

Mid-Continent's Changing Fortunes

Written by Jack Money

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AUGUST, 2007: The news in August 1925 related to getting a new home built for the Mid-Continent Insurance company was not good, but its leaders were nothing if not perseverant. They wanted to do something unusual for the time “ build a multiple story, commercial office building at NW 13 and Shartel Avenue in an area zoned for homes. The issue was as hot as the summer sun. City officials turned down building permit requests for the \$250,000 project numerous times. (1)

Even Mrs. Anton Classen, the wife of a prominent developer within Oklahoma City, protested the plans in a hearing before members of Oklahoma City’s council after it had been heard and denied by the city’s board of adjustment and conditionally approved by the city’s planning commission.(2)



This project, however, could not be stopped. The building, designed by Solomon Andrew Layton, would look like a palatial residence, include extensive landscaping and include private garages for employees and visitors to reduce on-street parking problems. Layton used Indiana

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limestone for the building's exterior. Getting the rock to the building site later proved to be a problem when the building's contractor hired a rail company to haul the material to the site using a streetcar line. (3)

Company leaders had hoped to open the building January 1, 1927. The date had to be pushed back to May. But financially, the firm was doing well. Advertisements of the day boasted that Mid-Continent was the oldest and largest firm in the Sooner State. It also financed the development of numerous commercial properties, including the Oklahoma club and Oklahoma City University. In 1934, Mid-Continent worked with Oklahoma City to establish a neighborhood playground for surrounding homes. Company President R.T. Stuart, nicknamed "Genial Bob," (4) put forward a plan for a fenced-in area at NW 15 and Classen Boulevard where a fulltime nurse would supervise children. (5)

The same year, the company celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. The company continued to operate for more than another 60 years, eventually becoming acquired by Florida Progress Corp. But in 1997, Oklahoma's Insurance Commissioner declared the firm insolvent and took it over. Its future became a political football in the late 1990s, as courts were asked to decide the firm's future. (6)

The building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, quietly sat empty as arguments about the company's future raged. Eventually, it looked as if the building might disappear "yet another casualty of changing fortunes impacting Oklahoma's people and its businesses. But then in 2001, its fortunes changed again. Edward L. Gaylord, editor and publisher of The Oklahoman, bought the building. Another \$3 million donation made by oilman Boone Pickens got the ball rolling on a \$15 million renovation of the building to provide a new home for the Oklahoma Heritage Association. (7)

In 2005, the association unveiled plans to turn the building into an interactive museum using cutting-edge technology to tell the state's story. Rand Elliott, of Elliott + Associates, was selected to design the renovation. Elliott told reporters that many of the building's original features would remain. They would be augmented with holographic displays to replicate famous Oklahomans as they told their stories. (8)

Â Five technology-driven, interactive exhibits focusing on optimism, generosity, perseverance, individualism, and pioneer spirit were planned to make the facility a living museum, a reinvention of what a museum experience is. Boston-based Northern Light Productions came in to help make the vision a reality. Today, after opening earlier this year, the museum is getting rave reviews. And the Mid-Continent Life building continues to occupy a unique place with

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Oklahoma City of both today and yesteryear.

Read more from Doug Loudenback at <http://dougdawg.blogspot.com/2006/08/from-mid-continent-to-oklahoma.html>

- 1.) "Mid-Continent Plea To Be Heard Aug. 25," The Oklahoman, Aug. 18, 1925
- 2.) "Mid-Continent Building Plans To Get Answer," The Oklahoman, Oct. 25, 1925
- 3.) "Mid-Continent In New Battle," The Oklahoman, July 02, 1926
- 4.) Advertisement, The Oklahoman, April 23, 1939
- 5.) "Offer Taken of Play Area," The Oklahoman, May 4, 1934
- 6.) "Acquisition bid for insurer due reconsideration," The Oklahoman, Nov. 24, 1999
- 7.) "Heritage center gets \$3 million donation," The Oklahoman, April 1, 2005
- 8.) "Historic building to house museum," The Oklahoman, Sept. 16, 2005