



K. Kidorf, 2009

Final Report:

Proposed Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse Historic District 882 Oakman Blvd.

By a resolution dated November 4, 2009, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse Historic District is a twelve-story, Art Deco, buff-colored brick with limestone structure, located on the northeast corner of Oakman Boulevard and Woodrow Wilson Avenue, less than one block west of the of the Highland Park border and approximately six miles northwest of downtown Detroit. The single building is located at 882 Oakman Boulevard, aka 14300 Woodrow Wilson, and faces south. The Lodge

Freeway was constructed just to the west of the building in the 1950s, giving dramatic views of the building to northbound drivers.

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse Historic District are outlined in heavy black on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the south, the centerline of Oakman Boulevard;

On the west, the centerline of Woodrow Wilson Avenue;

On the north, the southerly line of the Pennsylvania-Detroit Railroad right-of-way; and

On the east, a line drawn parallel to and 377.7 feet east of the centerline of Woodrow Wilson Avenue.

Boundary Justification: The boundaries described above reflect the entire parcel presently and historically associated with the Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse.

HISTORY

The Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse is significant under National Register criterion A for its role in the distribution of telephone and communication supplies and re-manufacturing of telephone equipment in Michigan. The period of significance is from the time of the building's completion in 1930 until 1958 when the operations moved to Plymouth. It is significant under criterion C for its Art Deco architecture and design by noted Detroit architects Smith, Hinchman and Grylls.

The telephone arrived in Michigan in July 1877, sixteen months after the successful demonstration in Massachusetts by Alexander Graham Bell. It was first demonstrated in Detroit, and then in Grand Rapids eight days later. Bell licensed the Telephone and Telegraph Construction Company in Detroit, and the first Detroit switchboard went into operation in 1878. It was connected to fifty-three lines. The second Michigan switchboard was in Grand Rapids, installed in 1879. In 1880 Detroit was connected by phone to Windsor, Ontario, and in 1881 the Michigan Bell Telephone Company was formed to connect Detroit to other Michigan cities. The first line was run to Port Huron through Mount Clemens, Richmond, and St. Clair. By 1885 Detroit was connected to Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, Toledo, Jackson, Coldwater, Hillsdale, Flint, Lansing and Saginaw. In 1904 the Telephone and Telegraph Construction Company and the Michigan Bell Telephone Company combined to become the Michigan State Telephone Company which became the Michigan Bell Telephone Company in 1924 as a result of Michigan State Telephone combining with the state's other large provider, Citizen's Telephone Company. It was related to the nationwide system of Bell Telephone Companies and the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.

The following years brought great expansion of the telephone infrastructure and the Michigan Bell Telephone Company in Michigan. Airplane to ground communications began in 1929 and 1931 brought teletypewriter service, and by 1940 there were 820,000 phones in Michigan handling four million calls a day. In 1942 the first ship-to-shore telephones arrived on the Great Lakes, and 1946 brought mobile telephones in cars and trains. In 1950 there were two million telephones in Michigan, and in 1953 Birmingham was the second city in the country to have Direct Distance Dialing. By 1961 there were three million telephones, and touch tone calling arrived in 1964.

After Bell's patent expired on the telephone in 1894, a number of independent telephone companies were formed in Michigan. The earliest was the Escanaba Telephone Company which formed in 1894. In 1895 the Citizens Telephone Company started in Grand Rapids and also served Kalamazoo, Lansing, and Jackson until 1923 when it was purchased by the Michigan State Telephone Company. Some Michigan communities had more than one telephone company which created duplication: people had to subscribe to every company that had customers that they wanted to connect to. The "duplicate service" ended in 1950 when Michigan Bell was consolidated with the Jonesville Cooperative Telephone Company; however as late as 1965 there were still seventy telephone companies in Michigan.

At the national level, the Western Electric Manufacturing Company was formed in 1872 and by 1878 had transitioned into making telephone equipment for Bell. In 1882 Western Electric signed a contract to become Bell's exclusive manufacturer of telephones in the United States. It was considered by Bell as an independent company until the early 1900s, but by 1914 Western Electric was described as the manufacturing department of the Bell System. In 1925 Bell's reorganization at the national level established the "...institutional responsibilities: Bell Laboratories designed the network; Western Electric manufactured the telephones, cable, transmission equipment, and switching equipment; the operating companies (such as Michigan Bell) installed the phones, operated the local networks, and billed the customers; and AT&T long lines operated the long-distance network." This arrangement was no different in Michigan; Western Electric was Bell's exclusive supplier of every item used in the telephone business, including cable, switchboards, telephones, and even office supplies.

The former Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse located at the northeast corner of Oakman Boulevard and Woodrow Wilson in northwest Detroit was constructed in 1929-30 as warehouse, garage and office space for both companies. The majority of the building was leased by Western Electric for use as their Michigan headquarters. All of the supplies and equipment needed around the state by Michigan Bell were routed through this facility. Western Electric had 350 employees in Detroit in 1930. In times of emergency, equipment was also sent to other Bell Companies across the United States.

In order to accommodate the growing demands of Michigan Bell, which had a rapidly increasing customer base throughout Michigan, both companies needed additional space - Michigan Bell to house and service motor vehicles, Western Electric to receive, store, and distribute equipment for all of Michigan. When the Oakman Boulevard building opened in 1930 it replaced a much smaller building used by both companies at East Kirby and Dequindre on the east side of Detroit. The new location was on a railroad spur that was connected to the Detroit Terminal Railroad, a

line constructed to serve outlying sites available for industrial expansion. Other industries were constructing buildings along this section of the railroad line. The site was likely chosen because of the availability of a large parcel with railroad access in order to receive the large spools of wire and many other needed supplies.

Described as “One of the largest and most complete plants of its kind in the Bell System,” in the October 1930 issue of *The Michigan Bell*, the brick, steel, and concrete building was designed by Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls, a noted and prolific Detroit architecture firm that designed numerous downtown Detroit skyscrapers such as the Guardian, Buhl, and Penobscot buildings, as well as the Michigan Bell headquarters located on Cass Avenue. The building originally housed five service units between the two companies. For Michigan Bell the west side of the first floor was a garage large enough to store and load 100 vehicles and had offices related to the motor fleet. A separate vehicle service building was located at the rear of the lot but was demolished about 1959. For Western Electric the north and east sides of the building housed an enclosed rail spur for unloading up to four freight cars at a time and warehouse space for heavy and large materials. The second through sixth floors of the warehouse wing on the north and east sides of the building were devoted to Western Electric’s offices and operations. A storeroom containing supplies of over 8,000 items was located on the second floor. The fifth floor was where used equipment and supplies were returned for repair and refurbishment, or for salvage. A fireproof chute serving all floors moved waste materials to large incinerators in the basement.

Michigan Bell had building and maintenance shops on the third floor and offices on the sixth floor. Other floors of the building were shared by both companies, the southwest side of the third floor had a cafeteria for employees, and the tower contained a conference room and lounges on the seventh floor. The tenth floor was devoted to telephone equipment for the building.

The building continued in this use for twenty-eight years; during World War II Western Electric contributed large amounts of scrap to the war effort that had been previously recycled into new products for the company. Continued suburban growth after the war necessitated new headquarters for Western Electric and they moved to a new, larger facility in Plymouth in 1958. Michigan Bell remodeled the building and converted the warehousing and manufacturing spaces into offices for the newly created marketing department. This department combined the functions of the sales, directory and telephone planning groups. One of the initial tasks of this group was to consolidate the twenty-seven metropolitan Detroit directories into three white pages books and six Yellow Pages books, a process which took two years and was completed in 1960. In 1961 a large sign was installed on the front of the building, covering the top of the front elevation and blocking the windows on the top two floors that contained two large water tanks. The sign advertised the Yellow Pages and it is reported that the neon outlining the telephone changed colors depending on weather conditions. The building is located near the intersection of the Lodge and Davison Freeways, the former of which was completed in the early 1950s and the latter in 1942. The new freeways provided new views of the building by northbound Lodge Freeway drivers that were not originally present when the building was constructed. This visibility probably encouraged the installation of the sign in 1961. The sign is proposed to be removed as part of the pending rehabilitation project. Michigan Bell sold the building in 1995, although a small group of their employees worked from the building until approximately 1999.

Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls

Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls had its origins in 1855 when Sheldon Smith (1818-1869) came to Detroit and started an architectural firm. His work included a number of residences, and the 1869 Detroit Opera House. In 1857 his son Mortimer Smith (1840-1896) joined the firm, and Sheldon Smith and Son, Architects, designed the David Whitney house on Woodward Avenue, as well as the Michigan State School in Coldwater. Mortimer Smith helped to form Michigan's first architectural society along with architects Donaldson and Meier, among others. About 1883, after studying in Omaha with architect Louis Mendelsohn, Mortimer's son, Fred L. Smith (1862-1941), became a partner in the firm, which was renamed Mortimer Smith and Son, Architects. A few of the notable projects designed by the firm included the 1891 J.L. Hudson Department Store in downtown Detroit, along with the Woodward Avenue Baptist Church in 1887 and the Pasadena Apartments, built in 1898-1902.

About this same time, in 1894, University of Michigan engineering graduates Henry G. Field and Theodore H. Hinchman, Jr. formed an engineering firm. They were known for their work in converting existing buildings from gas lighting to electricity. "Equally important in their early work was the planning and installation of business and residential telephone facilities for a host of small telephone companies."

Based on the Adler & Sullivan and Burnham & Root models in Chicago, Fred Smith realized the benefit of partnering with engineers. Albert Kahn was the only other Detroit firm to do so at the time. In 1903 the firm of Field, Hinchman, & Smith was incorporated. The incorporation form of business was unusual for architects and engineers at the time, but was done to build capital. In 1906 George Fields resigned, H.J. Maxwell Grylls joined the firm, and the name was changed to Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. Grylls was an architect from England who came to Detroit in 1883 and had worked previously for Mortimer Smith and was friends with Fred. Grylls was one of the founding members of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts.

In 1922, architect Wirt Rowland joined the firm, leaving Albert Kahn after working on the Detroit Athletic Club, the Detroit News headquarters, and the General Motors building. Rowland was known for his contemporary designs which he fully developed with Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls in Detroit's first skyscraper, the 1925 Buhl Building. He also designed the 1925 Second National Bank Building in Saginaw, and the 1926 Grand Rapids Trust Company building. In 1927 Rowland designed two more pivotal skyscrapers in downtown Detroit, the Penobscot Building, and the Union Guardian Building (National Historic Landmark). By 1929 Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls had grown to 250 employees and William E. Kapp was the head of the architectural department.

The lack of work in the 1930s resulted in major layoffs, including Wirt Rowland and William Kapp. As small commissions came in the designers would be called back temporarily; however the projects were always small, and at the peak of the depression the firm only had two permanent employees to assist the four officers of the company. Founders Hinchman, Smith, and Grylls all died between 1935 and 1942. However, the firm continued and in 1942 Minoru Yamasaki was hired as the head designer. In 1944 the office had a new record high of 700 employees, and was busy with the post-war rebuilding effort. In 1948 the firm was named as the

co-architects and engineers for the Eliel and Eero Saarinen designed General Motors Tech Center in Warren because of the friendship between Saarinen and Yamasaki. The firm continues to exist into the present day as SmithGroup with offices throughout the United States and over 800 employees. The relationship with Michigan Bell Telephone began early on. “An industry which has played an important role in the success of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls is Detroit’s telephone utility, which dates from 1877 when James McMillan obtained the franchise. ...and the Home Telephone Company became Detroit’s largest through various mergers and takeovers. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, with early experience in electricity and telephones, planned the company’s main building and exchange. This client relationship continued when it became the Michigan State Telephone Company, and then in 1924, Michigan Bell Telephone Company.” In 1904 the firm designed the Main City Exchange, located at John R and Madison, and it then went on to design the branch exchanges which duplicated the main building on a smaller scale. This main exchange was replaced in 1912 with the bottom half of the Michigan State Telephone Headquarters located on Cass Avenue in downtown Detroit. In 1927 the Michigan Bell Telephone Company added another twelve stories to the building, again using Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. Even though the design aesthetic had shifted slightly, the upper stories blend with the lower half.

A review of the firm’s partial project list reveals numerous telephone buildings including offices and exchange buildings throughout Michigan with the largest number being in the 1920s and again in the 1940s and 1950s. The 1920s designs seen around Detroit and in *The Michigan Bell* include many Art Deco and Moderne designs, but all are designed to fit in with their surroundings. Michigan Bell made a point of this in their August, 1931, edition of *The Michigan Bell*, “Since 1925 our company has erected forty-five new buildings, each on a practical, yet a definite contribution to the appearance of the community where it is located,” and “It is interesting to note that the cost of erecting a building that adds dignity and beauty to a community is not greater than the cost of a plain structure.”

“The tremendous postwar expansion of the Michigan Bell Telephone Company into the burgeoning suburbs around all major cities in the state brought commissions for new exchanges and additions to older ones into SH&G every month.” In 1957 the Northwest Staff Center in Southfield was designed, inspired by the work on the GM Technical Center. “Beautifully landscaped with trees and shrubs, the forty-acre site was developed following the ‘office park’ concept, and was similar in environmental feeling to the emerging General Motor Technical Center.” In 1974 the firm was hired to design a large seventeen-story addition to the Michigan Bell headquarters building in downtown Detroit. The design moved far away from the Art Deco and Moderne designs of the 1920s with “clearly articulated Cor-Ten steel and bronze glass tower with end walls of polished granite.

DESCRIPTION

The building is comprised of a number of rectangular masses that create an irregular footprint. The front portion of the building, which runs parallel to Oakman Boulevard, is six-stories tall, three-bays deep, and has five identical bays on either side flanking a central, three-bay by three-bay, twelve-story tall tower. Each bay in the lower wings is outlined by brick piers and contains

a group of three double-hung steel windows that are four-over-four in configuration and have limestone sills.

The central entrance has a two-and-a-half-story angular arched opening, the surrounding portal is faced in limestone and there is an Art Deco style angular relief, perhaps representing a spool of cable, as a keystone. The inset double-doors, sidelights, and transom have been replaced with glass and aluminum ones but are in the original configuration. Decorative panels, made of asbestos, span the area between the top of the door and the second floor windows. The panels have insets in angular arch and polygonal shapes. Similar panels are located between the floors in the center bay for the full height of the tower. The top of the center window bay has an angular arch. The tops of the tower walls have decorative terra cotta between and on tops of the piers. The terra cotta displays chevron relief patterns throughout the building.

A five-story tall, six-bay wide by seven-bay deep wing extends perpendicularly northward from the east end of the front section of the building. Each bay contains multi-paned, steel industrial-type windows, and the bays are separated by brick piers. A tall brick chimney rises along the northern bay on the east elevation and a square tower projects one story above the roof in the center of the rear elevation. The tower is capped with terra cotta. A long monitor roof is located in the center of the flat roof.

Running along the east side of the building is a two-story warehouse with a monitor in the center of the flat roof. The building mass is stepped back about a half-bay from the front wall of the building and it is five-bays wide by ten-bays deep. The front (south) elevation has multi-paned, steel industrial type windows at the first floor which have been painted out. At the second floor, each bay on the south and east elevations has a large multi-paned steel window. The parapet wall has a terra cotta face with chevron relief.

Extending from the west end of the front portion is a two-story garage that is six-bays wide and ten-bays deep with multi-paned, steel industrial type windows in each bay at the first and second floors. Some first floor bays have overhead garage doors. There are two monitors equally spaced that run the length of the flat roof. The parapet wall has a terra cotta face with chevron relief.

At the north side of the building is a one-story garage that is seven-bays wide and two-bays deep that runs from the northeast corner of the five-story warehouse to the east end of the two-story garage. It contains multi-paned steel sashes in each bay on the north elevation and two overhead garage doors on the west elevation.

The interior of the building was originally industrial in nature with few finished spaces. The entrance vestibule has a marble stairway with marble faced walls and a vaulted ceiling, as does the first floor corridor containing the elevators and central stairway. The garage and warehouse spaces are large open volumes with concrete floors, exposed trusses, and block walls. Throughout the building areas that formerly contained open warehouse spaces have been subdivided into office areas of various sizes, although some areas were left open with large concrete columns and mushroom capitals spaced throughout the rooms. In some office areas the columns are part of the dividing walls. Painted brick and concrete block walls are common

throughout the building. Most of the ceilings are suspended acoustical tile with concrete above. The concrete floors have been covered with carpet or vinyl tile. The third floor kitchen has glazed block walls and tile floors, as do some of the restrooms in the building. The eleventh and twelfth floors are one open space containing two large water tanks. It is an unfinished space with concrete floors and ceilings and painted brick walls.

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Criteria: The proposed historic district meets the first and third criteria contained in Section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (3) Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board: The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three *ex-officio* members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Atara Kwaku, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, Keith A. Dye, Zene’ Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Doris Rhea. The *ex-officio* members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed Michigan Bell and Western Electric Warehouse Historic District. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council’s consideration.