

Macon's first skyscraper still stands tall

By Rick Maier

Parks Lee Hay needed a bigger office for his rapidly growing insurance company and he wasn't about to let the end of a depression or the beginning of WWII stop him. In 1940 he began to build the first skyscraper in Macon.

Legend has it that it was the tallest structure constructed east of the Mississippi River since the Empire State Building was completed in 1929. He put it downtown on Cherry Street, right across from City Hall and the Macon Auditorium.

Today the 11-story building, now owned and occupied by the city of Macon, is one of many tall buildings in downtown Macon. But when it opened in 1941 it was the dominant force on the Macon skyline. The steeples of nearby churches and colleges may have reached higher into the air, but no structure could have represented a more welcome symbol of better economic times ahead than the Bankers Insurance Building.

Hay is also remembered as the man who owned the gracious home on Georgia Avenue known today as the Hay House. The grandfather of 12 was a big, broad-shouldered man with a commanding presence and a generous way.

He moved from Dallas, Georgia to Macon at the age of 25 in 1898. After a few years in the loan business, he created Bankers Health and Life Insurance Company, offering disability and burial benefits to working men for small weekly premiums. (This popular coverage would later become part of the government's Social Security program.)

After decades of success in Macon, Hay commissioned architect William Elliott Dunwody IV to design the biggest and finest building in Macon, featuring the latest technology of its day – elevators, air conditioning and bathrooms on every floor (men's and women's restrooms on alternating floors).

“This was the tallest building my dad ever designed,” says Gene Dunwody Sr., son of the architect and president of the architectural firm today, “so he solicited the help of the finest contractors in the country to design and build various parts of the building. Mr. Carrier himself designed and installed the air conditioners.”

The building is built like a luxury fortress – concrete frame, Cherokee brick exterior, LE Schwartz roof, polished granite walls along the sidewalks, and marble walls and terrazzo floors in the lobbies.

“If it hadn't been for a war-time shortage of aluminum needed to erect a tower, it might still be one of the tallest,” says Dunwody.

Bankers Life Insurance merged with Quaker City Life Insurance company in 1963 but continued to occupy the building for several years. Hay's grandson, William H. "Billy" Anderson II started up an altogether new insurance company, Southern Trust Company, in 1968 and purchased the building. "Bankers insured lives, Southern Trust insures property," says Anderson, careful to distinguish between the two companies.

"At first I worked harder finding tenants to share the cost of that building than I did on my business," says Anderson. "We must have had about 50 different business tenants in that building in the 1960's and 1970's, including WMAZ and Robinson Humphrey," recalled Anderson. "My worst memories are letting the elevator operators go when we switched over to automated elevators in the late 1960's, and complaints by tenants of bugs in their offices when they left the windows open all night."

To fully appreciate the triumph of the structure, you have to picture Macon in the early 1940's. Downtown was full of big brick buildings, few of which were higher than about 4 stories. Water towers stood on top of many of the larger buildings. The Hotel Dempsey stood proudly two blocks away on Cherry Street.

The tremendous building boom of the 1920's - City Auditorium, Luther Williams Field, Bibb County Courthouse, Washington Library, and Lanier HS to name a few - ended with the stock market crash in 1929. But Hay started another growth spurt after the depression with his skyscraper success on Cherry Street.

In 1998 Southern Trust built new offices on Riverside Drive near Bass Road.

In an ironic twist, Anderson, Hay's grandson hired Gene Dunwody Jr., grandson of W.E. Dunwody, to design the new building. And Robinson Humphrey again leased space alongside Southern Trust.

"Just like in the 1960's," said Anderson.

"There's every reason to believe," said Gene Dunwody, "that the building will be around for at least another 60 years."