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Cedar Rapids celebrates centennial of NewBo's famed factory-loft space

CEDAR RAPIDS — "This building has always been an innovator," said Mark Stoffer Hunter, addressing a centennial celebration on Sept. 14 for the building that seeded the blossoming New Bohemia district.

Many Corridor residents are familiar with the Cherry Building, the three-story factory block at 329 10th Ave. SE that became a foundation stone for NewBo. It's home to the Iowa Ceramics Center and Glass Studio, Illuminations Center for Enlightenment, deNovo Marketing, Mortuary Lifts, Shoemaker & Haaland Pro Engineers, the TCR Set shop, two musical instrument repair business and dozens of other artists and businesses.

But there's enough they don't know to literally fill a book.

That's something Mr. Stoffer Hunter, a consultant at History Connect, decided to remedy. His book

"100 Years: The Cherry Building," will be on sale this fall, bringing a deeper understanding of one of the city's largest and most viable historic buildings.

The book details the history of the building, from the arrival of immigrant John George (JG) Cherry and his founding of J.G. Cherry Co. to the present day.

Why write an entire book about one old factory building? It is, Mr. Stoffer Hunter explained, an amazing success story. While thousands of factories sit abandoned or underutilized across the United States, the Cherry Building entered its 100th year as vibrant as ever.

Architecturally, it's a rarity because it was one of the last, large-scale wooden post-and-beam factories built in the USA after WWI. Few brick factory buildings remain in existence today, and its large windows, high ceilings and authentic hardwood materials make for inspiring and practical work spaces. There are also reminders of its industrial past, including loading docks and a massive cable-and-winch freight elevator that still works.

More than 40 artists, professionals and even light manufacturing businesses call the 104,000-square-foot building home, a number that has stabilized



A sculpture of a giant cherry on the south side of the Cherry Building, seen from the NewBo City Market property. PHOTO DAVE DEWITTE

since the Chadima family began leasing out parts of the factory in the 1980s.

Cherry's history

The building traces its origins back to Mr. JG Cherry, who came to Cedar Rapids in 1879. He developed the idea for his business while working as the chief butter maker for a small creamery in Walker, Iowa, Mr. Stoffer Hunter explained. It was a revolutionary "jacketed dairy cream canister" that reduced spoilage during transport. The octagonal metal canister included such features as a floater device that reduced curdling, and a wooden outer container that created an insulating layer to preserve the temperature of the cream.

While no longer needed in the age of refrigerated transport, it was a significant innovation at the time and generated large demand.

Among the many surprises the book reveals is that the J.G. Cherry Building was once part of a

much larger complex of J.G. Cherry Co. buildings between 10th and 11th avenues, including a building constructed eight years earlier that was a virtual twin, and one larger factory. A connection between the buildings was essentially the city's first skywalk, Mr. Stoffer Hunter notes.

The business expanded to produce egg cases, and provided an important source of employment for early Bohemian immigrants, who often had no other choice except to work in the nearby Sinclair meatpacking plant. The company was so successful that artist Grant Wood was commissioned to paint a series of scenes of its workers and processes in 1925.

Like many businesses, it was affected by the Great Depression, resulting in a merger with the Burrell Company and a name change to Cherry-Burrell.

With the growth of Iowa Manufacturing's operations in the vicinity during the World War II effort, Cherry-Burrell ran out of room to expand and was



encouraged by city officials to locate its new factory at 2400 Sixth St. SW. It continues to operate there today as Evergreen Packaging, a division of GEC Packaging Technologies.

After the move, Cherry-Burrell's properties were sold off separately. The Cherry Building became a warehouse, and was taken over in 1951 by Collins Radio, which was growing so quickly it had a hard time finding enough space to house its assembly operations.

The blue tile J.G. Cherry lettering on the front façade of the building was chopped off, but relatively few other changes were made. More than 100 Collins Radio employees called the Cherry Building home, and by all accounts loved working there, Mr. Stoffer Hunter said.

By the 1970s, Collins Radio had built more modern facilities and the building was acquired by Robert Chadima of Cedar Rapids for his welding and industrial supply and distribution business, Thorarc. He later founded Thorland Company, a real estate business that leased out extra space in the building.

An artistic community

Well-traveled, Mr. Chadima knew that artists had been the key to revitalization of urban areas like Lower Manhattan's SoHo district, where the owners of old factories had encouraged them to renovate create and live in loft-style studio spaces. He appreciated artists, and welcomed them to work and live in the building. Early artists to locate their studios in the Cherry Building included Jane Gilmore, Doug Hall, Rod Bradley, and David Van Allen.

Around the year 2000, Bob's son and daughter in law, David and Lijun Chadima, moved back to Cedar Rapids from Taiwan, taking an equity stake in the family business, with Lijun managing the day-to-day operations. It was at this time Thorland Company formally positioned the Cherry Building as a creative center for artists and entrepreneurs, adopting the slogan "Where Creativity Works!"

Gradually, a community of artists, craftsmen and entrepreneurs developed within the Cherry Building, and many of them formed the nucleus of a group that began meeting to promote the area as an arts and entertainment district. They formed the nonprofit New Bohemia Group, which gave the district its name and began promoting events such as the annual NewBo Arts Festival and EcoFest.

After the massive Cedar River flood of 2008 inundated the below-ground portion of the building and the entire first floor, the Chadima family was among the first to rebuild and retenant the affected spaces. The renovations preserved the history of the build-



Historian and author Mark Stoffer Hunter of History Connect relates the story of John Cherry, founder of the J.G. Cherry Co., during a centennial celebration for The Cherry Building on Sept. 14 in Cedar Rapids. PHOTO DAVE DEWITTE

ing, and only made it better, including restoration of the JG Cherry Company tile lettering on the Tenth Avenue façade.

Wood sculptor and craftsman John Schwartzkopf has been coming to the Cherry Building since the 1990s, and moved his business in after the flood. "When I first came down here, it was kind of a seedy area. People didn't always want to come here at night," Mr. Schwartzkopf said. "Now, everybody comes here."

Mr. Schwartzkopf had to give up his first attempt to repurpose a flood-restored space because of the fire marshall's requirements, but later came back to another space where the requirements weren't so restrictive. He built out a super-insulated workshop that reduces energy cost and usage, and keeps sound to a minimum.

Mr. Schwartzkopf said the Chadima family's warm regard for artists was well-known, encouraging tenants to design their spaces to suit their needs and reflect their creativity.

After Bob Chadima died in March 2016. In 2017, David and Lijun Chadima vowed to carry on his original vision of historic preservation and creativity through the repurposing of the building to meet the needs of artists and entrepreneurs. They commissioned local artist Todd Sabin to design and construct a beaming red cherry sculpture that adorns the south entrance to the building. The sculpture, visible from the NewBo City Market, was installed this summer, and dedicated to Bob's memory. Mr.

Schwartzkopf provided the wood cladding for the cherry's pedestal and Jane Gilmore donated the ground cover greenery around the base.

The giant cherry is so big that it's visible from the city's Mount Trashmore overlook, close to a mile away, Ms. Chadima said, adding that "Bob's smiling in heaven."

Last year the Holmes Law Firm moved into the building, with attorney James Holmes carrying on a family law tradition dating back as long as the building itself. When the firm had to leave the Guaranty Bank building due to redevelopment efforts, he jumped at the chance to lease a first-floor space in the Cherry Building. "It's a lively place to have a business," said Mr. Holmes, who takes advantage of the building's pet-friendly policies to bring his dog to the office. "There's always something going on, always people to help out and chat with."

Mr. Stoffer Hunter, whose great-grandfather worked as a foreman at J.G. Cherry Co., says that the sense of family and community dates back to the JG Cherry days, and is one of the building's most enduring assets.

"What I love, full circle, about this building is that it has a heart and soul to it," he said.

About 200 attended Mr. Stoffer Hunter's talk and toured Cherry Building businesses during the centennial celebration. For those who missed it, visitors can meet with spiritual healers, potters, massage therapists and digital marketers during the building's annual Very Cherry Holiday in December. CBJ



Cherry Building. PHOTO STEVE SOVERN



Giant cherry commissioning.