

History of 209 W. Madison

1874 Fire burned the business district. Not an unusual event because everybody used fire places and candles. An ordinance was passed after this fire that the downtown had to be replaced in brick.

Electric lights downtown 1882, fewer fires, but still dangerous.

Sandborn Insurance Plat book of 1888 lists the building as a drug store.

In 1892 they have it listed as Wall paper and drug store.

1897 Polk Brothers lists the building being occupied by a L. Lutyen and W.C. Lutyen. They were druggists. The Sandborn Insurance map shows the outline of the building with a small garage on the back (North end) of the building, but it was only built about half way across from East to West. Enough room for a buggy to park outside to the West Side of the garage.

The 1904 Polk Brothers lists the location name as BOLANDERS as a RACKET Store. This was the designation for a sundries store selling inexpensive items. It was run by Fritz Bolander. He is listed in the same location in 1910 as selling NOTIONS and in 1914 the building was listed as a 5 and 10cent store. A lot of the early photos of Pontiac have pictures of the front of this store.

I think the building burned in 1915. At that time during the rebuild the roof was extended to cover the entire parking lot in back (you can see the char marks on the brick upstairs). The roof was fitted onto the front section and you can see it slopes markedly to the North. This was the last major rehab until we got the building August 21, 2017. The present outside entrance from the street between the Art Center and Brian Gabor's office goes up to the dance hall. The inside stairs were probably added in the 1915 rehab, so there is a set of stacked stairs. At this time the top floor was covered with oak flooring to be used as a dance center. People came up from the street stairs, checked their coats (got a drink in prohibition?), and danced in the back. The downstairs staircase could be locked so keep people out at night.

Downstairs the back of the old store can be seen at the rear wall of the classroom. The present kitchen and pottery room was just a covered parking lot with gravel base. Later the gravel had a haphazard job of pouring concrete poured over it which lasted until we torn it out. They used to have deep fat fryers back there when it was a restaurant. The bottom of the old wall with the glass mirror in the classroom had the original basement windows under the parking lot gravel. The basement only goes to the wall between the classroom and the kitchen. (There be dragons...)

The 1920 Polk Brothers lists the location as named: M.GOODMAN and Sons. They were listed in 1920 and 1924 as a Dry Goods store. The Sandborn map of 1923 lists the upstairs as vacant (prohibition). Part of the upstairs chair rail has a Busy Bee paper trim from the old business. The 1926 Polk Brothers lists 209 W. Madison with Wm. B. Morrissey as the owner of the BUSY BEE and with 209 ½ listed as the BUSY BEE conference center. Nice euphemism. He is also listed thru 1961 at this location

In 1925 the Morrissey Brothers opened the bottom floor as the Busy Bee Café. They renamed it the Busy Bee Tavern in 1933 when prohibition was lifted. The booths upstairs in the library and by the windows in front are examples of the furniture that was all around. I think it was more like an English Pub than anything else, with people socializing pre TV. The wall between the downstairs office and the classroom must have been added in the late 60's when it was an insurance office.

The wall of the closet upstairs has a pencil scrawl: Allen Shaw July 28 1925. At first I thought this was the plaster mason or a plumber signing their work. But Allen Shaw is listed as working for Legg Shoe Company in 1924 and as a driver for the milk company in 1926. No longer listed after that, so maybe he was a craftsman for a year between and then left town or maybe he was a graffiti artist in the 20's.

Prohibition was from 1920 to 1933. Route 4 became Route 66 in 1926..

Le Messurier Insurance was in the city directory in 1962. Dick Devendorf said that his parents purchased the building about this time. They has an ad in the directory that said they had been in business 60 years at that time and I found them in several locations earlier, so they had been around before they landed in this spot. Dick thinks the dance hall upstairs was used in the 1880's, but I find nothing listed and think most of it was built after 1915.

Rumor has it that blind gentlemen (Mr. Beck) brought his dog upstairs for several years while he ran a bookmaking enterprise. There was quite a bit of telephone switchboard equipment when we moved in. Always wondered how a blind guy could do much reading?

I heard there was a dance club upstairs until about 1965. Nouveaux pas de danse (new moves) or Entrée nouvel (new entrance) is what I have heard they were named but I am unsure. There were several clubs downtown but I bet television drew the dancers home to their couches.

The building had structural issues so the building and a generous cash stipend were donated to the city by the LeMessuer when they moved. The buildings at 209, 211, and 213 had their fronts extensively remodeled and secured. Most of the front windows are new. A closed bid auction was held in 2017 and the newly created not for profit, The Greater Livingston County Art Center, purchased the building for 50,000 and we commenced rehab in August of 2017.

The building has had a small kitchen added, new heating and air system upstairs and down and new display windows. The hot water system was replaced. There was a new floor poured in back for the addition of a pottery studio to include a separate kiln room and a new ADA bathroom. During COVID 19 slow down there was a hydraulic lift installed to make the upstairs ADA.

An ADA bathroom was made upstairs by combining two small bathrooms and a coat closet. The present gallery was erected with a historical section of paneling and benches added to show what the downstairs used to look like.

The South room of the upstairs has been converted into a meeting room with a display of Amity Town painters on the walls.

We have a donor board and hope we have not missed any of the dozens of people whose money and labor have made this possible.

