



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

November 2014

An Old Fashioned Christmas At Knapp's HSGL Annual Auction

*Saturday, November 15, 2014 4:00pm - 6:30pm
Knapp's Centre - 300 South Washington Square*

*Tickets are \$15 and are available at
www.lansinghistory.org, by calling (517) 282-0671,
and at the door.*

Please support HSGL's efforts to establish a Lansing area historical museum by attending our annual auction, this year at the newly renovated and reopened Knapp's Centre! The event promises to be memorable with tours of the building, including the main floor space, a newly designed atrium, and the quickly filling apartments, a mini pop-up exhibit about Knapp's colorful history, slideshows featuring historic images and ads from Knapp's, light hors d'oeuvres, and, of course, our auction! This year we have over 125 items available for bidding. Check our website, www.lansinghistory.org, in the coming days for a complete catalogue of items available for purchase.

A Few Of The Many Items Available At The Auction:

- Mackinac Island Getaway for Two
- Glen Arbor Fall Weekend Luxury Condo Stay
- Antique Grandfather Clock
- 99 Bottles of Michigan Craft Beer
- Dinner for Eight at Lansing's Historic Harper House
- Drawing Lesson with Artist Gijsbert van Frankenhuyzen
- Tour of MSU's Beaumont Tower
- Day at the Beach in South Haven

Please note that after a very busy year, HSGL will not be hosting any events or sending a newsletter in the month of December. We thank you for all of your support this past year, and we look forward to a great 2015!

HSGL would like to thank Physicians Health Plan for serving as our Platinum Sponsor and the Eyde Company for hosting the auction!



EYDE COMPANY

Central Michigan's Beautiful Store of Stores

by Bruce Kopytek

For most of the twentieth century, America's great cities were hubs of activity, populated day and night with the whole gamut of their citizenry: not just daytime office workers, but civic employees, tourists, shoppers, moviegoers, and gourmets among others who unfailingly saw the center of town as "the place where everything happened". This enticing cocktail of humanity was supported by the "hallmarks" of any great American city: representative metropolitan hotels, great movie palaces; stately government buildings; soaring office towers; and, that beehive of activity, the downtown department store.

Examples of these facilities have gone down in history as essential components that literally formed the cities they served. New York was as inseparable from the Plaza Hotel or the Waldorf-Astoria, as it was from the legendary Macy's store or its rival Gimbel Brothers. For

many, entry to this wonderland of commerce and pleasure was through world-famous Grand Central or Pennsylvania Stations, themselves veritable microcosms of the cities for which they so handsomely provided a gateway. Likewise, Chicago will always be associated with the great Palmer House Hotel and the inimitably aristocratic Marshall Field & Company store. Other examples like Rich's of Atlanta, Jordan Marsh of Boston, Higbee's of Cleveland or Woodward & Lothrop in the nation's capital were famous enough to become familiar ambassadors to their home cities.

This phenomenon may seem exclusive to the biggest ten or twenty cities in the United States, but it is a fact – albeit a less well-known one – that even America's mid-size cities were, at one time, vibrant centers in their own right with their own versions of the big city classics. So, Allentown, Pennsylvania's Hess Brothers was considered such a spot on the maps of the day's fashionistas that they regularly traveled from even department-store rich New York City, just to sample the offerings of this small but worthy retailer. Arizona's famous Goldwater's (of Barry Goldwater fame) had its start in tiny Prescott before it ever made it to the big city of Phoenix.

Lansing was no different. Michigan's capital city was much more than a lovely governmental edifice surrounded by offices. Landmarks like the Olds Hotel enriched the center with fine restaurants and community facilities, as did Lansing's mid-sized, but notable, department stores. The J.W. Knapp Co. could in fact be

cited as a shining star in Michigan's line-up of retail companies. In spite of steady growth and appreciation, nothing illustrated its position in the community more than its meteor-like 1937 emergence from the Great Depression by inaugurating a new and stunningly beautiful flagship store it styled "Central Michigan's Beautiful Store of Stores."



Knapp's had its beginnings in February of 1896, when Joseph. W. Knapp came to Lansing with his partner Frank W. Jewett. They had closed their three year-old Albion dry-goods business, and transferred its operation to the 6,000 square-foot store of N.F. Jenison, located at 123 N. Washington Street in the capital. There, they prospered, until 1901 when the store moved to a two-story brick building at 220-224 S.

Washington, which itself continued to be expanded to 226 S. Washington and remodeled as time went on. In 1908, the firm took on the name by which it became familiar for years: The J.W. Knapp Co.

By 1930, Knapp's was a well-established business in Lansing, and was virtually a household word in Michigan's capital city. No less a personality than Flint entrepreneur, philanthropist and founding partner of General Motors Corporation Charles S. Mott took notice of Knapp's commercial value, and purchased it as an asset for his C.S. Mott Foundation, along with the L.W. Robinson Co. of Battle Creek, Smith-Bridgman's of Flint, and the nearby D.M. Christian department store in Owosso.

As America fought its way out of the Great Depression, the site of Lansing's Hotel Downey became available. Once known as the Lansing House, the city's finest lodging-place had deteriorated and lost its prominence due to a series of fires, and competition from the larger and much more modern Hotel Olds. Knapp's acquired a lease on the land in 1936 and hired local architects Bowd & Munson to create a new home for the store. Under the direction of Orlie Munson, the firm produced a startlingly modern 5-story structure, faced in

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P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901
www.LansingHistory.org

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an eye-catching combination of cream-and-blue metal-faced concrete panels (an experimental product known as “macotta”) and glass block. Adding to the lively composition was a welcoming and protective marquee that sheltered window shoppers browsing the broad expanse of seemingly unsupported glass that made the building seem to hover over the streetscape. The Christman Construction Company built the building that became known as one of Michigan’s – and indeed the nation’s – finest examples of the “Streamline Moderne” style that was born in France and came to North America, where it was more familiarly known as Art Deco. Knapp’s opened to rave reviews and a crowd of over 15,000 people on December 7, 1937.

Commenting on the shuttered store almost 75 years later, a former Knapp’s shopper stated “It’s still mesmerizing,” and spoke lyrically about it at Christmas saying, “It was magical. There was a large gold talking Christmas tree in the kids dept.”

In 1949, Knapp’s extended its colorful face to the west along Washtenaw Street, in the process renewing the store and entering the world of post-war prosperity in full form, informing customers that:

“We know how hard we’ve worked for many months to have for you a truly fine store. Now it is



completed and we’re proud to show it to you . . . We know you’ll enjoy these beautiful surroundings as we do and that you’ll find we’re still the same friendly store that has held your confidence for so many years”

The *Lansing State Journal* quoted Knapp’s president Dorr M. Shotwell who explained how each of the store’s departments would be enlarged and enhanced

to meet growing demand, calling it “A Greater Lansing Store.” A few years later, it expanded its bargain basement, and in 1956 installed one of Lansing’s first escalators. By 1961, Knapp’s had taken over other properties on the block, notably the Lansing Olds Dealership on Capital Avenue, which it remodeled for expanded appliance, hardware and sporting goods selections. By this time the store encompassed almost 200,000 square feet of space and then-president Howard



C. Grimes stated, “It is inconceivable to us that it [downtown Lansing] should be anything but a showcase for the State of Michigan.”

Further Knapp’s developments brought the store to East Lansing, where it built a lovely modern branch in 1961, to the Meridian Mall in 1969, and to the Lansing Mall in 1972. It also operated a store in Jackson where it acquired a branch from the failed F.W. Wurzburg Co. of Grand Rapids, owner of Knapp’s own Washington Street competitor, Arbaugh’s.

The Mott Foundation sold its retail interests in 1970 to the L.S. Good Co. of Wheeling, West Virginia, another small-town department store firm that had already acquired department stores in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Though the match seemed to be a good one, before long, Good couldn’t maintain its retail strategy, entered receivership and closed its stores. As a result Knapp’s came to an abrupt end, leaving a devastated retail district that held such promise only 20 years earlier, and a painful, though poignant gap in the hearts of both patrons and employees of a store that came to be loved and appreciated over such a long span of time.



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P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

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Historical Society of Greater Lansing - Membership Application

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in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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- \$20 Individual Membership
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