

A MATTER of SCALE (part two)



D.H.M.C.C.

Outdoors, old Helena is mostly "walking scale". It's scaled to suit people on foot. That scale shows up in all sorts of ways -- as many ways as there are aspects of the walking experience -- from the purely practical to the purely pleasurable. At its best, The old town is equally attentive at both ends of that spectrum. The walk should be as enjoyable as it is useful.

One way to help make it so is to populate the architecture with all sorts of eye-catching details -- art and craftsmanship, unusual materials and construction techniques, clues to place, historic allusions and so on -- thereby inviting pedestrians to exercise their unique freedom to look around.

We show just a few of those details on this page. To the left and right are the terra cotta seamstress and tailor who peer down from the New York Store facade, as if momentarily distracted from their work by some

drollery in the mall below. The store was a pioneering dry goods firm (here since 1885) which had become Helena's leading department store by 1929, when the present facade was built. Its design owes a lot to the "arts and crafts" movement, an egalitarian way of thinking that sought to give every workaday craft and trade its due when it came to composing architectural ornament. In this case, fittingly enough, it has to do with the garment trade.

Along with the seamstress and the tailor you'll find, in the terra cotta work around the central windows, the insignia of four medieval Florentine mercantile guilds. Over the middle window are an eagle and bales of wool representing the dressers and dyers. Below is the fleur-de-lis of the drapers and mercers. To the left is the barred door of the silk-makers (silk-making was once a closely-guarded secret), and to the right are the swatches of fur that represent the furriers. High above, in the cartouche at top center, is a fanciful emblem (an honorary gift from his business associates) for Hermann Fligelman, who'd founded the store.

The mustachioed fellow drawn at the bottom (center) of this page is one of a matched pair carved in sandstone where the arches come together on the second-story front of the Sands Brothers' Building. He looks like the sort who sometimes shows up on old sea charts to signify hope for fair winds and favorable commerce. The Sands Brothers -- Morris, Julius and Abraham -- were another group of pioneering dry-goods merchants, established in Montana since 1867. It's

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quite possible that, flush with success when they put this new front on their store in 1889, they wanted those carvings to recall the early days of their business, when long-distance transport of their merchandise, by river and overland, was as worrisome as any sea passage.

On either side of that Sands Brothers' carving, we've drawn details from two homes of the First National Bank. On the left is one of the green glazed terra cotta spandrel panels on the bank's 1931 "Art Deco" home (now the US Bank), with its stylized flower and fiddlehead design. A "fiddlehead" is a new frond unwinding in the center of a fern. More of them, this time carved in shallow relief in dark stone quarried near Radersburg, show up in the striking decorative work around the bank's original doorways.

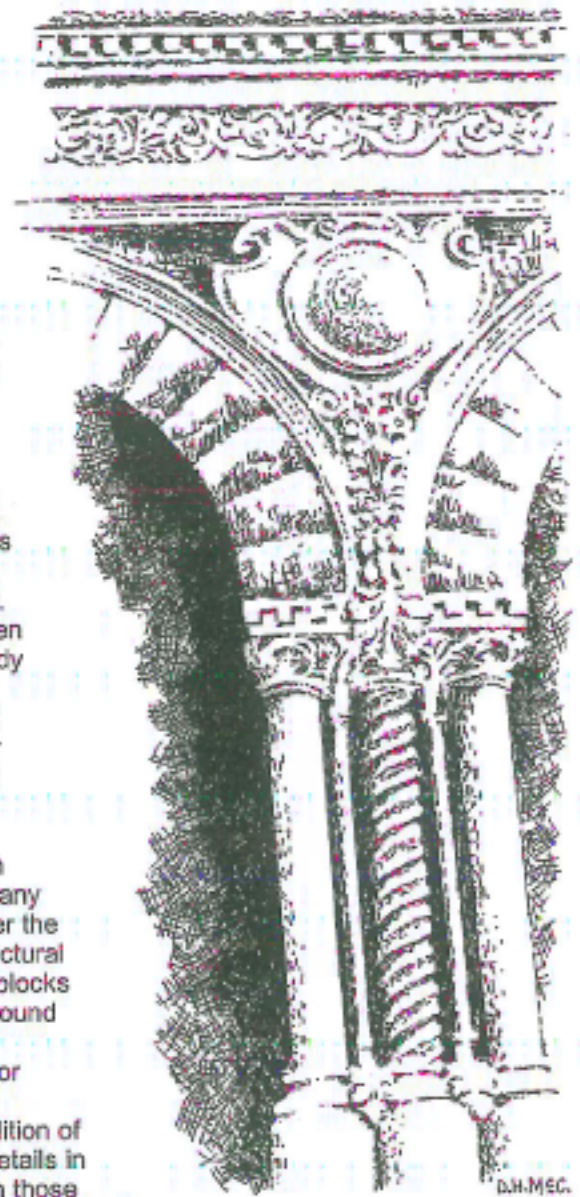
To the right of the Sands Brothers' carving we've drawn a detail from the bank's 1886 home (now called the Securities Building). It's the "dolphin" downspout, carved in red Wisconsin sandstone, at the lower north corner of the west facade. He lost his head at some point, so we drew him as he probably looked when new. He's a classic bit of design.

To the right – on this page – we've drawn more of the carved sandstone on that same facade. Up between the arches is the cartouche with its famous "fingerprint". There's been some speculation regarding whose print it might be, but it's really either an accident or a witticism on the part of a stonecutter. Pre-1931 photographs show the bank's "FNB" insignia in that space, but when the bank moved to its new home (with the fiddleheads) in that year, somebody was hired to chisel it away. That fingerprint pattern is just the track of his cutting or, maybe, his own personal statement (we prefer the latter). He also chipped away the bank's name from the sandstone at the base of the corner tower where it projects over the doorway, but he spared the dates carved on either side – 1866, the year the bank was founded, and 1886, the year the Securities Building was built.

At the bottom of this page we've drawn that nicely-carved granite column that stands, a bit incongruously, at the corner of the little Kain Granite Company building on Jackson Street. Like the 1893 Norman arch under which we enter the 1905 Montana Club (see page two of this series) it's an early case of architectural recycling. It was originally part of the entranceway to another building a few blocks farther south on Jackson. When that entrance was remodeled, sometime around 1912, the Kain people, who knew a fine piece of stonework when they saw one, saved the column for their own facade. We owe them our thanks.

We can be thankful again that the humane tradition of including all sorts of engaging and place-specific details in the architecture is still very much alive. It lives on in those new parts of town where walking is still honored as the primary means of moving around outdoors – most notably at the Great Northern Town Center, a neighborhood we'll visit later on in these pages.

For now, take a look at the ceramic work on the west wall of the Journey Block, honoring place-makers from Sacagawea onward, and those panels up on the concave central part of the Cinemark Theatre facade, with their references to such things as the Great Northern Railroad and our lost Marlow Theatre.



The Sesquicentennial Project

2014 will be Helena's sesquicentennial year, its 150th year. How'll we mark it?

The best way, we think, is to celebrate what's authentically peculiar to our town – to sharpen our sense of place.

We won't define "sense of place", beyond saying that it acts much like a sense of humor. Either you "get" a place or you don't. If you get it, it's engaging and invigorating and good for the imagination. You'll want to savor it.

We get Helena, so, from now to the sesquicentennial, we'll publish these free bits of information, one page at a time, about Helena's architecture, landscape, weather, history, whatever tickles our sense of place.

Look for these pages. Pick them up. We can't say how many there'll be, but we'll number them. Keep them and you'll build a trove of well-mulled Helena lore.