

The Braniff Building

Written by Jack Money

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JULY 27, 2007:

Excavators were busy this week in 1922, digging into the red soil at the southeast corner of NW 3 and Robinson Avenue to start the foundation for a ten-story, modern office building known as the Braniff Building. (1) Major tenants for the building were Leonard & Braniff, real estate lenders, and the T.E. Braniff Company, an insurance provider and investment firm. (2) The job's contractor was the Dunning Construction Company, which already had built the Colcord, Magnolia, Kress and Smith Baking Company buildings, a hospital and the Oklahoma Golf and Country Club. (3)

Less than fifteen months later, in November 1923, T.E. Braniff was ready to show off his firm's new home, with special entertainment planned for guests coming to Oklahoma City from as far away as New York, Hartford, Connecticut, Boston, Massachusetts, Atlanta, Georgia, and Chicago, Illinois. A local dry goods company planned a style show in the building's second floor, while another building tenant planned to have Chinese playing Mah-Jongg during the celebration. At the time, the Braniff Building was cutting edge, with an "acoustically perfect" ceiling on the building's main floor, a basement-level conference room, dining room and kitchen for employees. (4) Â

The building also included a fireproof coal storage area in its basement "a necessity for a building using the black mineral to heat its offices and corridors during Oklahoma's chilly winters. Lucky thing. Less than a year after the building opened in September 1924, coal caught fire within its storage area. Ironically, the U.S. Post Office and Federal Building on the opposite corner of the intersection had a fire in its basement fireproof coal storage area at the same time. Fire officials pegged the cause of both fires as spontaneous combustion, and W.G. Johnston, Oklahoma City's postmaster, speculated coal in his building had been delivered damp, thereby causing the blaze. The fires were extinguished by flooding the storage areas with water. Neither building was damaged. (5)

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Braniff's companies only occupied about two stories of the building, initially. Other building tenants included W.R. & W.E. Ramsey, who later would go on to build their own office tower. But T.E. Braniff's company by no means was stagnant. In January 1928, he announced the creation of the Prudential Fire Insurance Company, and relied upon some of the city's biggest names to serve as company officers and directors, including Ed Overholser, G.A. Nichols, W.R. Ramsey, Frank Buttram, and S.A. (Solomon) Layton. The company announced a capital stock of \$500,000 and a surplus of the same amount. Braniff served as the firm's president. Overholser, a vice president, told members of the Oklahoma Club the goal of the firm was to build a financial center in Oklahoma City so that money from policyholders would stay in Oklahoma instead of going east. (6)

Later that same year, T.E. Braniff and his brother, Paul Braniff, started a daily, round-trip airline service between Tulsa and Oklahoma City using a Stinson plane the Paul Braniff flew. Initially, T.E. Braniff and five other partners had bought the plane to use as a corporate aircraft. But too many of them needed the plane at the same time, so T.E. Braniff bought the partners out and formed the Braniff Airways with his brother. Before long, the airline had affiliated with Universal Airlines. While corporate offices stayed in Oklahoma City, though, the airline's operational center moved away from the Capitol to Tulsa in 1929 after support for a needed bond issue to improve Oklahoma City's airport failed to materialize. (7) Later, the airline moved its operational and maintenance headquarters to Dallas, Texas. By 1938, the airline boasted a fleet of a dozen Lockheed Electra and Douglas DC-2 planes, forty-four pilots and a staff of 270 other persons. The airline flew a daily schedule on routes stretching from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. (8) The airline continued to grow. In 1951, T.E. Braniff was honored with a luncheon celebrating his fiftieth year of being in Oklahoma's insurance industry. Then, Braniff expressed a concern about the country's future. "The country is not nearly so strong today as in the days of the Cherokee Strip," he told his audience at the time. (9)

In 1953, T.E. Braniff died in a plane crash, and about a year later, his widow, Mrs. Bess Thurman Braniff, was dead, too. Executors of her estate reported to the court that it valued \$561,410, including the ten-story office tower. (10) But while the man who built the building was gone, it remained, eventually becoming part of a campus covering an entire downtown block owned by Kerr-McGee. (11)

By then, the building was air-conditioned, and ready to be used by the super company as it set about its plans to building a new office tower to dominate downtown's skyline. After that, the Braniff Building fell into a slumber, with little evidence the building continued to be owned, save for security cameras pointing east down Dean A. McGee Avenue and south down Robinson Avenue. But it was not through making headlines yet. In 2005, Kerr-McGee announced plans that the Braniff Building and two other historic downtown buildings owned by the firm would be renovated into high-end condos. A partnership between Kerr McGee and other downtown

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housing players including Bert Belanger, Pat Garrett and architect Anthony McDermid would do the work. Of the three buildings, the partnership seemed most excited about the Braniff because of its storied past. (12)

Â The plans destructed, however, when Anadarko Petroleum bought Kerr-McGee and took possession of the Braniff Building and the others planned for condominiums. Today, SandRidge Energy owns the Braniff Building, and sources tell us condominiums still could be in its future.

References:

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