

Out of the ashes: Buildings with many lives

By Jaime Lump For The Astorian Apr 14, 2023



The story of Astoria is one of destruction and regrowth with buildings stacked upon the bones of their predecessors. The 1883 and 1922 fires destroyed swaths of downtown, and they opened the space for new growth born of the industrial spirit of Astoria. In this spirit, Astorians started construction one hundred years ago at 14th and Duane on the Miller-Jeffers building, which is known to many as the home of the Norblad Hotel. This year, Astorians commemorate 140 years since the great 1883 fire that began at this juncture, and they remember the great 1922 fire that passed back through the same site.

In 1841, when downtown Astoria was developing over the tidal flats of the Columbia River. Ferdinand Ferrell's saw mill was right in the heart of it all at 14th and Duane streets. Familiarly known as "Old Dad's Mill," Ferrell Mill provided the majority of employment to workers outside of the salmon industry. The site also served as an attraction to younger Astorians, who found the massive piles of leftover wood shavings to be an ideal landing spot for Olympic-worthy somersaults.



Others, a little older, found the area below the mill's wooden platform to be the perfect spot to smoke cigarettes after school. This combustible combination ignited at 5:50 pm on July 2nd, 1883, when a fire erupted underneath the sawmill. Unfortunately, the mill had no buckets, no hose, and no water pump, so, despite being built over tide water, the mill went up in flames and the fire spread east burning down all of the business buildings on three blocks of Commercial Street.

The site where Old Dad's Mill was destroyed, remained an open tidal flat for nearly three decades as the rest of downtown regrew around it. At the turn of the century, Duane Street was fast becoming Astoria's "auto row," and the empty block was prime real estate for new construction. In 1909, a new building for Sunflower Dairy Company was constructed on the corner of 14th and Duane. That same year, Albin W. Norblad moved from Michigan to Astoria,

where he began practicing law and establishing his business ties. He started with a seat as president of Sunflower Dairy Company alongside his brother, George F. Norblad, who became the dairy company's vice-president, and Alpheus C. Miller, who served as secretary and manager. But the trio of businessmen did not stand together for long. Albin Norblad moved on to become Astoria's city attorney, then later, President of the Oregon State Senate, and eventually Oregon's 19th governor. George Norblad moved his family to downtown Portland, where he co-managed an apartment building with his wife, Emma. Miller continued at Sunflower Dairy as secretary-treasurer and was joined by new president, John H. Jeffers.

The block of 14th and Duane eventually met another unfortunate fate on December 8, 1922, when it was among the thirty blocks of the downtown district destroyed by a second great fire. The Sunflower Dairy Company building burned to the ground. In March of the following year, business partners Alpheus Miller and John Jeffers announced plans for a new two-story concrete and brick building, designed by Astorian architect, John Wicks. In April, construction began on the Miller-Jeffers building atop the site of the former Sunflower Dairy Company. The footprint of the new building covered only half of the block, but its foundation extended the length of the full block for the future purpose of erecting an adjoining two-story structure once the first building was complete. Despite these plans, Miller and Jeffers never expanded onto the adjacent foundation.



The northeast corner of the Miller-Jeffers building also became the permanent home of the city's Bank of Commerce, which had been operating temporarily out of the Clatsop County Courthouse basement since its former Commercial Street building perished in the 1922 fire. Although the new bank location exhibited a less extravagant façade than some of its local peers, the entrance featured an elaborate terra cotta portico facing Duane Street with decorative molding above dentil detailing, festoons flanked by rosettes, and two pilasters on either side of the double front door surrounded in an egg and dart motif. In January of 1924, the Bank of Commerce became the first financial institution in the city with permanent quarters since the fire. The bank closed its doors only five years later when the Wall Street stock market crashed in 1929.

Miller and Jeffers designated the remaining first story sections of the building as storerooms while the second floor was designed for professional offices. But six months after construction began, the partners began to recognize the city's growing hospitality industry and decided to build out the second floor as a 36-room hotel instead. This new business opportunity brought Miller's former business associate, George F. Norblad, back to Astoria to manage the

hotel on a ten-year lease. The business with the Miller-Jeffers building, officially named the Norblad Hotel, began checking in new guests in January 1924. After only a year of running his namesake hotel, Mr. Norblad chose to break his commitment to the 10-year lease and transitioned management of the hotel's operations to Mr. and Mrs. Randles of Portland. Norblad and his wife returned to Portland, where they continued their work in hospitality for a different hotel.



The story of Astoria continues to grow and evolve. Over the years, the Norblad Hotel has experienced various iterations, but in all its forms, it has continued to welcome visitors beneath its glass and pressed tin canopy for nearly a century. The Miller-Jeffers building has been no stranger to the town's industrial spirit, offering a home at various times to Allen's Cafe, McLin Hardware Store, the state employment office, the Chamber of Commerce, the Community Store, Poole's Music Shop, two thrift stores including, Deja Vu and Clothes Encounters of the Second Kind, the Compleat Photographer, and many more.

Photos:

Miller-Jeffers Building 1920s (Clatsop County Historical Society)

Miller Jeffers building c. 1970s (Sara's Old Photos)

14th and Duane Streets - site of Dad's Mill and future site of the Miller Jeffers Building c. 1890s (Clatsop County Historical Society)

Miller Jeffers 2021 (Jaime Lump)