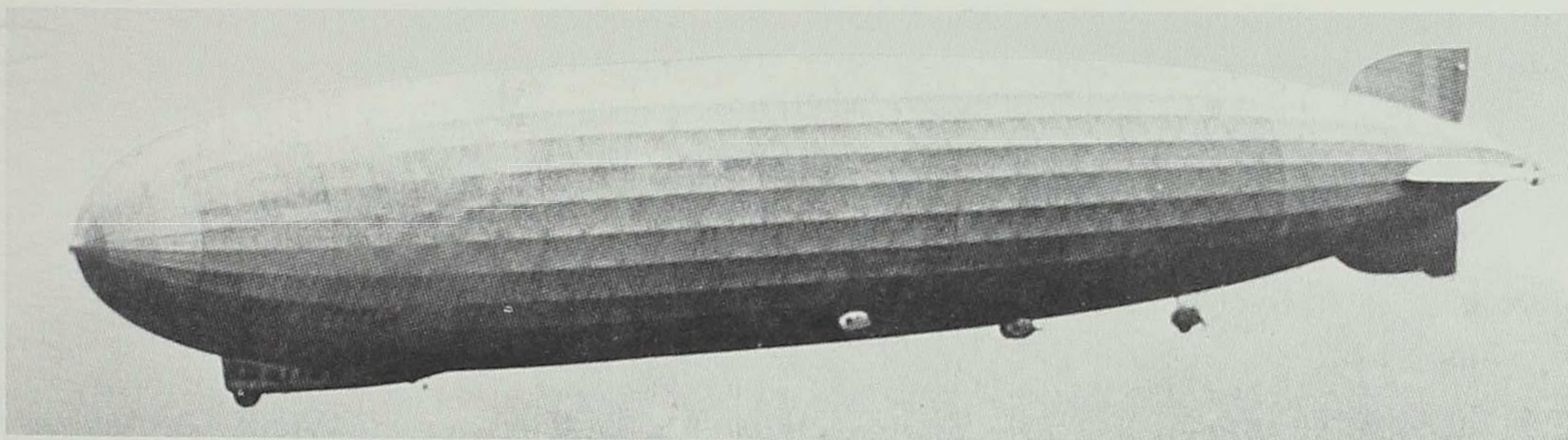


DAVENPORT'S GOLDEN
BUILDING YEARS





COURTESY QUAD-CITY TIMES

On August 28, 1929, all Davenport paused to gaze into the sky. On this day, Dr. Hugo Eckener piloted his *Graf Zeppelin* over the proud river town. While Dr. Eckener soared overhead and Davenport's numerous German-Americans cheered from below, the city showed off the face of her new downtown skyline. Throughout the 1920s, Davenport had witnessed an unprecedented stream of building. Each new construction site prepared the way for the emergence of office buildings, banking houses, and movie palaces.

The rise of new buildings reflected Davenport's growth and prosperity, and the succession of ribbon cuttings by her commercial leaders reinforced their unbridled optimism about the city's continued expansion. Postwar Davenport, as the commercial center for the Tri-Cities (which included Rock Island and Moline, Illinois), had a pressing need for expanded commercial space. To meet this demand, the pace of construction quickened.

The forces working to push Davenport building upward crystalized between 1919 and 1931. Rising real estate prices, physical constraints on the downtown area's outward sprawl, and advances in building technology formed the

foundation of this era of downtown construction. From the 1880s, Davenport's role as the commercial center of the flourishing Tri-Cities had led to increasing congestion along her main commercial arteries: Front, Second, and Third streets. Competition for prime commercial corners bid prices on land ever higher. Moreover, physical and natural constraints on the downtown worked against an outward progression of growth. As historian Edward Espenshade has noted, Davenport's distinction as a railroad "Loop City," along with the downtown's east-west progression of growth parallel to the river, straightjacketed an outward expansion of major building. Escalating costs and physical constraints, taken together, forced builders to look upward, not outward, when considering expansion.

The introduction of the elevator and structural steel in building design before the turn of the century was a technological catalyst for the "vertical revolution." Architects now had a means by which to overcome previous limitations on building heights.

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by Edmund H. Carroll, Jr.

For Davenport, the completion of the Scharff Building marked the arrival of the "elevator age." Patients of B.J. Palmer, Davenport's "fountainhead" of chiropractic care, were whisked by one of the city's first elevators to Palmer's top-floor clinic in the Ryan Block. After 1900, D.H. Burnham, renowned Chicago architect and planner, sent Davenport's office elevators even higher. The W.C. Putnam Estate enlisted Burnham to design what was called Davenport's first "real skyscraper," the eight-story Putnam Building, which opened to tenants in 1910. The landmark building was built at the heart of the commercial core and incorporated the latest construction designs tested earlier in Chicago buildings. The building hung on an iron-steel system of internal support, a breakthrough that freed the walls from supporting the weight of the building and thereby introduced reinforced concrete construction to the Tri-Cities. After the Putnam Building opened, Davenport businessmen—confronted with accelerating commerce, higher land prices, and congestion—pressed architects and contractors to incorporate better building techniques and designs into their plans.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, restrictions on construction other than work essential to the nation's war effort halted the parade of new buildings throughout the country. Yet, the Tri-Cities boomed with

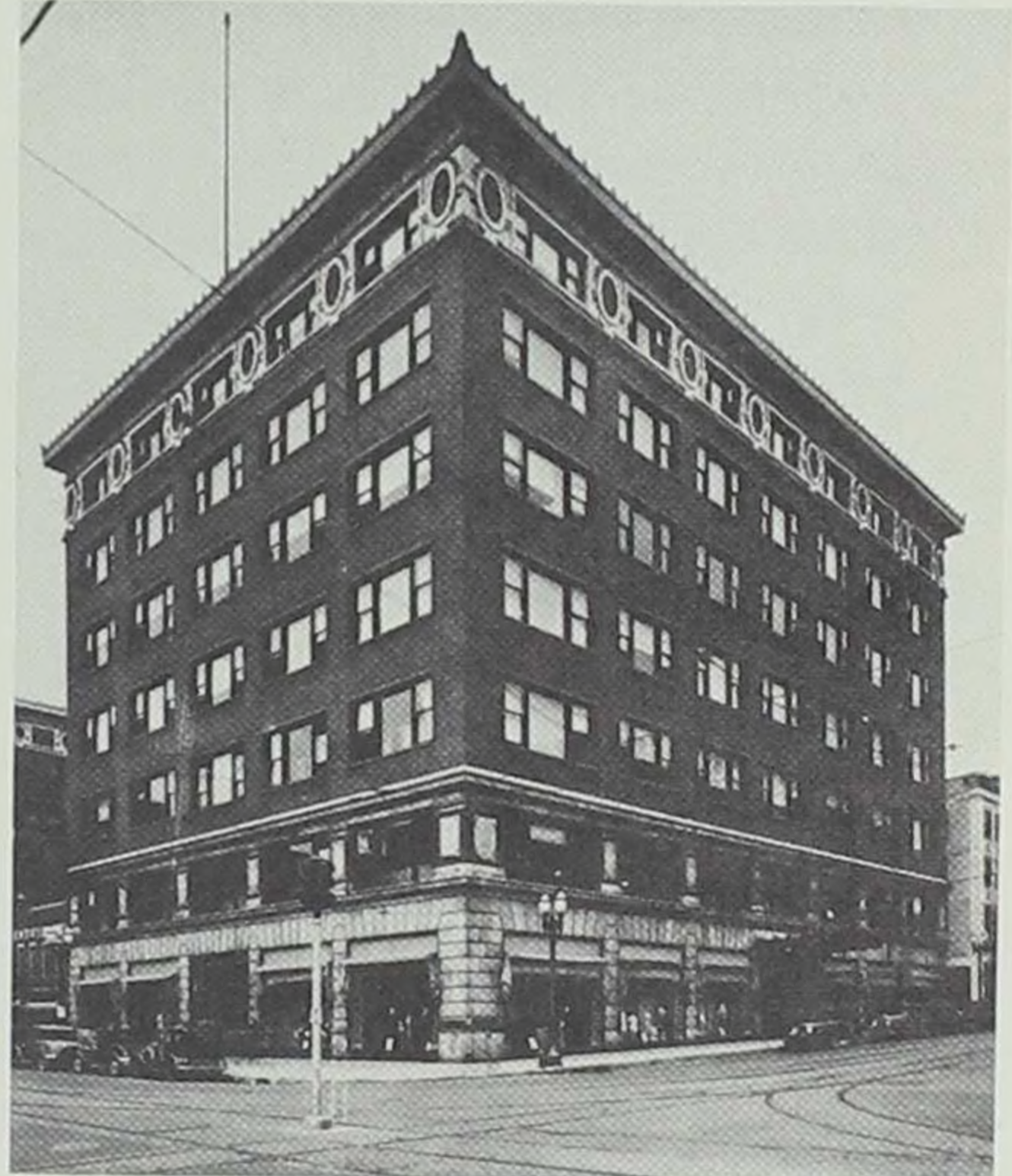
the prosperity that came with the war, and Davenport shared in the benefits of the area's burgeoning production. Davenport manufacturers received over \$30 million in war contracts. Davenport's population swelled as the manufacture of munitions at the Rock Island Arsenal drew more and more people to the area. Employment at the Arsenal climbed from a few thousand in the prewar years to over 14,500 in 1918. Farmers also shared in the wartime prosperity as the beneficiaries of record commodity prices. John Deere & Company and other farm-implement manufacturers that were concentrated in Moline and Rock Island worked overtime to satisfy farmers' demand for new machinery. Bank deposits filled Davenport bank vaults, merchants rang up record sales, and Davenport factories expanded their payrolls. By war's end, the city's financial, retail, and wholesale establishments, flush with prosperity, were bursting to expand their commercial space.

F ed by pent-up demand and nationwide prosperity, the United States emerged from the war with a voracious appetite for new homes, buildings, roads, and plants. Although residential construction loomed larger in dollar terms, commercial building left an impressive mark on Davenport and many other cities throughout the country. The years from 1919 to 1931 in Davenport were highlighted by several major downtown building projects. Local prosperity gave the initial push; New York provided the guiding light. All the nation watched as New York buildings went higher, culminating with the Empire State Building in 1931. "What New York had," wrote historian William Leuchtenburg in *The Perils of Prosperity*, "every interior city had to have too, and those on the prairies erected their own towers. The skyscraper was as certain an expression of the ebullient American spirit as the Gothic cathedral was of medieval Europe."

Note on Sources

Much of the information in this article came from the archives of the Davenport Chamber of Commerce and from the files of the Davenport *Democrat and Leader* and the *Daily Times*. The author also consulted Edward B. Espenshade's *Urban Development at the Upper Rapids of the Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944) and John H. Fetzer's 1945 University of Iowa doctoral dissertation, "A Study in City Building: Davenport, Iowa." Studies of national conditions during the war and postwar years include: William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); and George Soule, *Prosperity Decade: From War to Depression, 1917-1929* (New York: Rinehart, 1947).

An annotated version of this article is on file at the library of the State Historical Society.



Chicago architect D.H. Burnham designed the Putnam Building (left) and the M.L. Parker Building (right) to incorporate a structural steel framework, the heart of modern skyscraper design. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce) The two buildings anchored a block on Second Street in Davenport's commercial core. (SHSI)

Flush with the earnings from wartime prosperity and optimistic about the city's prospects for the future, Davenport set out on a decade of commercial construction. A generation of city builders, men whose direction and industriousness brought building plans to fruition between World War I and the Depression, loomed as large as the buildings they erected. Daniel Burnham, writing a year after the completion of the Putnam Building, encouraged future city builders to "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work. . . . Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty." Throughout Davenport's building years, prominent Davenport businessmen made their contributions to the city's skyline.

Henry "Hummer" Kahl led the way in bringing changes to the face of the downtown. Kahl was a man of bold vision and inexhaustible energy who had risen from laborer to vice-

president of the Walsh Construction Company, a nationally noted railroad and general contractor. He inaugurated postwar building in a grand fashion with the announcement in 1919 of his intent to build the \$1.5 million Kahl Building and Capitol Theater. Kahl's plans envisioned a building both larger and grander than its predecessor, the Putnam Building. His ten-story office building, complete with lavish basement restaurant and ground-floor retail space, was hailed by the *Daily Times* as "the biggest feature in the business history of the city." Betty Adler, writing for the same newspaper, reported that Kahl's elaborately decorated, 2400-seat movie palace "marked an epoch for Davenport. All the Tri-City Symphony orchestra, the art league and the women's clubs have been trying to do to spread the gospel of culture has been given a new impetus by this Capitol Theater."

The time between the ground breaking and

completion of the building proved to be a trying one for Kahl. Postwar inflation pushed the cost of materials and labor far beyond his original estimates. In 1919 Kahl paid \$226,000 to C.A. Ficke, a man of equal foresight, for the commercial corner on which his building rose. The builder had recognized Davenport's urgent need for more office space. Yet many chided Kahl for building on such an out-of-the-way site on West Third Street, an area away from the Second Street commercial core.

Still, Kahl proceeded with his plans, undaunted by criticism and rising costs. A 1920 *Daily Times* article reported, as Kahl had predicted, that the building's office space was being rapidly filled. And the article added that "the construction of the Kahl block gives Davenport its largest downtown block and relieves considerably the shortage of office and

storage space so prevalent in 1919 and the greater part of 1920." Increasing employment in Davenport's service fields, a pronounced national trend throughout the decade, kept the Kahl Building filled with national branch offices and doctors' and lawyers' offices. Equally important, the project's completion pulled much of the city's business and entertainment activity away from Front and Second streets. All but two of the major downtown building projects of the Twenties sprang up along Third Street, part of a natural progression of growth away from the congestion of the two established streets.

With the contractors working on Kahl's massive project and the four-story addition to the Blackhawk Hotel that



Built in 1919 and 1920, Henry Kahl's ten-story office and theater building met part of Davenport's postwar demand for office space and a cultural center. (portrait courtesy Henry C. Wurzer; photo courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)



would make it the largest hotel in Iowa, all signs indicated an even bigger construction year for 1920. A 1920 article in the *Democrat and Leader* listed almost twenty different businesses and organizations considering various building plans and noted a local prediction that about \$6 million in construction would be begun during the year. Actually, however, the years 1920 and 1921 proved to be only moderately active for the construction industry in Davenport. The *Democrat and Leader* concluded that "the steadily advancing cost of material and labor, coupled with the throttling influence of federal reserve banks on the money market, conspired to discourage any extensive construction."

Across the river, Moline and Rock Island shared in the area-wide surge of postwar building, albeit at a less pronounced pace. Declining economic conditions, which especially battered the farm-implement manufacturers, did not forestall big building projects in either Illinois city. In 1920, Moline, flush with profits earned from its implement industry's wartime sales, saw the Moline Trust and Savings Bank complete construction on a \$557,000 eight-story office and bank building. Soon after, Moline subscribers raised money to finance the \$1.5 million LeClaire Hotel and Theater Building. The towering fifteen-story hotel soared above all other Tri-Cities buildings. In Rock Island, the 1920 announcement of plans to build a \$900,000 theater and hotel, the Fort Armstrong, highlighted the city's postwar construction. But the tide of building exuberance did not last beyond Moline's record 1921 rate of construction, as both cities reeled from the sweeping curtailment of Arsenal employment and the notable downturn in the farm-implement industry.

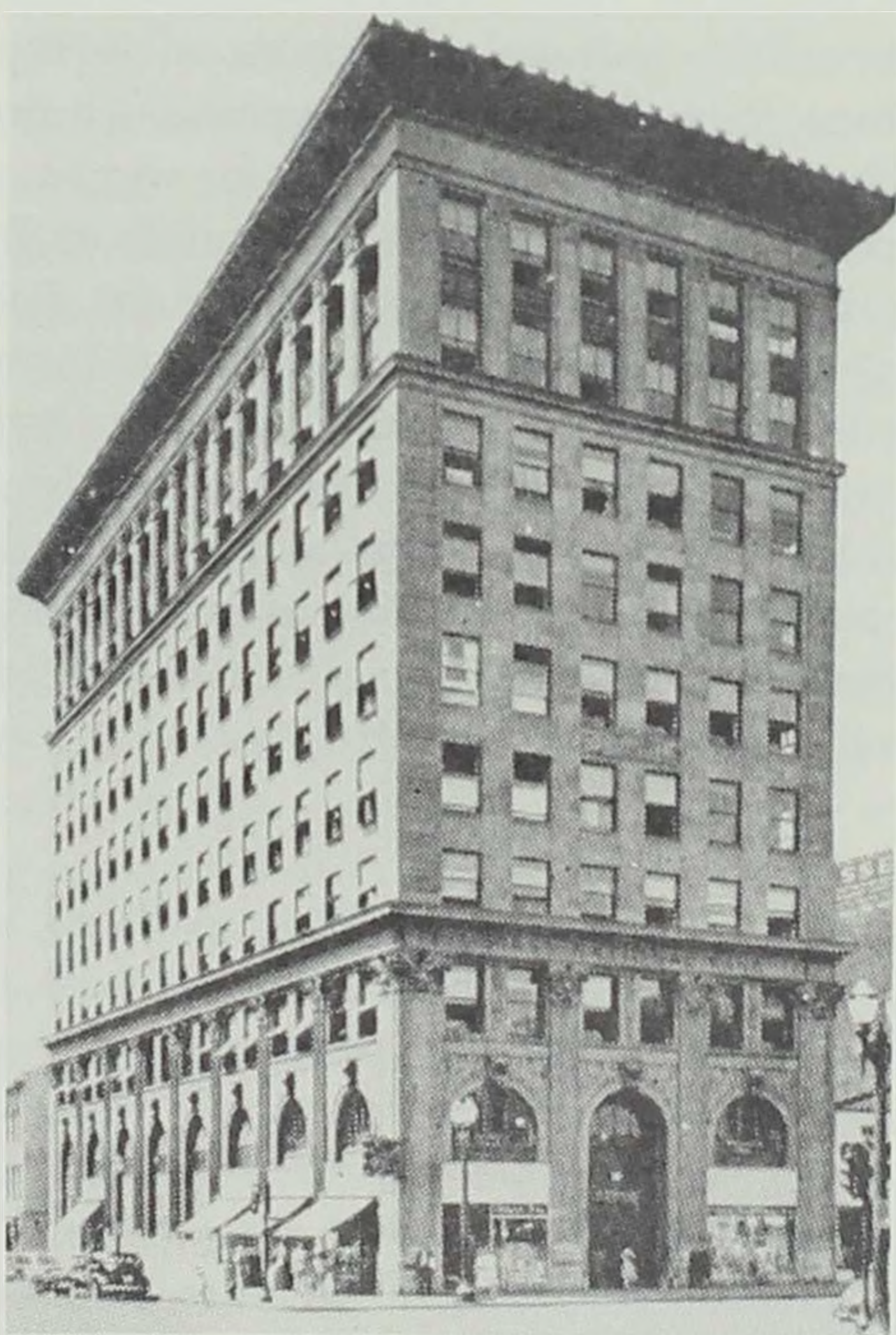
Davenport, however, was insulated by a broader-based economy that included many small consumer-goods producers, an expanding service sector, and an area-wide domination of the wholesale business. As a result, it

witnessed a surge in downtown building after the lackluster years of 1920 and 1921. This was spurred by national conditions of increasing prosperity underpinned by expanding business and greater purchasing power for wages, combined with cheaper and more readily available mortgage funds to renew construction. For the next seven years, in fact, according to historian George Soule in his book, *Prosperity Decade*, mortgage rates and construction costs dropped to a level compatible with the nation's building demand. In response, Davenport bankers, retailers, and private organizations dusted off their shelved building plans and set to work.

Census figures for 1929 revealed what Davenport businessmen had long known: years of momentum had reinforced Davenport's position of dominance over the area's commercial activities. From a radius of over thirty miles on both sides of the river, industrial workers and farmers flocked to Davenport's numerous offices, retail stores, and wholesale houses. Amid the dawn of installment credit, the city's retail sales were greater than the sales in Moline and Rock Island combined. Davenport's wholesale business outdistanced that of her neighbors by more than two to one.

Davenport's retail dominance was reflected in the construction work begun in 1922 for a large modern department store to house the M.L. Parker Company, built by the W.C. Putnam Estate on its Second Street property east of the Putnam Building. The million-dollar Parker Building was designed by junior members of Daniel Burnham's Chicago firm, the firm that had designed the Putnam Building twelve years earlier, and the seven-story department store replicated the style and size of its predecessor.

The M.L. Parker Building, reflecting the expertise lent by leaders in department store design and construction with its bargain base-



Major new buildings for the deposit-rich First National Bank (left) and Union Savings Bank (right) were monuments to Davenport's prosperity in the Twenties. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

ment and twenty-six separate departments, encompassed the largest retail floor space under one roof in Iowa. For those entrusted to carry through W.C. Putnam's wish to modernize his Second Street property, the completion of the Putnam Building's twin tower was a proud occasion.

Two deposit-rich Davenport banks seized the headlines in 1923 by announcing major building programs that pushed the year's building activity to unprecedented levels. Flush with funds garnered from the area's war boom and expectations of future business gains, the First National Bank and the Union Savings Bank built proud banking

houses topped by floors of new commercial office space.

One hundred and fifty men labored for over a year to ready the First National's ten-story skyscraper, eight office floors supported by the banking room's ornamental fluted pilasters. Irvin Green and Joe R. Lane, chief officers of Davenport's oldest bank, supervised planning of the building's rich details, right down to the completion of the facade's last carved stone plaque. As the three high-speed Otis Elevators ferried their first passengers to the building's tenth floor, the work crew of John Soller—a Davenport contractor who also built the Masonic Temple, the Democrat Building, and the Federal Bakeries Building—hurried to finish work on Second Street's newest addition.

Over on Third and Brady streets, Union Bank President George Haeur craned his neck to watch the construction of his firm's million-dollar bank and office building. Hoggson Brothers, renowned New York bank builders, pressed into service an army of iron workers, masons, and carpenters to finish the neo-classical structure. The offices offered prospective tenants the latest in innovations: circulating ice water, compressed air, gas, and high-tension electric current.

Newspaper accounts stressed that the additions to downtown office space would satisfy an unmet demand. Nevertheless, neither building's occupancy rate approached that of the Kahl Building. Nor did either bank have any ground-floor commercial space, other than its own, to offset taxes and maintenance costs. Both banks stretched their resources tightly to accommodate the grand projects. Yet the mounting wave of new office space—reinforced by civic pride and unfettered optimism, and the perceived need to “keep up with your neighbor's building plans”—foreshadowed the day when it would spill over and inundate the existing demand.

The record building pace achieved in Davenport in 1922 and 1923 extended beyond commercial building. It ap-

peared that every charity and fraternal organization had the building bug. Between 1922 and 1923 Davenport's local organizations, cramped by inadequate facilities or in need of more space to accommodate greater membership, kept fund raisers and contractors busy. The Eagles pointed with pride to their new \$350,000 fraternal lodge. The Lend-A-Hand Club for young workingwomen revered its new \$200,000 home. The Masons built an immense million-dollar temple, complete with a 3,000-seat auditorium. A \$185,000 addition enhanced the public library's book collection.

Nor were Davenport's educational institutions dormant. St. Ambrose College, bolstered by a fund-raising drive that raised nearly \$900,000, erected Davis Hall, the first of a series of buildings the college constructed during the decade. B.J. Palmer, the sometimes eccentric and always provocative leader of the Palmer School of Chiropractic and WOC Radio, spent over \$350,000 between 1920 and 1923 to erect new administrative and classroom buildings for the Palmer School. The school's building program reflected its founder's optimistic belief that, with time, his student body would expand beyond its contemporary enrollment of nearly 2,000 students to over 21,000.

In 1924, Palmer unveiled plans to erect a monument worthy of his grandiose aspirations:

COURTESY DAVENPORT CHAMBER OF COMMERCE





The new home of the American Commercial & Savings Bank became a Davenport landmark as the Davenport Bank and Trust Company Building. (courtesy Davenport Bank and Trust Company)

the Kindt Concerterium. This was to be a sprawling \$500,000 auditorium patterned, according to the *Democrat and Leader* "after the Mormon Tabernacle at Salt Lake City, but on a larger scale." The 6,000-seat auditorium with its \$180,000 pipe organ was to be used for Palmer School assemblies, concerts, and theatrical presentations. Actually, the Concerterium never moved beyond the drawing boards, but its very conception serves as an example of the high-reaching optimism of the age.

The mild recession of 1924 weakened the base of confidence on which Davenport construction projects were launched. With one exception in 1925, the building pace declined, then sputtered forward, coasting on the strength of residential building and minor commercial activity. Had it not been for United Light and Power's decision to build its new headquarters in Davenport in 1925, the lull following the flurry of activity in 1922 and 1923 would have continued into 1927. The huge utility syndicate's five-story headquarters, begun the same year that its Davenport subsidiary, Peoples Light, completed its \$3 million Riverside Power Plant, kept workers busy when other new construction slackened. Meanwhile, Davenporters could look across the river to see Rock Island's long-awaited hotel, the nine-story Fort Armstrong, nearing completion.

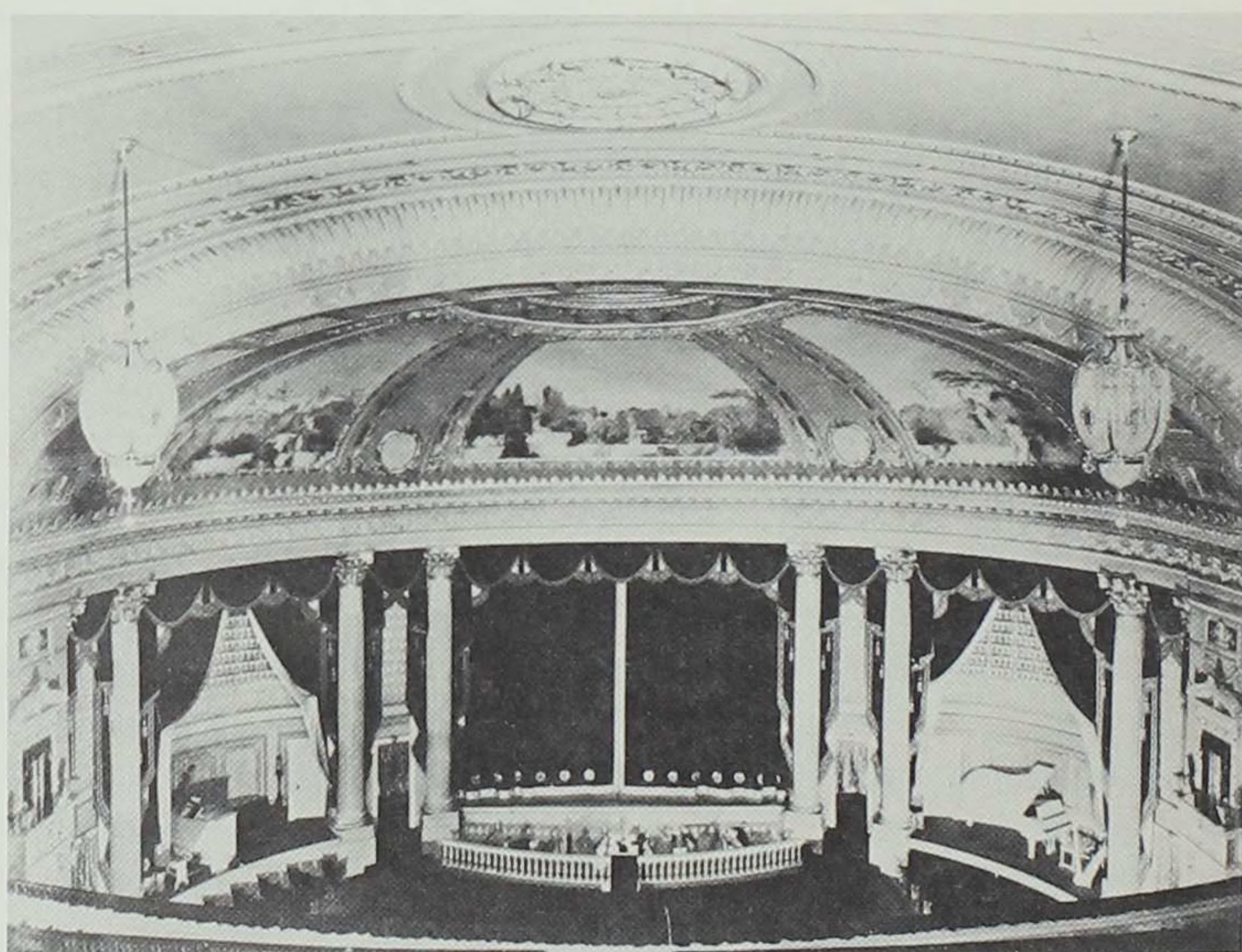
Downtown Davenport building revived in 1927 on the strength of the American Commercial & Savings Bank's dramatic announcement of its intention to erect a new bank and office building. When completed, the terraced-style structure (now the home of the Davenport Bank and Trust Company) rested upon the location of its predecessor at Third and Main. Built at a total cost of almost \$2 million, the building, with its eleven floors of office suites astride a cavernous three-story banking room, all topped off by a massive clock

tower, boosted Davenport's claim to true skyscraper status. The vaulted banking room was highlighted by a wall mural depicting scenes from Davenport history. The bank selected Walsh Construction to erect this crowning symbol of postwar prosperity, a fitting honor for the Davenport-based firm. Under the leadership of Patrick Walsh, and later his son Thomas, Walsh Construction made a lasting imprint on Davenport. The Blackhawk Hotel, the Sacred Heart Cathedral, the Kahl Building, and the American Commercial Building all took shape under Walsh supervision.

American Commercial's new home mirrored Davenport's swelling stream of bank deposits, which funded most of the major projects. Davenport bank deposits grew from \$43 million in 1921 to just over \$64 million in 1930, and Ray Nyemaster and Ed Kaufman had guided American Commercial's rise to the largest savings bank in Iowa. Davenport made claim to being the financial capital of Iowa.

But now ominous clouds were beginning to gather on the economic horizon. Nationally, the easy bank credit that flowed into real estate promotions had prompted speculative projects in commercial building that had begun to exceed the demand for space; the construction industry had been caught up in the speculative mania of the Twenties. Occupancy rates, and therefore the builders' return on their investments, were beginning to fall.

In Davenport, however, building went on. Davenport's economic resilience, shored up by renewed production at area farm-implement factories and the Davenport Industrial Commission's success in attracting new industry to the city, provided a final burst of construction in 1929 and 1930, a year beyond the limit of most cities' building booms. Davenport's population increased by 8,000 between 1926 and 1930, and 1,800 workers were added to Davenport payrolls. By 1930 Davenport was listed as one of the top twenty cities in the country in total building under construction.

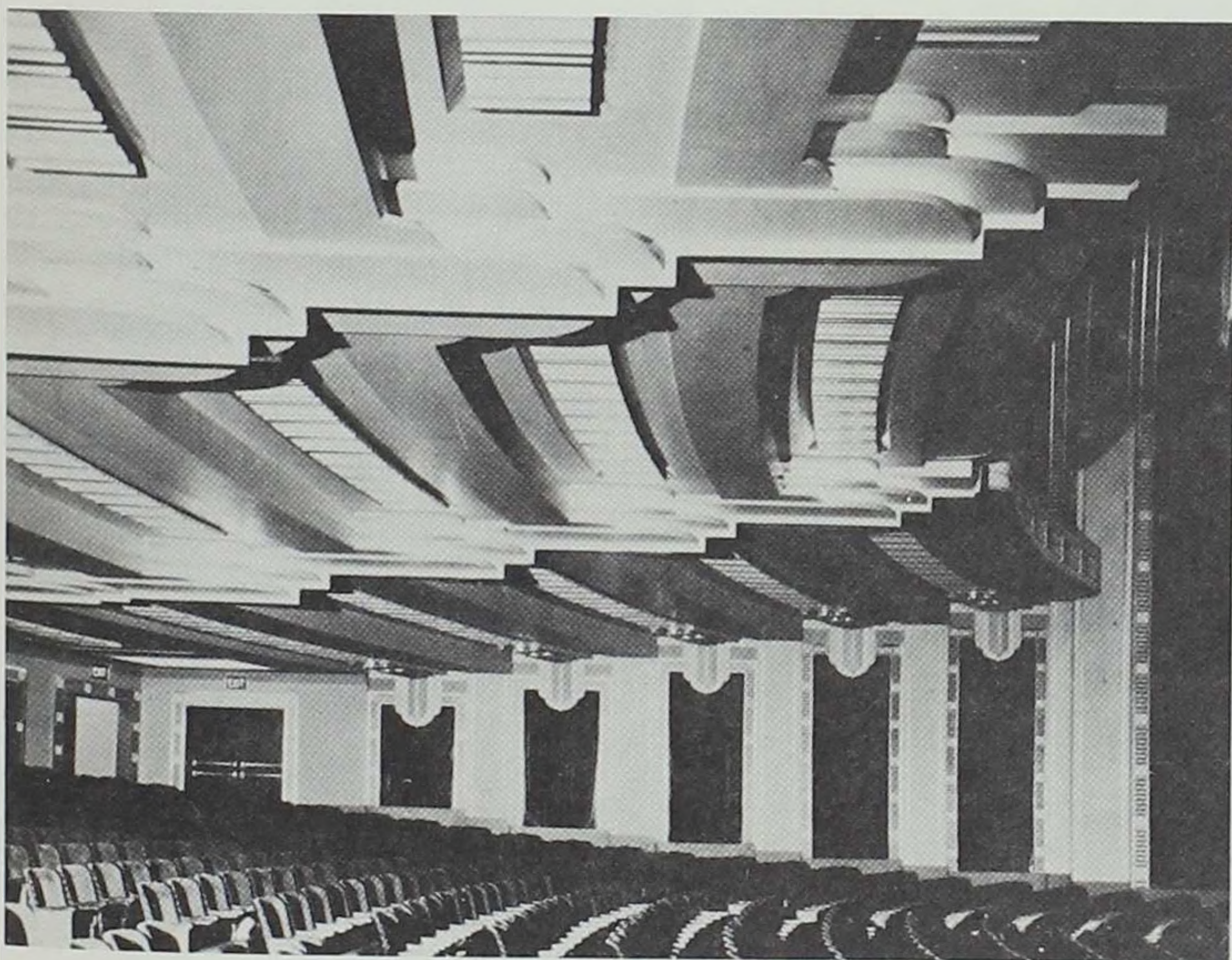


The ornate, opera-house style of the Kahl Building's Capitol Theater (left) contrasted sharply with the contemporary Art Deco style of the RKO Orpheum Theater in the Mississippi Hotel Building (right), though

Projects underway included a \$500,000 addition to Mercy Hospital, a \$100,000 river-front stadium, a \$750,000 nursing home for the Royal Neighbors of America, and George Bechtel's \$2 million hotel-theater building in the downtown area. Across the river, International Harvester led the area's implement industry through three years of major building. In 1930, construction activity flourished in

Moline, highlighted by the completion of the eight-story Fifth Avenue Realty Building.

George Bechtel provided downtown building watchers with one last topic of conversation. Bechtel, who was known as "the father of Iowa Municipal Bonds," left his mark on the city by constructing the Mississippi Hotel and RKO Theater on the corner of Third and Brady streets. The ten-story building, with a theater



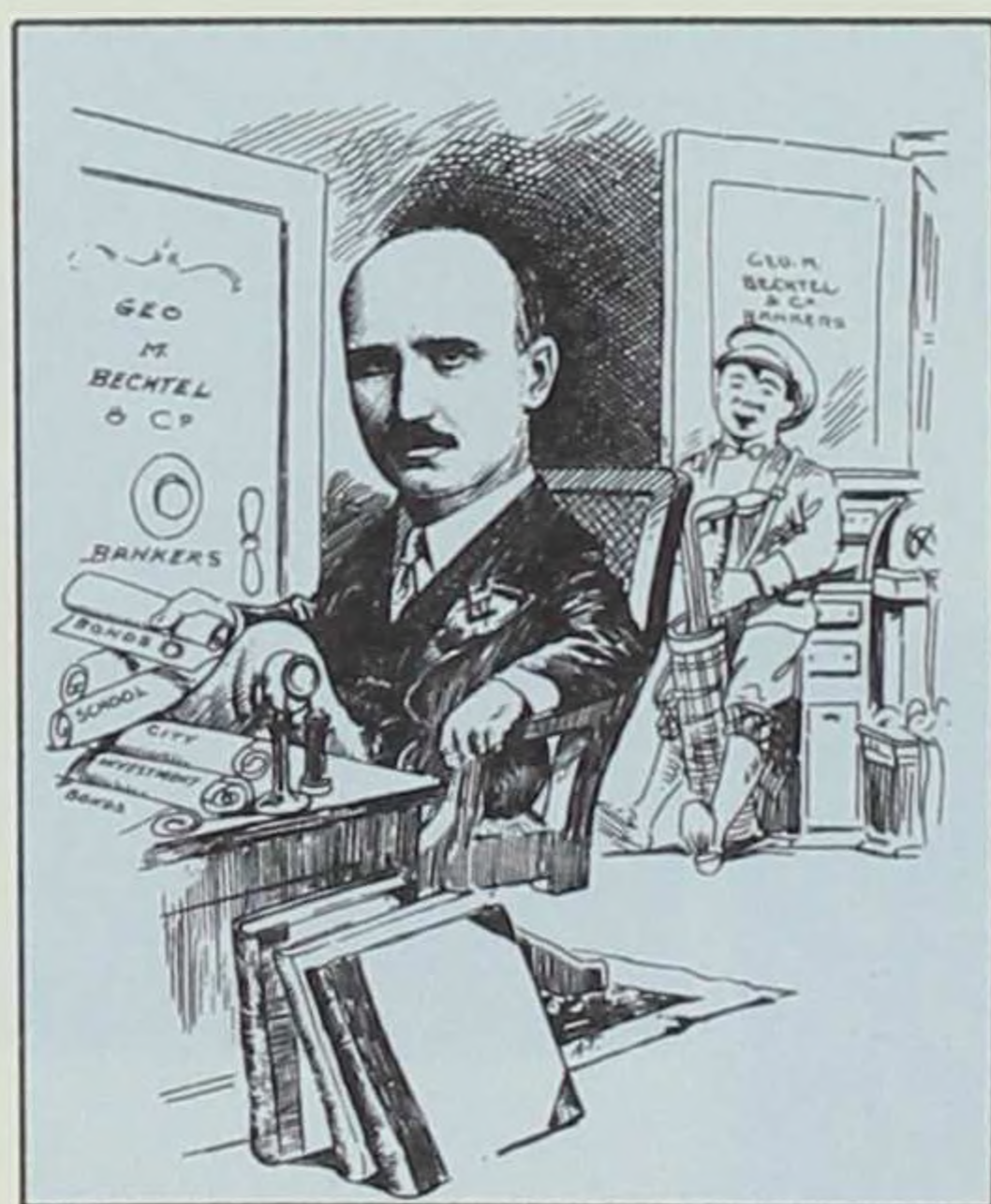
they were built only ten years apart. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

built expressly for sound pictures, gave employment to a workforce of over two hundred. The Lundoff-Bicknell Company, builder of Chicago's Palmer House and several prominent Midwest theaters, erected both structures. Built in prosperity's dying days, neither the hotel nor the theater proved to be profitable investments; by the time they were completed, hotel rooms and theater seats

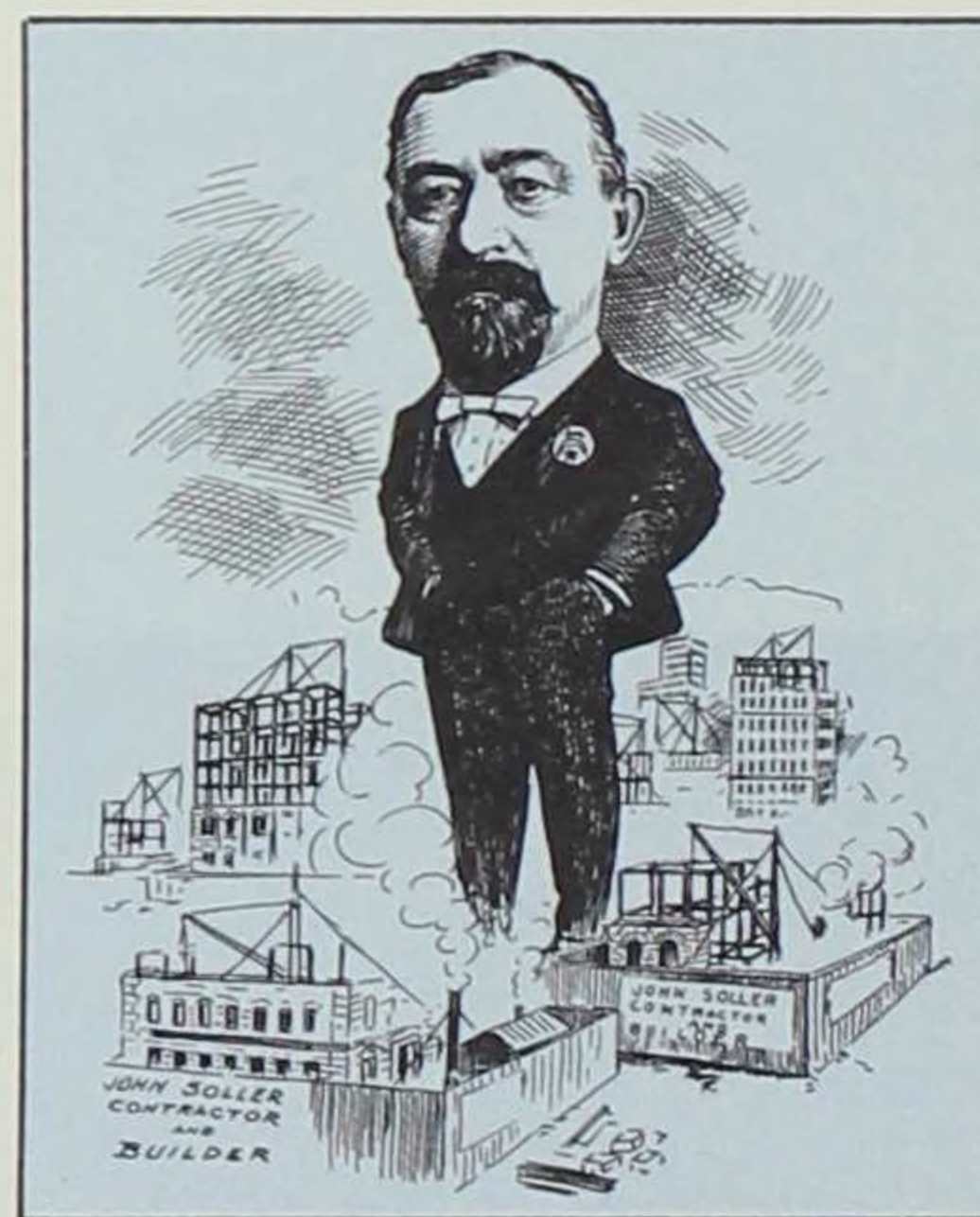
abounded in the Tri-Cities. The eminently successful Bechtel, caught up in a burst of civic and personal pride, had taken out a mortgage on continued prosperity using unbridled optimism as collateral. On the eve of the Depression, according to knowledgeable contemporaries, the Mississippi Hotel had an occupancy rate of little better than 25 percent.

After 1930, when the Depression finally set-

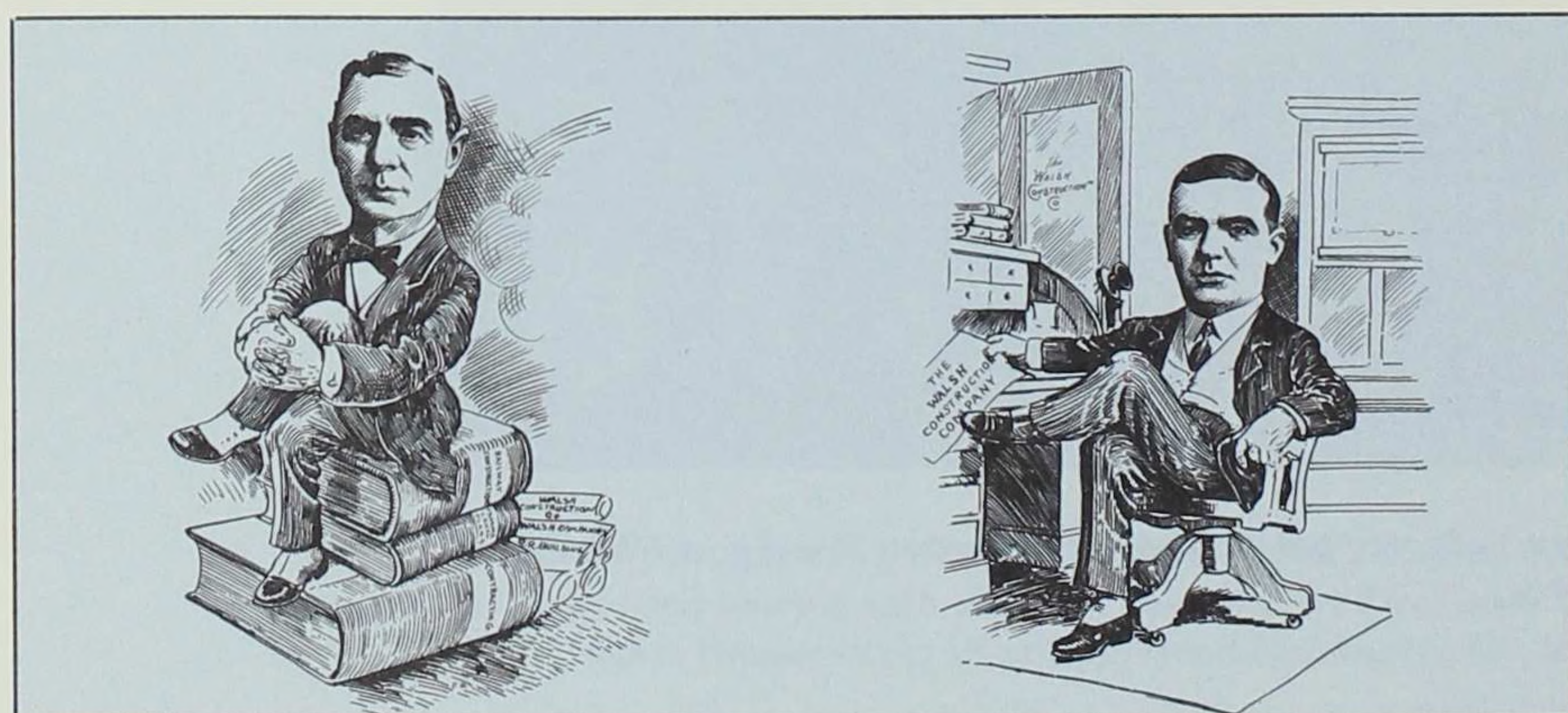
Four Men Who Left Their Mark on Davenport's Architectural Heritage



George Bechtel, builder of the Mississippi Hotel and Orpheum Theater



John Soller, contractor for the First National Bank Building and other major downtown buildings



Patrick Walsh (left) and his son Thomas, supervisors of the construction of the American Commercial & Savings Building, the Blackhawk Hotel, the Sacred Heart Cathedral, and the Kahl Building (drawings courtesy Quad-City Times)

tled on the city, Davenport's golden years of commercial building came to an end. Its proud bank doors closed during the Bank Holiday of 1933, and some never reopened. Many of Davenport's new offices, theater seats, and hotel rooms went unoccupied. The buildings

themselves survived, however, after World War II, when Davenport emerged from the economic depths stronger than ever. They graced the city with a vibrant skyline, a distinguished contribution to Davenport's building heritage. □