Harlingen Skyscraper History

Norman Rozeff, September 2008

Recent developments posit the possibility that Blaschka Tower, Harlingen's tallest building at nine stories, may be recycled into a multi-use facility. Some foresee it having the Downtown Harlingen and related offices on the bottom two floors and whole floor condominium apartments on the remaining seven floors. The renovation of this sizeable building at the corner of A and Jackson streets would go a long way to jumpstarting the Old Downtown. Here is how this remarkable structure, for the Valley in the 1920s, came about.

Harlingenites first learn something is about in The Harlingen Star headline of 7/30/26. It reads "Harlingen Will Have 7-Story Office Building". It goes on to say that R.W. Baxter from Dermott, AK has bought the vacant site at the [southwest] corner of A and Jackson Streets for $17,000 cash. He purchased it from Domingo R. Rotke, Jr. It previously housed a saloon which had burned down a year ago. The work on the $125,000 building was planned to start 11/1/26. Mr. Baxter had also purchased some lots near the Central Ward School and was already here with his family. Later the firm of Elwing and Mulhausen are selected as architects and R.P. Blythe as contractor. On 2/15/27 it is announced that the building will be 9 stories and cost $160,000.

Baxter was born 6/22/85 in Montecello, AR and attended public schools. He was a graduate of the University of Michigan and became a lawyer. In 1917 he served in the Arkansas legislature and was for six years county attorney for Warren, Arkansas. He was also an alderman in Dermott, AK. He married Sallie Murphey of Warren 7/21/18. Residing with them at 610 E. Van Buren are children Robert, Tommy, Murphey, and Brian. This Rotarian's bid to be elected city commissioner in 1928 falls short.

Robert W. Baxter does begin constructing the Valley's tallest building at nine stories. It is of concrete, block, and brick. It is Type 1 construction (non-combustible). Mr. Baxter has a time capsule incorporated somewhere in the structure.

By late September some tenants have moved in. Initially called the Baxter Building, it is renamed the Rio Grande National Life Insurance Building in January 1929 after he organizes this company in 1928 and sells the building to the company. He is a principle of the $100,000 stock company together with Drs. James R. Doss and J. W. Davis of McAllen.

Mrs. J. J. (Mary) Busa is the Harlingen branch manager of the company. Into 1930 Baxter is the owner of the Baxter Building Drug Store on the first floor with its entrance at 201 W. Jackson. Joe Chaudoin manages it. Then in a year's time the Rio Grande Pharmacy, with T. R. Williams as manager and vice president, occupies this ground floor site. In its early decade the building, whose entrance address is 106 ½ A Street, was home to the offices of numerous professionals. On floors two through nine the building averaged six tenants per floor. A listing of the names of early occupants will bring back many a memory.

In the vocation of architecture there were Stanley W. Bliss, and (Lloyd) L. E. Mellor. Among the numerous attorneys were Ramsey Cox, (Claude E.), Carter & (Lloyd E.) Stiernberg, (P.G.) Greenwood & (W. B.) Lewis, Homer R. Maxwell, DuVal West Jr., C. M. Wunderman, A. W. Cunningham (former Harlingen mayor and a longtime judge),
Paul H. Brown, (Polk) Hornaday & (Arthur A.) Klein who was also the city's corporate judge, (George W.) Johnston & (Fred) Newland, and Menton J. Murray among others who would come and go.


Sending business their way were the various real estate companies located in the building. These included the Ewing Securities Co., Altus B. Wiles, Wimberly McLeod, (W. D. ) Woodruff, the Finwood Corp., T. S. Herren, and the Harlingen Development Co.

Doctors and dentists were many in the building. Among the dentists were J. G. Brittain (an orthodontist), J. E. Kirby, Wallace M. Driskell, and George W. Diehl.

The prominent physicians included J. D. Carroll and J. A. Crockett (both of whom specialized in eye, ear and nose), N. A. Davidson, C. G. Delfs, I. G. Fox, G. W. Wentz, A. R. Lozano, G. W. Edgeton, George L. Gallaher, L. F. McClenathan, Paul R. Maxwell who in 1934 will operate a Maternity Hospital at 705 N. 1st Street, A. J. Pollard, (R. E.) Uttley & (L. M.) Davis, M. A. Childers, C. D. Dennis, and Charles H. Chandler, osteopath. There was even Conrad E. Broden's Pathology Laboratory within the building to run analyses.

Involved in financial matters were the American Finance Co., Retail Credit Co., and the accounting firms of (M. B.) Huffman & (L. B.) Martin and Cobb & Company.

Odd occupants of the building were the US Department of Agriculture, the Texas Citiculture Magazine, the Western Weighing Inspection Bureau, Valley Clay Products, Jennings and Speed (nurserymen), Cameron County Water Improvement District No. 15, and an office for the Nickel Plate Road railroad company. Harlingen's premier street paver and sidewalk builder, the general contractor F. P. McElwrath, was also located there. Occupying the basement was the Valley Beauty Shop.

The building's most unusual tenant was the radio station KRGV, "the Valley Voice", located in the top floor of the building, with its roof top garden, and two antennae to transmit signals from its spacious studio. M.S. "Dick" Niles is president and general manager of the station. C.J. Niemann is secretary-treasurer, George Parker vice-president in charge of mechanical operations, Warren Reitz is musical director, and Mrs. Ernest Wright is staff pianist. Jack Negley, an ex-vaudevillian, is studio director and announcer. A KRGV survey of 108 Harlingen homes visited reveals 57 radios owned or 52% of those surveyed. After the Labor Day 1933 Hurricane destroys the rooftop Baxter Building studios of KRGV, "Kum to the Rio Grande Valley", the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce entices the radio station to move to that city where it did so in 1934 and upped its power to 1000 watts.

The current owner of the building is Every Enterprises Inc. This firm is named after the grandfather, Howard Frederick Every, of this firm's principal, Wayne Blaschka. The
The building takes on the name Blaschka Tower after the principal of Every Enterprises. The prospects for the property are exciting. Let's hope that they come to fruition.