

Sandwiching in History
B. P. O. Elks Club
(now the Junior League of Little Rock)
401 S. Scott Street, Little Rock
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By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of the B. P. O. Elks Club, also known as the Woman's City Club, and now the headquarters for the Junior League of Little Rock. I'd like to thank the Junior League for allowing us to tour their beautiful building, and I'd like to thank a few people in particular for their help with the tour—

 Kerri Sernel, Jr. League Headquarters Chair, who initially approached me about doing a tour here;

 Betsey Mowery, Jr. League Historian, who spent a lot of time with me doing research for the tour;

 And Joan Wehr (Weer), rental manager, for ensuring that everything runs smoothly.

The B. P. O. Elks Club was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 as part of the Charles L. Thompson thematic nomination, which contained about 150 Arkansas buildings designed by Thompson and his associates in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Architecture

This building was completed in late 1911 or early 1912 to serve as a clubhouse for the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, Little Rock Lodge No. 29. It was designed in 1908 by Little Rock architect Theo Sanders and is a good example of the 20th century Renaissance Revival style, which emphasized elements of ancient Greek and Roman architecture. The style is characterized by the lavish use of classical ornamentation, which you will see throughout the building. The front façade (west) features a projecting metal cornice with brackets, cast-stone parapet, and decorative central bay with elaborate cast-stone detailing and second story loggia. Each floor of the building is clearly delineated through the use of different window shapes and sizes on the front façade. Originally, a massive elk head with antlers was mounted to the round panel at the center of the front parapet. The round panel itself was a clock face with the hands at 11:00. For the Elks, 11:00 p.m. is the “hour of recollection,” when members pause to remember deceased and absent lodge members. If they were having a meeting, a bell or chimes would ring 11 times and the exalted ruler would give a toast in remembrance of those not present. You can barely see the outline of the letters B. P. O. E. in the frieze above the second story loggia, and the two medallions above the front entrance were inscribed with “No. 29” (this is no longer readable).

Some of you may be wondering why the building was designed in 1908 but not completed until 1911-1912. Construction occurred in phases over a few years as funds allowed.

*A little bit about the architect...*Theodore Marcus Sanders (born March 13, 1879, in Little Rock) was a classically trained architect who studied for one year at the Ecole des Beaux Arts (Ecole de Boze arts) in Paris after graduating in 1902 from the University of Illinois, Urbana. Sanders was employed as a draftsman under Little Rock architect Frank Gibb, and in 1906 Gibb made him a partner in the firm. In 1910 Sanders started his own firm. He enjoyed a successful practice, designing many buildings in Little Rock, including the Woodruff School, the Cornish House,

and the BPO Elks Club. In 1919 Sanders formed a partnership with Frank J. Ginocchio (Geen-ocho), formerly the supervising architect for construction at the well-known Charles L. Thompson firm. In 1927, Sanders and Ginocchio merged with Thompson. Thompson retired in 1938, followed by Sanders in 1941. Theo Sanders died suddenly in 1947 (age 68). [His drawings are on file at the UALR Art Department. Ginocchio was joined in 1941 by Edwin B. Cromwell, and the firm exists today as Cromwell Architects Engineers.]

Block 30, Original City of Little Rock

Historically, Block 30 was entirely residential. By 1886, there was a 2-story house on this site, and by 1889, four more homes had been constructed on block 30. Two of those homes were located in the 400 block of S. Scott Street—one at 415 S. Scott and the other at 423 S. Scott (just south of this building on the east side of the street). About 1895, a 2-story house was built at 413 S. Scott (lot immediately south of this building). You can see it in the historic photo of this building. Also by the late 1890s, four 2-story houses had been constructed to the east of this site facing north on E. 4th Street. Presumably, the 2-story house on this site was destroyed to make way for the Elks Club.

Elks Club

The Elks Club first appeared at this location in the 1912 Little Rock City Directory. At that time, Lodge No. 29 met here every Thursday night. F. N. Croxson was exalted ruler; James A. Ginocchio, secretary; and C. L. Lawson, treasurer. [One of the architects I mentioned earlier, Frank J. Ginocchio, was later secretary for the Elks. I believe that James A. Ginocchio (a druggist) was his uncle.]

According to the original plans for the Elks Club, the basement, which could be accessed from an entrance on 4th Street or by an interior staircase, housed a gymnasium, locker room, handball court, kitchen, serving room, boiler room, and storage.

The first floor spaces have been slightly reconfigured (in 2002 JLLR renovation) to accommodate an elevator, additional restrooms, and smaller meeting rooms. However, the basic floor plan is the same. The first floor originally housed rooms for reading, writing, lounging (parlor), and playing cards, as well as a kitchen, dining room, coat check room (under the main staircase), and a secretary's office (to the north of the entrance vestibule).

Most of the second floor was occupied by the huge lodge room, which is now known as the ballroom. The wood risers still run along the walls (members sat in chairs on these elevated platforms). The north rooms housed a ladies' parlor and toilet, while the south rooms housed another toilet and two private Elk rooms, one of which was an "apparatus room" (maybe for clothing and props used in different ceremonies?), and the other was a "preparation room," perhaps like a dressing room?

The third floor provided access to the lodge room (ballroom) balcony and contained 9 small rooms situated around a balustrade overlooking the stained glass skylight and directly below the vaulted wire-glass skylight. A common bath was also located on the third floor and still contains its original clawfoot tub and commode.

The third floor rooms were available for rent to both local and out-of-town Elks and traveling businessmen.

Woman's City Club

In 1928 the Woman's City Club purchased the Elks Club Building for \$65,000 (or \$75,000, depending on the source) after a fundraising drive by the City Federation of Women's Clubs. Despite the fact that the cornerstone on this building says "The Woman's City Club, Organized 1928," my research shows that the Woman's City Club was organized in 1926 and incorporated on December 5, 1927, in order to "create and maintain an organized center of thought and activity among the women of Arkansas, non-partisan and non-sectarian; to aid in promotion of their

mutual interests; in the advancement of science, education, philanthropy, literature, and art; to provide a place of meeting for the comfort, culture, and pleasure of its members.” The 1928 date on the cornerstone probably comes from the year they acquired this building.

The Woman’s City Club was set up so that members paid dues, which entitled them to shares of the capital stock of the club. So each member owned at least one share of the property. The club had regular meetings on the fourth Tuesday of each month as well as department meetings. Members could participate in the department of their choice. The offerings changed a little over the years. For instance, in 1940 the departments were Press & Publicity, Legislation, Education, Public Welfare, International Relations, American Citizenship, Fine Arts, and American Home. In the 1980s, the departments were Modern Arts, Garden Club, Professional, Duplicate Bridge, Chorale, and Literary Guild.

The Woman’s City Club used the building for meetings, luncheons, bridge games, dances, style shows, and the occasional musical. The Woman’s City Club also rented space to organizations, businesses, and individuals. In 1930 the Lucille Rental Library, the Little Rock Council of Girl Scouts, the Catholic Woman’s Exchange (like a consignment shop, but you could also sell homemade goods), and *The Homemaker*, which was a periodical, were all housed in the building (some in the basement and some in areas of the first two floors, like in the two “nooks”—now enclosed—on either side of the second story loggia). The Woman’s City Club rented the third floor rooms to single women who worked downtown, and in later years, the club rented those rooms as studio space for artists.

By 1935 the building’s occupants included the Woman’s City Club, James N. “Jimmy” Heagen’s (Hagan’s) piano studio, Curtis Publishing Co., Thomas Morrissey music teacher, Crystal Tea Room (which was open to the public at noon), a beauty salon, Houck (Hook) Music, and the Woman’s Exchange.

By the mid-1960s, the building was occupied by the American Businesswomen’s Association; Brotherhood of Railway Clerks of America, Rose City Lodge No. 2046

(now exists as the Transportation Communications International Union); Christ Adelphian Church; International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 807 (this organization still exists); Little Rock Democratic Women; Little Rock Federation of Women's Clubs; Little Rock Wholesale Credit Association; Rebekah Lodge (female auxiliary of the International Order of Odd Fellows; still exists); Woman's City Club; and the Woman's City Club Tea Room. Also at that time, the Linda Seitz Dance Studio, ABC Rental Service, Blanche Beauty Salon, and Jimmy Heagen's (Hagan's) piano studio were in the basement (with a 201-203 E. 4th Street address).

In addition to these tenants, the ballroom was used for a variety of things, including community theater productions and Little Rock Cotillion.

Some of you may remember Mrs. Bell and her daughters, Ann and Sylvia, who catered out of the kitchen for over 70 years. Ann and Sylvia were well known for their homemade rolls.

Up through the mid-1970s, the Woman's City Club remained active, and a multitude of organizations and businesses rented space in the building. But by 1985, the commercial tenants had moved out of the basement, and the only organization listed at the main address was the Woman's City Club. At its peak in the 1940s, the Woman's City Club had a membership of almost 1,000. Due to a variety of factors, including an aging membership and an increase in the number of working women, the club's membership dwindled.

[In 1984 local businessmen Lawson W. Turner, III, and Warren A. Stephens offered to buy the WCC Building for \$330,000, or \$1,122 per share to each shareholder. Turner and Stephens intended to renovate the building for use as a private club or office space. The club was divided on the issue, causing much controversy. Members of the Woman's City Club signed a contract selling the building to Turner and Stephens, but because Arkansas law required the approval of 2/3 of the shareholders for such a decision to be made, dissenting club members filed a lawsuit against the developers, claiming they had not received the required 2/3

approval. In the end, a judge voided the sale because the WCC could not determine how many shares had been issued and how many were outstanding; therefore, they could not determine how many people were required to reach the 2/3. And in 1986, Turner and Stephens formally withdrew their offer.]

Junior League of Little Rock

By 2000, the Junior League of Little Rock was looking for a new headquarters, and the Woman's City Club was still struggling. Junior League member Stacy Hurst chaired a task force to find the perfect headquarters. Hurst approached the Woman's City Club about the possibility of purchasing their building. Her proposition created some controversy because the WCC membership was divided on the issue with some in favor and some very much opposed. And likewise for the Junior League—not everyone was in favor of purchasing this building. But the League was able to strike a deal with the WCC and raise the necessary funds to purchase and rehab the building (\$2.5 million allotted to purchase building, rehab, and for future maintenance—actual purchase price, including closing costs and fees, was about \$730,000). The purchase was finalized in the fall of 2001 and rehab work began soon thereafter. In 2002 the League purchased the parking lot to the east of the building.

The Junior League of Little Rock was organized in 1914 as a branch of United Charities, the forerunner of United Way. In 1921 the group separated from United Charities and was incorporated in 1929. In general, the Junior League works to develop the potential of women and improve the community through effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. Its purpose is exclusively educational and charitable. Throughout its history, the Junior League has been involved with numerous community projects. The League's first project was the establishment of a Baby Welfare Station in the Arsenal Building at MacArthur Park in order to provide medical exams for infants and preschoolers as well as health care instruction for parents. Other notable projects include the Arkansas Arts Center, Bargain Box, Little Rock Cooks, Riverfest, Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect

(SCAN), Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, Channel 7 On Your Side, Holiday House, etc., etc.

Today the Junior League focuses on nutrition, wellness, and school readiness, as well as city and statewide policies that impact women and children. The League has a total membership of about 1,000 with around 300-350 active members. The organization meets 6 times a year as a big group, and committees meet separately. The Junior League rents out the ballroom and some first floor rooms for special events and meetings. They have a very successful rental business—they are already booked solid for Saturdays through July 2013 and are scheduling things for Fall 2013 and Spring 2014.

[Former League homes—Arsenal Building at MacArthur Park, Trapnall Hall (1929 to 1976, when they sold to State of AR), leased spaces, T. J. Raney & Sons Building at 3600 Cantrell, leased spaces, WCC Building.]

Interior Specs

JLLR Renovation details (October 2001 to April 2002)—new exterior fire stair, HVAC, elevator, first floor restrooms, a few new walls, other structural maintenance (restoration architects: John Allison and Herron Horton Architects)
August 2010—unboarded transom windows in ballroom and installed period appropriate replacements (identical to original pane arrangement)
December 2011 to February 2012—kitchen upgrades, including new appliances, fixtures, floor, subway tile, etc.
Currently looking into rehab of 3rd floor (estimate \$300,000)

Other details:

Building is a little over 14,000 square feet

Oak woodwork

Marble flooring/insets in floor

Corinthian columns

Some original fixtures

See fans in the north and south parlors

South parlor has original fireplace with green tile and Ionic columns

Door handles with Elk emblem

Originally had a very masculine interior design of forest green walls with oak or ivory trim

Crystal Room—chandelier donated to building in 1930s

Green stained glass skylight

Ballroom—most ornate interior space. Elaborate plaster molding throughout, including lion heads on the balcony and ceiling medallions. The Tiffany crystal chandelier originally hung in the Nut Club, which was located on the upper floor of the 555, Inc., the state's largest service station and Firestone tire dealer, at the southeast corner of 2nd & Broadway in LR (the 555 service station occupied the entire eastern side of the 200 block of S. Broadway—went from 2nd all the way to 3rd). For a time, the Nut Club was Little Rock's premier night spot, boasting "the largest dance floor...beer and good things to eat...Tuesday bargain night—gentlemen forty cents, ladies free...Saturday—whoopee night 40 cents per person...music by Frankie Littlefield and his 10 piece band." The owner of the 555 station donated the chandelier to the WCC in memory of his daughter.

Note that the ballroom was restored in memory of Augustus Caleb Rimmel. Augustus C. Rimmel was an insurance agent and served as chairman of the state Republican central committee from 1916 until December 3, 1920, when he died of malaria. He was a member of the Elks Lodge and a respected man in the community. His body lay in state in the ballroom for three days before burial. He was the father of Gertrude Rimmel Butler and Carrie Rimmel Dickinson (and the grandfather of Cathie Matthews and Richard Butler).

You will not be allowed to visit the basement, loggia, or the balcony in the ballroom.

Next tour is on Friday, February 1 at the Capital Hotel.

