

Sandwiching in History Tour

ACME Brick Company Sales Office

301 Victory Street, Little Rock

August 4, 2017

By Mason Toms



Happy Friday everyone, my name is Mason Toms and I work at the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program which is an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage. Thank you for coming and welcome to the ACME Brick Company Sales Office. Today's tour is worth one hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. Please see me after the tour if you are interested.

Built in 1959, the ACME Brick Company Sales Office was designed in the Populist Modern style of Mid-Century Modern architecture by H. Price Roark of the notable Little Rock firm Erhart Eichenbaum Rauch & Blass. The building served as the central

Arkansas sales office for the ACME Brick Company for nearly forty years until the operation was moved to Maumelle in 1996, where it currently resides.

Original “West Little Rock”

Although this area of Little Rock was part of the original town that was platted in 1821, this was the western edge of town and not really developed until the 1880s. It may be hard to believe now but this area was entirely residential when it was first developed. It wasn't until 1897 that this area appears on the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of Little Rock; prior to that the maps ended at Markham Street to the north and Ringo Street to the east. However, when this area is shown on the 1897 map there are four small, narrow houses on long, narrow lots facing Victory Street on the site that is now occupied by the ACME Brick Building and its parking lot. These houses were likely something similar to “Shotgun Houses” which were common in Arkansas during this period. By 1902 at least one of these lots, but likely two of them, was occupied by the Cross Methodist Episcopal Church. However, this church is gone by 1906, which is about the time that we first see commercial structures appearing in the area. The J.C. Arent Grocery appears in the Little Rock City Directories at this address in 1907, and the Arent Grocery would remain here until 1926. The 1913 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for this block shows the Grocery as well as two larger houses occupying the land that was formerly the two northernmost lots. It appears that at some point between 1897 and 1913 this quarter of the block was subdivided, and the once long, narrow lots were shortened with a new lot being created behind, which had a stable on it. The Grocery building sat directly on the corner of Victory and 3rd, facing 3rd Street, with another stable on the east side of the property and another narrow structure running between

the Grocery and the stable. Also seen for the first time on the 1913 map is the structure that is at 1307 W. 3rd Street, originally a house, and the house that now is home to the offices of the local architect Tommy Jameson, at the corner of Pulaski Street and 3rd Street, but I digress.

As I said a minute ago, the J. C. Arent Grocery was on the corner of Victory and 3rd from 1907 to 1926. It is then taken over by C.F. Conway who continues to operate a grocery here until 1928. However, by 1929 the building is modified and turned into a cleaner. Little Rock City Directories show Clark Cleaners of Arkansas in this location until 1931. From 1932 to 1935 the building sat vacant. This was likely the result of the Great Depression. In 1936 the Best Cleaners are listed at this address, but they would only stay here until 1938, when Vogue Cleaners would take over the building. Vogue Cleaners remained here until 1948. The 1939 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps give us another peek into this period. By this time the stables are all gone, along with the connecting structure, so that only the building on the corner remained. Gone too was another of the long, narrow houses that sat to the south of the commercial structure. The two larger houses, however, did still remain in 1939.

After a decade of being home to Vogue Cleaners, the building at the corner of Victory and 3rd is purchased by the Henry P. Massery Cleaners. They would be here until 1954 when the building once again appears to be vacant in the City Directories. In 1955 the building became occupied by the A & J Electric Company, but by 1957 this company

had moved to 6th Street. The building was once again vacant and would remain this way until it was demolished in late 1958 to make way for the new ACME Brick Company Sales Office.

ACME Brick Company

The ACME Brick Company was chartered on April 17th, 1891, in Alton, Illinois, by George Bennett. According to the ACME Brick Company Bennett built his first brick plant in 1890 in Parker County, Texas. In early 1891 his test bricks are rated “superior” so Bennett decided to name his new company “ACME”, which means the point at which something is best, perfect, or most successful. By 1894, Bennett built his second brick plant across the railroad tracks from the original in what is now Millsap, Texas. Over the next several years ACME Brick continued to grow. Bennett commonly would purchase existing brick plants to expand but would occasionally still build new when necessary.

It was in 1919 that ACME first came to Arkansas. That year Walter Bennett, son of George Bennett, purchased 120 acres in Perla, Arkansas, to build a new plant. The first bricks were shipped out from the Perla Plant in 1921. In 1923 ACME expanded in Arkansas by purchasing the Fort Smith Brick & Tile Company in Fort Smith, Arkansas. However, it was 1926 that was the most significant year for the ACME Brick Company in Arkansas. In that year ACME purchased a rival plant in Perla, which became Perla Plant #2, and also purchased the Arkansas Brick and Tile Company, which had plants in Malvern, Pine Bluff, and Little Rock. It was also in this year that ACME opened their first sales office in Little Rock.

Located at 111-115 Center Street, the original ACME Brick Company Sales Office was in the same spot that the former Arkansas Brick and Tile Sales Office was located. This was in the northwest corner of the ground floor of the old Hotel Gleason, which sat where the Stephens Building is now. This site would be the home of the offices until 1931. From 1932 to 1934 the Little Rock Sales Office was closed due to the economic hardships brought on by the Great Depression; however the brick plants did remain open, including the Little Rock Plant which was located at southeast corner of the intersection of Asher and Cedar, then at the southern edge of the city. ACME stayed afloat during this period with the aid of decently large governmental contracts. In 1935 the sales office reopens in Little Rock but was now located at 208 S. Louisiana Street, just around the corner from the former location and where Hyden Miron and Foster, PLLC. is currently located. They would stay here until 1951. From 1951 to 1958 the ACME Sales Office was located once again in the Hotel Gleason, but this time it was in the southwest corner of the building at the intersection of 2nd and Center Streets. It would stay in this spot until the new offices at 301 Victory Street were completed in 1959.

The building at 301 Victory Street was home to the ACME Brick Company Sales Office for nearly forty years. In 1996 it was decided that a newer, bigger facility where the sales offices, showrooms, warehouses, and shipping center could be housed was needed for the Central Arkansas location. So a new structure was built at 10921

Maumelle Boulevard and the operations were moved there. At the same time Berkshire Hathaway, Inc., purchased the ACME Brick Company. This may have been a factor in the movement of the offices, but I cannot say for sure.

The Designers

The building at 301 Victory was designed by the Little Rock firm of Erhart Eichenbaum Rauch & Blass in 1958. According to Gordon Wittenberg and Charles Witsell, in their book *Architects of Little Rock: 1833 to 1950*, the firm was originally founded in January of 1930 after Howard Eichenbaum and Frank Erhart were turned down by their then employer, famed Little Rock architect Eugene Stern, when they requested to be made partners. However, this was very poor timing on their part because it was the beginning of the Great Depression. Needless to say, it was a rough start. Eichenbaum went to work for the Works Progress Administration to bring in some sort of income while Erhart stayed to man the office. Eichenbaum would come in on the weekends to assist with any designs that were going on. The firm's first design was for Saul Harris, who owned the Gem Building where their office was located. Harris requested that they design him a shopping center with interrogated parking at the corner of Kavanaugh and Spruce. This design would be in place of their rent. If you are familiar with Leo's Greek Castle in the Hillcrest, then you know the shopping center that they designed for Harris there. In 1931 the firm had its first big commission. It was for a new building to house the Arkansas Deaf Mute Institute in Little Rock, Parnell Hall. This building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in January of 2008.

The firm continued to grow in the following years. In 1938 they received another large commission in the form of a new tuberculosis sanitarium in Booneville, Arkansas, which they designed with the notable Fort Smith firm of Haralson and Mott. The resulting buildings were highly praised for their Art Deco design and were eventually added to the National Register of Historic Places in October of 2006.

The years of World War II brought the construction industry to a crawl, but the firm managed to pull through. In 1945 Erhart and Eichenbaum added John Rauch as partner, making the firm Erhart Eichenbaum & Rauch. The following year Noland Blass, Jr., joined the firm, and in 1949 Houston Price Roark joined the firm. In 1955 Blass became a named partner as well, and the firm became Erhart Eichenbaum Rauch & Blass, or more commonly known as EERB. That same year the firm moved its offices from downtown Little Rock to a new building at the corner of 2nd and Chester, just a few blocks away from here. That building was the result of an internal design competition, which Price Roark won. Roark designed the floor plan and structural systems of the building and Blass added architectural flourishes to the exterior. EERB would become one of the premier architectural firms in the state. They completed several high profile commissions including the former VA Hospital on Roosevelt, the Baptist Hospital Main Campus, the original St. Vincent Hospital at the corner of Markham and University, Horace Mann High School, Worthen Bank Building (now Bank of America), the Arkansas Justice Building, and the Boy Scouts of America Arkansas Headquarters at the corner of Cedar Hill and Cantrell Road. The firm continued to be a pillar of the Arkansas architectural community until it finally closed its doors in the late 1980s.

Houston Price Roark was the principal architect at EERB on the design for the ACME Brick Company Sale Office Building. Price was the son of Granville Roark, Jr., and Evadna Price. His father was from Franklin, Kentucky, and his mother was from Newton County, Missouri. They met and fell in love while they were attending the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. In 1917 the two were married and by 1919 they had moved to Little Rock. Granville Roark, Jr., was a chemist for the Arkansas Department of Conservation and Inspection. In 1924 they had their only child, Houston Price Roark. Roark grew up in Little Rock and graduated from Little Rock High School. He started attending the University of Arkansas as an engineering student, but soon left to join the U.S. Army Reserves in 1953 and ended up serving in the European Theater. According to his obituary he was awarded the Bronze and Silver Star Medals for his bravery in volunteering to run through enemy lines to bring back reinforcements for his unit. After the war Roark returned to the University of Arkansas but this time he was studying architecture. He was part of the first class of the architecture program at the University of Arkansas, alongside Fay Jones, Ernie Jacks, and Bob Laser. However, he did not stay there. He transferred to Washington University in St. Louis where he graduated with honors in 1949 with a Bachelor's of Science in Architectural Engineering. Shortly after graduation he returned to Little Rock where he went to work for Erhart Eichenbaum & Rauch. In the fall of 1951 Roark was recalled into the military and served in the Korean Conflict; after which he returned to Washington University where he obtained a Master's of Science in Civil Engineering with honors in 1953. He again returned to Little Rock and Erhart Eichenbaum & Rauch the following year.

Roark primarily functioned as the firm's structural engineer and as such worked on many of the firm's most notable projects. However the ACME Brick Company Building is one of the few projects that Roark was the principal architect on. In 1962, just a couple of years after the completion of the ACME Brick Company Building, Roark left EERB and teamed up with local architect, Dan Cowling to form the firm Cowling and Roark, but this partnership only lasted three years. In 1966 Roark founded his own firm at 713 W. 2nd Street, taking over the building from the notable firm Trapp Clippard Phelps, which is where you will still find the firm though now it is called Roark Perkins Perry Yelvington.

The Architecture

As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk the ACME Brick Company Sales Office is an example of Populist Modern architecture, which is a subset of the Mid-Century Modern Movement. Populist Modern is best described as vernacular Modernism. Buildings of this style often contain elements from multiple other styles but without a concentration of influences in any particular one. Populist Modern is most commonly associated with the work of Arkansas native and internationally renowned Modernist architect, Edward Durell Stone. The late Carlson Terrace Apartments (1957) on the campus of the University of Arkansas is a local example of his work in this style, but it was most famously seen in his design for the American Embassy in New Delhi (1959).

If you look to the south you can see the National Old Line Insurance Building by Little Rock architect Yandell Johnson in 1955, now called the 501 Building, which is regarded as being one of the best examples of International Style architecture in the state. The ACME Brick Company Building has a similar base design to the National Old Line Insurance Building. The overall form is simple and geometric with a flat roof and no traditional ornamentation. Another International Style element on the building is the fact that it is raised up on a platform, a necessity due to the sloping lot, which also points to the International Style influence. It makes the building more of “an object in the landscape” which was an early Modernist ideal. However this building has a few elements that are more florid than the strict minimalist, Modern forms of the International Style. Similar to this period of Stone’s work, the ACME Brick Company Building is best described as an International Style building that has been gussied up a bit. The clean features of the International Style are contrasted with the screen block panels, also called solar screens or breeze block, that line the front and the unique, if not a touch gaudy, metallic gold bricks. It was touches such as these that really point to this building taking inspiration from the work of Stone. That and the fact that Roark said that is who he was looking at.

Now keep in mind that this building was a showroom as well as well as an office. To that end Roark designed the architecture of the building to be as much of a showroom as the various panels of brick samples were that were around the property. The building was constructed using all ACME products. Though the metallic gold brick on the exterior was obviously a specialty brick, the unusual appearance of the brick drummed up quite

a bit of business for ACME from people who saw it while driving by. It has faded quite a bit over the last fifty-eight years, but we can see how eye-catching the original effect would have been when we go inside in a minute. The screen block panels were also an ACME product but also served as a shade and light filter for the harsh western sun that otherwise heat up the showroom windows behind them. Even the staircase is made of ACME bricks. These steps, which are one of my favorite design elements of the building, were designed by a young Gene Levy when he was interning with EERB during summer break while he was in architecture school. Gene told me that his inspiration for the steps were a series of geese sticking their heads out of agate. However, I think he may have also been inspired by Modernist floating staircases like the one seen on Mies van der Rohe's famous Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, but maybe it was just the geese.

The building as a showroom continued on the interior. Originally the floor of the showroom space featured a dozen or more different types of brick laid into the floor and panels were hung on the walls around the room. The floor of many colors has since been carpeted over and the panels removed to make the space more suitable for other occupants. Also a majority of the interior walls of the office were originally a bluish-green glazed ceramic tile, another ACME product. These have since been painted a more neutral color. A final interior feature I would like to point out is the large sliding door that could originally separate the foyer from the showcase so that it could also be used as a conference room. Unfortunately the door really doesn't move anymore, but it is still an impressive feature of the building.

There is one more significant feature in the design and construction of this building that make it stand out. The roof of the building was constructed using a technique known as lift slab construction. This is when the entire roof plane is poured at one time on the ground and then lifted up into place using hydraulic jacks. This is the third building that we know of to have been built using this technique in Arkansas. The former EERB building over at 2nd and Chester also has a lift-slab roof on it, which was also designed by Roark. In case you were wondering, the oldest lift slab roof in the state is on the Student Union building at the University of Arkansas in Pine Bluff, which was designed by Dietrich Neyland of Ginocchio Cromwell and Associates in 1952, which may actually be the oldest lift-slab structure in the country.

I hope you have enjoyed today's tour. Please let me know if you have any questions or comments. The next Sandwiching in History will on September 1st at the Park Hill Fire Station and Water Company Complex in North Little Rock, and please join us next Saturday for our Walks Through History Tour in the ever so charming downtown of Siloam Springs. Thank you for coming and have a great weekend.