

History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

February 2014

Lansing Votes Exhibit

Thank you to everyone who turned out for the Lansing Votes exhibit opening on Monday evening, February 3. Thank you also to everyone who loaned artifacts for the exhibit. We're so thrilled to tell this story of six votes that changed our city:

- *Michigan Votes to make Lansing the state capital*
- *Lansing Votes for a Carnegie Library*
- *Lansing Votes to put Carl Morlok, father of the Morlok Quadruplets, to work*
- *Lansing Votes for the River Trail*
- *Lansing Votes for Mayor Crego and Urban Renewal*
- *Lansing Votes to Keep GM*



The exhibit will be open for viewing anytime City Hall is open until April 30, 2014. Guided tours of the exhibit by HSGL volunteers will be available on Wednesdays from 12:00pm-1:00pm. The building can normally be accessed between 8:00am to 6:00pm weekdays and Monday evenings until city council meetings end, often around 9:00pm.

Lansing Fire Department Museum Tour

Thursday February 20 - 7:00pm

Fire Station #41 - 120 East Shiawassee Street

HSGL is taking field trip to visit the Lansing Fire Department Museum located in Fire Station #41 downtown. We'll enjoy a short talk about the history of the fire department by Steve Babcock, LFD Public Information Officer, and then tour the station and visit the museum, located in the station. Among the treasures we'll see there is the original Call Box #23, the box used to alert the department to the Kern's Hotel fire, the deadliest in Lansing history.

The Lansing State Journal Remembers

Thursday, March 20 - 7:00pm

Downtown Library - 401 South Capitol Avenue

Join a panel of mostly-retired LSJ writers to hear their favorite memories of writing for Lansing's oldest newspaper. A short presentation about the history of the Lansing State Journal will be included, and some interesting historical papers will be shown. Panelists will include Karen Douglas, Jim Hough, John Schneider, Mike Hughes, David Olds, Marcia Van Ness, and Kathleen Levy.

This Week in Lansing History

The Historical Society will be posting a fact about something that happened this week in Lansing history on our Facebook page and Twitter feed every Friday for #flashbackfridays #lovelansing. Stop by every week to see what we're remembering!

Volunteers Needed

HSGL is looking for additional volunteers to help out with some important projects in the upcoming months. Volunteers don't need any experience in these fields, just willing hands! Training for all tasks will be provided.

- *Volunteer tour guides for Wednesdays from 12:00pm-1:00pm in March and April for the Lansing Votes exhibit*
- *Setting up and watching a mini-exhibit of Lansing cookbooks and food related memorabilia from the Lansing Eats! exhibit at the Allen Neighborhood Market Wednesday afternoons from 3:30pm-6:00pm in March.*
- *Photographing, organizing, and packaging HSGL Collections items for storage.*
- *Leading guided tours in the summer*

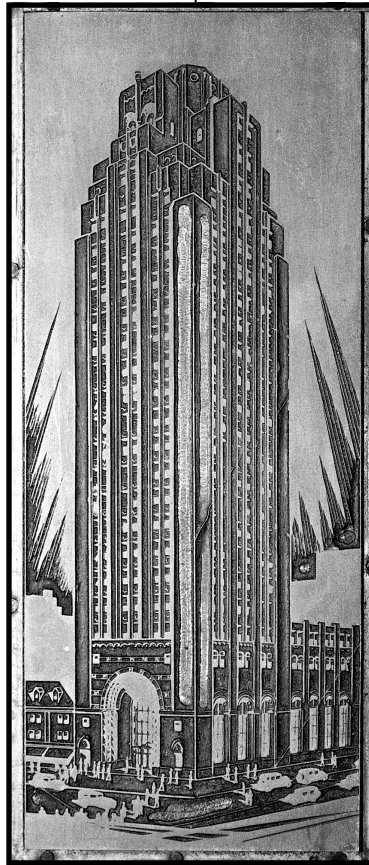
If you would like to help, please contact us at (517) 282-0671 or info@lansinghistory.org.

History of Boji Tower

by Tonya Blust

I have worked in Boji Tower for a little over a year, as a legal drafting editor for the Legislative Service Bureau (LSB). Every day when I step into the elevator that takes me to my office, I feel blessed to work in one of Lansing’s most historic buildings. When I joined the LSB in January 2013, the only things I knew about Boji Tower were that it was tall and that it had a huge neon clock on top of it. Being a history buff, I wanted to learn more about the structure where I would be spending forty hours of my life every week. With that in mind, I headed to the Capital Area District Library’s main branch, a few blocks from Boji, and dug into a file containing newspaper articles from throughout the tower’s history. Here’s what I came up with.

Boji Tower is a 23-story structure that sits at the corner of Allegan Street and Capitol Avenue in downtown Lansing. It was the brainchild of Ransom E. Olds, a man to whom local history buffs need no introduction. As founder of the REO Motor Car Company (and, before that, founder of the Olds Motor Vehicle Company, which eventually became Oldsmobile), Olds was one of the most prominent—and richest—men in Lansing. By the late 1920s, when Olds seized upon the idea of building Lansing’s first skyscraper, he had enough money to pay for the project almost entirely out of pocket (with assistance from local attorney Edmund C. Shields)—no loans required.



Typsetting block of the Boji Tower

The skyscraper that Olds wanted to build was, of course, Boji Tower, though at first it was called Olds Tower. Not long afterward, the structure became known as Capital National Bank Tower, after the bank that Olds owned and that occupied the structure’s first three floors.

Olds’ plans for the tower were grand. Though the building would serve a practical purpose by housing the offices of Olds’ bank, as well as those of his automobile company, Olds understood the public relations value of financing a massive building in downtown Lansing—a building that, at the time, would be the tallest structure in the state outside of Detroit.

Olds’ big dreams were almost his downfall. In the late 1920s, buildings in Lansing could not be more than 12 stories in height or 150 feet tall. Olds’ behemoth was nowhere near those limits. At a city council meeting during which members considered Olds’ petition for an exemption from the ordinance, alderman Frank H. Thoman railed against the project, stating, according to the July 17, 1929 edition of the Lansing State Journal, that Olds wanted the building simply as “a monument to himself.” Fortunately for Olds, Thoman was the only alderman who thought that

way (or, at least, was the only alderman willing to express the sentiment in public). The other city council members, likely swayed by the fact that, as of the late 1920s, the REO Motor Car Company produced nearly a quarter of all the manufactured goods that came out of Lansing, saw the wisdom in keeping Lansing’s primary benefactor happy. The council approved Olds’ petition with a vote of 13 to 1.

With that, construction got underway. Crews laid the building’s cornerstone in November 1929 and, throughout the next year and a half, the structure rose slowly toward the sky. The Lansing State Journal breathlessly reported on its progress. According to an article in the November 16, 1929 edition, the building would “take the city of Lansing out of the class of small towns into a metropolitan realm.” The paper even equated Allegan Street, which was already home to a

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

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series of banks and loan companies, to a “little Wall Street,” a smaller-scale version of the famed New York City financial district.

Just as the tower was creating a place for Lansing among the nation’s most modern communities, Lansing businesses were helping the tower achieve its record-setting status. Though the building’s general contractor, Hutter Construction Company, was based in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, many local businesses managed major parts of the project. For example, Jarvis Engineering Works of Lansing handled the steel work, while the Barker-Fowler Electric Company installed the electricity. The Silver Lead Paint Company took care of painting.



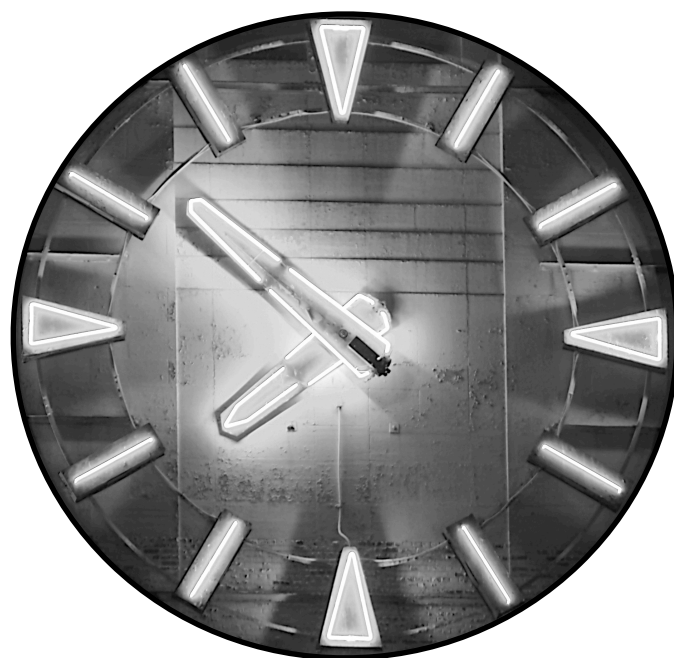
Boji Tower remains the tallest building downtown Lansing

By April 1931, crews had finished their work, and construction was complete. Olds held an open house on Monday, April 6 so that tenants and other VIPs could get a look at the new structure (the building officially opened for business the next day). Visitors wandered throughout the ground level, which boasted a 42-foot-high ceiling and a mezzanine that looked down upon the bank’s work area. Stone walls and railings created a stately atmosphere, while, according to the Lansing State Journal, windows covered with Venetian blinds were “draped in appropriate style.” The building also featured two basements, as well as three elevators whose doors portrayed scenes from Olds’ life. The tower topped out at 300 feet—true to word, the highest structure in Michigan outside of Detroit.

The building, with its sturdy brick exterior, looked solid and unyielding. However, in keeping with the modern era that its construction heralded, the following years brought a series of changes. A few decades later, the building became known as Michigan National Tower, after the bank that purchased it. To tout the change, a neon “Michigan National” sign was

installed on the building’s east-facing side. In 1967, the structure acquired a 10-story addition that sits to the east of the original tower. In 2001, Michigan National was purchased by Standard Federal Bank, so the neon sign came down and the building remained nameless until 2005, when Lansing-based developer Boji Group bought it. Now, the building contains a mix of private and government offices, as well as the state Senate’s hearing room. However, despite all the changes, one thing remains the same—Boji Tower is still the tallest building in Lansing. Whether it was built to herald Lansing’s entry into the 20th Century, or simply to boost the ego of the community’s major patron, it remains one of the Capital City’s most distinctive—and beloved—structures.

Enjoy Michigan history? Read along with Tonya’s efforts to tell some of Michigan’s most interesting history stories at her blog, Michigan 101 at <http://michi101.blogspot.com>.



Boji Tower’s iconic neon clock

Photos courtesy of David Marvin - marvins-gardens.blogspot.com



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P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

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