

Welcome to Sullivan's Merchants Natl Bank buiding. A question most frequently ask is "Why in the world is there a Louis Sullivan building in Grinnell." The question should really be restated in two parts: "Why would an architect of Sullivan's stature accept a commission to build a small midwestern bank?" and "Why would the board of directors of a small town bank be moved to engage an eminent Chicago architect for their building project?"

As to the first part: After a rather off-and-on-again experience with formal education and a short apprenticeship in the East and in Europe, Sullivan in 1879 at the age of 23 joined his parents in Chicago; where he met and started working for architect Dankmar Adler. Adler, 35, with formal training in engineering and Civil War service in the Union Army had already established himself on the Chicago scene as a level-headed businessman and an architect of great promise.

Two years later Sullivan joined Adler forming the firm of Adler and Sullivan. For the next 15 years Adler, the engineer and accoustics genius - perhaps the best in the nation - and Sullivan the master of design, teamed up as one of the most successful architectural firms of that time. Averaging a theatre a year, being recognized as the originators of the tall building - skyscrapers - with the Wainwright Building in St. Louis and Guaranty Building in Buffalo, N.Y., and with what is considered their masterpiece - the Auditorium Building in Chicago, Adler, the calmer - client oriented, and Sullivan, the volital egocentric, designed more than 100 major buildings. It should be mentioned that during this time Frank Lloyd Wright worked under Sullivan for 7 years. In 1895, for reasons unknown, the partnership - with 50 people in the office - was dissolved.

In the remaining 30 years of his life while working alone, he had only 22 commisssions; only two large buildings of significance: Carson, Pirie Scott building which is still regarded as one of the best commercial retail buildings, and the Bayard Building in New York.

These were lean and difficult times for Sullivan. He became an alcoholic and turned to small buildings for at least some means of support. So when contacted by the Merchants Bank, he was eager to talk.

Now as to why the Merchant National Bank officials were interested in Sullivan: At the beginning of the century, bankers were re-evaluating their profession and establishing standards in an attempt to creat a better image. Farmers had difficulty in obtaining adequate financing, and bankers were not held in very high esteem. In fact much of the public held them in about the same catagory as Jesse James, perhaps giving Jesse the ethical edge.

The banker wanted to humanize his institution; to become a counselor to his clients; and as a friend, advise them in their financial matters. Elegant new buildings were one way to project a new progressive image of respectability and stability. It was in this climate that Merchants decided to rebuild.

One of the directors of the bank, B.J.Ricker, an executive of a local glove manufacturing company, had commissioned Walter Burley Griffin to build a residence in 1911. Mrs. Ricker was originally from Oak Park so it is quite likely she was the motivator in the commissioning Griffin to build her Prairie School home. Both Griffin and his wife, Marian Mahoney Griffin, had worked for Frank Lloyd Wright in Oak Park. Griffin was also commissioned to design an area known as the Clark subdivision, for housing development, but unfortunately only the Ricker house was built. In 1912, before the house was completed, Griffin had won an international competition to design the new Austrtalian capital - Canberra, so was off to new interests.

It is speculated that had Griffin been available, he would have

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been the likely candidate for the bank's commission.

Sullivan had successfully built the Owatonna bank just a few years earlier with much acclaim. So it was natural for the Grinnell bank to turn to him. Mr. Ricker and Geroge Hamlin, president of the bank, travelled to Owatonna to consult with the bankers there and to see the bank first hand. Sullivan was invited to Grinnell to talk.

He came; met with the bank's building committee and spent the next three days sketching the proposed plans in meticulous detail on sheets of common yellow paper purchased at a local drug store. The building committee was pleased with what they saw, and Sullivan left town with the commission. This was early December 1913. According to a newspaper account the contract was let for \$60,000.; construction proceeded on schedule. Much to his credit there is no indication of any disagreement or animosity between Sullivan and the bank board. The bank was completed to be opened January 1, 1915.

Merchants Bank closed its doors in 1924. In 1926 another local financial institution purchased and occupied the building. In 1930 they too were in financial trouble and sold to the present bank organization.

The building was designed for a staff of 6 or 7 persons. Over the years alterations were made to accomodate a larger staff. The first major remodeling was done in 1955. I did not have a part in the planning of this project so can take neither the credit or blame. I do believe the architects, Brooks-Borg of Des Moines, were reasonably cognizant of their responsibility to preserve the integrity of the building.

Major changes made at that time were: installation of air conditioning; cutting a stairway to the basement and finishing a basement for work area; moving the safe deposit vault to the basement; reducing the height of the partition west of the public space to about 2 1/2 feet in height;; and completely renovating and expanding the tellers area. After making an unsuccessful attempt at removing the white paint from the west brick wall, that wall was paneled.;

By 1974, the staff had increased to where people were nearly having to sit on each others laps. Our prefernce would have been to expand to the west so as not disturb the vault area. However, that property was not available so we took the only other alternative. We acquired the properties to the north and did what we had to do.

Some of our board felt we should sell the building and rebuild at a different location with more available space. However, the saner heads prevailed.

Architects Stewart-Robison-Laffan of Davenport were selected for the job - not for their expertise in Sullivan architecture, but they recognized our committment to preserve the integrity of the building as best we could, and we felt we could work together - striving for an addition compatible with the Sullivan Building - not to copy but to compliment.

This was not easy - the challenge to attach a 12,000 square foot addition to a 3,200 square foot architectural gem - avoiding an overpowering effect.

Our first approach of one story with basement did not work.

The second attempt went better, with the floor plan falling nicely into place. But the exterior was a problem. All proposed plans looked like conventional office or school buildings.

The design man, Sam Skinner, finally worked up over 40 rough sketches and Mrs. Smith and I reviewed them in his office. Only one seemed to fit. It was refined and we proceeded. Some have suggested the arches were "borrowed" from the Owatonna Bank. This I doubt as Mr. Skinner was not a student of Sullivan nor had he seen any of the