of the building were built about 116 years ago and look it. Paint peels off the wall in sheets. Almost a quarter-inch of grime coats every surface. The metal beds look barely large enough to accommodate grade schoolers, much less burly criminals. And it’s definitely not ADA-compliant.

“I definitely wouldn’t have had to come here a second time,” said Karen Wilson, the head of the Williamson County and Cities Health District, which has its office in the newer part of the old jail.

But there are definite signs of people having served hard time. Tobacco smoke has stained the ceiling yellow. One inmate etched a makeshift checkerboard into the metal tray of a bunk bed. And though much of the graffiti is faded and unreadable, some of it is still vivid: There’s the calendar an inmate sketched on the wall to tick off his time, the “Welcome to Hotel Hell” drawing at the entrance of one cell block, and an extremely detailed depiction of a rough-looking biker.

“I don’t know why the jail attracted so many artists,” said tour guide Linda Bunte, a lieutenant with the sheriff’s department.

Then there’s the jail tour’s centerpiece — the cell where serial killer Henry Lee Lucas was kept. Inside the cell is a mannequin laid out in a striped gray suit and a table featuring Mr. Lucas’ silverware and the log-in book open to the page where a jailer scrawled his name. There’s also a creepy oil painting by Mr.

Lucas depicting a cartoonish deer eating grass near a cottage.

Mr. Lucas, who was convicted in for 11 homicides, was given the death penalty in Williamson County for murdering an unidentified woman only known as “Orange Socks.”

The old jail was actually the county’s fourth jail. It replaced a ramshackle wooden jail on the courthouse square from which inmates frequently escaped. At the time, it cost roughly \$22,000.

Lt. Bunte, who began working for the sheriff’s department in 1979, said she hopes that someone takes an interest in restoring the old jail into a museum depicting the county’s history of law enforcement.

The county built a new jail on Rock Street in 1989, which expanded in 2003 to accommodate 780 inmates. When the third floor of the jail is built out, the capacity will increase to 1,000.