

Drives / Fidelity Building - Rich In Fulton's History

By Barbara Mask

Fulton was a cradle of fraternal and social organizations during the early 1900's. There were twelve of them. Two of the most prominent and, ultimately, made a significant impact on Fulton's history were fraternal life insurance societies: Modern Woodmen of America and Mystic Workers of the World (name change to Fidelity Life Association in 1930). With the announcement last week that Drives, Inc., a local business established in Fulton in 1959, donated their former office building to the City of Fulton, a history search of the building became a topic of interest. Dr. George Clendenen was the first medical director for the Modern Woodmen and parted from that fraternal organization and founded the Mystic Workers of the World in 1891. It was chartered in 1896. He was a Master Mason for many years and had filled nearly all the chairs in his Masonic Lodge. He modeled many of the rituals and laws suitable for lodge work. The positive contributions that Fidelity made in the Fulton community are immeasurable, but for this article, the focus is primarily on 'the building' referenced above.

At the biennial meeting of 1898, a committee of three was appointed to obtain offers and investigate such offers for a permanent site for the Supreme Offices of the Mystic Workers of the World (forerunner of Fidelity Life Association). The committee received four offers from cities in Illinois. The society was incorporated in this state and it was mandatory that the head offices be located in Illinois.

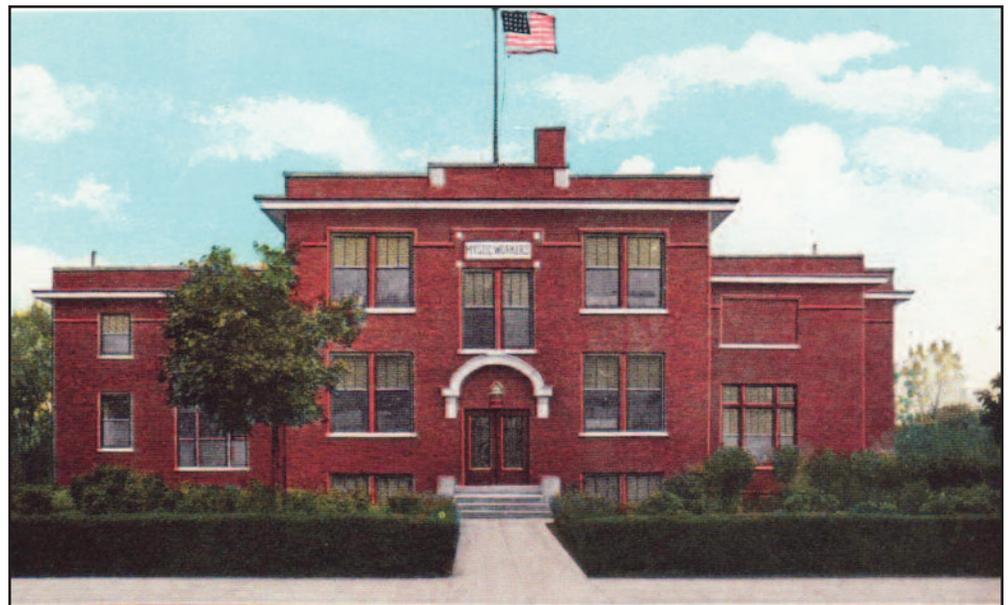
The biennial session for 1900 was held on March 13, 14 and 15 in Fulton. At that meeting, the committee made its report. The four communities were Sterling, Chillicothe, Dixon and Fulton. The offer from Fulton was presented by a group of businessmen – Nathaniel Green, William H. Mitchell, J. W. Broadhead and A. M. Hansen. This committee also identified four sites in Fulton for the new building. One of them was the current location of the building which was donated to the City of Fulton by Drives, Inc. last week. The land was purchased for \$750 from J. W. Broadhead.

After the delegates heard the various locations in the four cities described, the question was put to a vote and 142 votes were cast. Fulton received 124, Sterling 10 and Chillicothe 8. Fulton was declared to be the permanent home of the Order. A resolution to choose a site by the board of directors was passed. Another resolution was made to authorize the board to purchase the real estate and erect a building not to exceed \$8000. The proposals carried unanimously. Final cost was \$12,000, paid by lodge member's donations.

At the lodge meeting in Rockford on June 13, 1902, a resolution was passed unanimously to begin building the new home office in Fulton. Yet, it was another decade before construction was started. Ten years of doubt and debate about Fulton as the site of the home office continued. Cedar Rapids, Iowa became a strong competitor as a site for the home office, but finally a decision (130 votes more for Fulton than Cedar Rapids) was made that Fulton would be the site of the home office. John Morrell & Son, an architectural firm in Clinton, Iowa, was hired. The first carload of brick arrived in October, 1912. The building was completed in July, 1913.



Fidelity Life Building in 1913



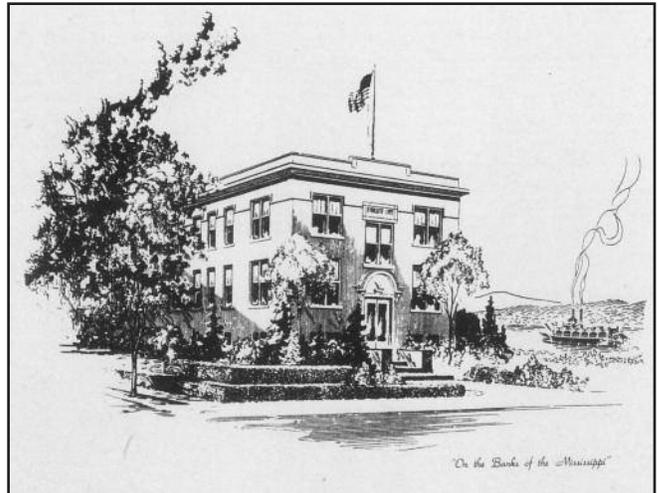
Fidelity Life Building in 1925



The Junior class play "Galloping Ghosts" performed in the Fulton Coliseum in 1950
Note the FLA initials on the curtain

THE 1913 BUILDING

"The proposed building will occupy the center of the block and with walks and entrances on the four sides will make a most attractively located structure for the purposes designed. There will be unobstructed light and a view of the river, with no danger of fire from any adjoining property," according to the resolution approving the building plan. A Fulton Journal article described the new building on January 31, 1913, "It is built of hard pressed red brick and is forty by fifty-five feet on the ground, two stories high, besides the basement. The vault is twelve feet by eighteen feet and extends from the basement to the roof, and is so arranged that it can be entered from any of the three floors. In the basement are large storage and supply rooms, boiler room and the ladies' cloak and toilet room. Upon entering the building on the first floor to the right is the supreme secretary's office, a room fourteen by fifteen feet." The article continues describing in detail each room, its size, and intended function. "On the second floor is the directors' room, which is large and well lighted. The woodwork on the first and second floors is golden oak, which harmonizes with the decorations and gives a very inviting appearance." The City of Fulton offered to supply free water service for the first five years. In the early days of working in the new building, employees would recall how they heated bricks on the pot-belly stove to warm their feet during those cold winters along the Mississippi River.



The official logo of Fidelity Life Insurance
Always proud of its location, the inscription is
"On the Banks of the Mississippi."

THE PREVIOUS SITE OF THE HOME OFFICE

From 1907 to 1913, the Mystic Workers' supreme offices were located in the building located at 720 11th Avenue, which was one of the four sites suggested by the committee of businessmen. The building was then owned by Dr. George Clendenen, the Mystic Workers of the World Supreme Medical Director. That building had a varied and interesting history; including its mysterious destruction.

It was built as a Presbyterian Church in 1856 across the street from another Presbyterian Church. Later, it served as a worship house for Methodists, Lutherans and Congregationalists. Dr. Clendenen purchased it in 1896 and converted the former church into a

hotel; named the Broadway. He moved the Supreme Offices of the Mystic Workers there in 1907 where they remained until the new building was completed at 110 10th Avenue in 1913. He later used it as a cancer sanitarium. The Immaculate Conception Catholic Church purchased it in 1936 with the intention of providing for a Catholic School there and later converted it into an apartment building. Clarence Wierema purchased it in 1948 and it remained an apartment building until it was destroyed by fire in 2004.

THE 1925 ADDITION Community Coliseum and Gymnasium

The decision to enlarge the 1913 building was necessary because of the increase in business and lack of adequate vault space for storing the valuable records of the society. "The addition will include a modern, fire-proof vault 42 feet by 11 feet, adequately lighted and ventilated," according to "The Mystic Worker," a monthly publication of the society. The description of the new addition was, "new brick two story building 118 feet by 48 feet fronting on Second Street, extending clear across the present property owned by the Society to First Street, the north side will be joined to the south end of the present building. The elevation of the roof is to be the same as that of the present building."

Like the decisions regarding the new building in 1913, there were many issues regarding the community addition to the building: costs/revenue, management responsibilities; and policies and procedures on its usage. The initial proposal to the voters was defeated.

In the January, 1925 "The Mystic Worker," reported that, "the city of Fulton highly appreciated the Mystic Workers and made arrangements with the Society to use the large ground floor of the new building addition for a municipal auditorium. A Board of Directors will manage operations with funds available from the two mill tax levy authorized by the Illinois statute." Its official name was the FULTON COMMUNITY COLISEUM. The lease agreement was between Mystic Workers of the World (name change to Fidelity Life Association occurs in 1930) and Fulton Township Trustees so that, "every citizen in the township has equal rights with every other citizen to use the Coliseum for all purposes that will contribute to the advancement of the welfare of the community." A Fulton Journal article on September 22, 1925 details the new addition, "The Coliseum has a large auditorium without a post to interfere with the view of the stage. It is provided with the latest most serviceable dance floor, extraordinary high ceiling, and beautiful electric lighting. It also has check rooms, rest rooms, comfort stations, reception parlors, two large front entrances and three additional exits, substantial wide comfortable opera chairs, together with a large commodious kitchen and cupboard with a complete assortment of kitchen utensils, including dishes, silverware and dining furniture to accommodate a large banquet."

For 25 years the Coliseum was the setting for many community and school activities. Fulton High School used the auditorium for school plays. This author can recall walking down to the Coliseum while in grade school to watch those plays. Sport events, such as basketball games, were also played in the gymnasium. Minstrels and other types of entertainment, sponsored by the Fulton Kiwanis Club, were performed to standing-room-only audiences. Church services were held in the community auditorium when building projects created a need for alternate worship sites. Public dances and large group meetings also used the coliseum's auditorium. Fidelity also used the facilities for their corporate activities, such as hosting conventions for the Juvenile Division. Fulton Community High School, opened in 1950, soon replaced the need for usage of the auditorium/gymnasium for school activities.

DRIVES, INC. PURCHASED FROM FIDELITY LIFE ASSOCIATION

Drives, Inc., owned by Alfred Den Besten and Richard Kummerer, purchased the Fidelity Life Association home office building on February 20, 1974. President Den Besten stated at the time of purchase, "that the company had not decided what purposes the building would be used for but they intended to find uses that would be helpful to the Fulton community." The building had been vacant for about a year. Fidelity Life Association moved to Long Grove, IL, along with other divisions of the Kemper Insurance Group, in 1973. Drives, Inc. fulfilled their initial commitment and made the building available for public usages such as antique and quilt shows and most notable; the site of the Fulton Food Pantry. Fidelity used the entrance on the north as their main entrance and the address was 110 10th Avenue. Drives, Inc. used the entrance on the west and changed the address to 1009 First Street.

The architecturally attractive building with a history of successful business and public accommodations still sits on the Mississippi River. A century later, how exciting, that new usages will be explored! Will a business and community activity center once again co-exist or commingle?

Sources: Fidelity Life Association publications; Mary Morpew, Historian for Fidelity Life Association; and Fulton Journals. Barbara Mask is the President of the Fulton Historical Society.