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Chamber building has history of its own

(Editor's note: This is the 31st in a series of "then and now" articles on places and things of interest in Kansas City, Kan., compiled by area historian Margaret Landis in observance of the 100th birthday of KCK in 1986. Much of the information has appeared in past editions of The Kansan.)

(Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.)

The building housing the Kansas City, Kan., Area Chamber of commerce, 727 Minnesota Ave., has a history of its own.

It was the home of Wyandotte Lodge #440 of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks and the Mercantile Club.

Wyandotte Lodge #440 was instituted April 30, 1898. The fifth floor of the Portsmouth Building on the southwest corner of 6th Street and Minnesota Avenue was leased and equipped for lodge rooms and club rooms.

The lodge grew in membership to about 800 or 900 members and had become one of the leading factors in the social as well as the fraternal life in KCK. In 1907, the elks erected their own building at 727 Minnesota Ave.

The Mercantile Club

Contemporary with the B.P.O.E. (The Elks) was the Mercantile Club, a civic and commercial club organized Dec. 28, 1898. "Its announced purpose was to promote the commercial and industrial advancement of the city" and "always aggressively support every movement for the good of the city."

The club held weekly meetings in the Club Rooms in the Commercial National Bank Building, then located on the southeast corner of 6th Street and Minnesota Avenue.

Move to 727 Minnesota Avenue



The building housing the Kansas City, Kan., Area Chamber of commerce, 727 Minnesota Ave., originally was the home of the Wyandotte Lodge #440 of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. It also was the home of the Mercantile Club, the forerunner of the Chamber. Photo courtesy of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Library.

During World War I, in the war drives, the Elks renounced their policy of exclusiveness and became the best known and most used of all private buildings.

The Mercantile Club moved to its new quarters at the Elks Club Building, 727 Minnesota Avenue, in March 1917. By special arrangements with the Elks, the businessmen would have all the privileges of the Elks.

Reorganization

When it moved, the Mercantile Club had a membership drive to enroll a thousand new members with dues of \$25 a year. They obtained 1,102 members.

At the same time the Mercantile Club was reorganized into the Chamber of Commerce.

Fire [- Oct. 14, 1917]

The Elks Club built a "New Land Mark for K.C. Skyline" -- the city's first true skyscraper. The 12-story building at 905 N. 7th Street was completed March 1924. The building later became the Huron Building. It was accepted to the National Register of Historic Places July 5, 1984 and is in the Huron Place Historic District.

Chamber of Commerce Building

The site and fire damaged building owned by the Elks Club was purchased September 1918 by the Chamber of Commerce. It was financed by the issuance of bonds bearing 3 percent interest annually. All of the bonds were purchased by the members. "The Chamber of Commerce was one of the first organizations of its kind in the country to own its own building. The decision to purchase the old Elks Club Building and reconstruct it for use as a modern Chamber of Commerce, under the ownership of that organization, was born of necessity since at that time there was no available place in which small group meetings, banquets and other gatherings could be held to discuss the issues that faced this city immediately following the war." (*Kansas City, Kansas Today*, March 1939).

Town House Hotel

The Town House Hotel, on the southeast corner of 7th Street and State Avenue, was opened in 1951.

The office of the Chamber of Commerce remained on Minnesota Avenue until it was moved in 1959 to the Town House Hotel. The chamber's move to the hotel was made to help the hotel financially and to make the chamber the center of activity downtown.

The hotel closed in 1970 and the chamber office was moved back to 727 Minnesota Avenue.

Temporary Location

The Chamber of Commerce Building is now being remodeled. During remodeling, the temporary office address is 630 Minnesota.