

## History of the Rand Building 1906-1985

On October 29, 1985, the grand old Rand Building burned in a spectacular fire. Investigators determined that the fire started in control equipment for the air conditioner in the basement. For 26 years after the rubble was cleared, there was a hole in the ground at the 2003-2009 First Street site. That hole made news recently, when the property was acquired by adjacent Banner Bank, which had it filled to make a parking lot for a planned new bank building across the alley. Here is the rest of the story of the Rand Building.



*Rand Building fire in 1985.*

In late 1905, construction of five substantial, multi-story stone and brick buildings were in the planning for First Street. But there was a problem on the east side of First Street that had to be dealt with first. South of Antlers Hotel was a red-light district composed of a half dozen unsightly, narrow, one-story frame buildings, in which prostitutes carried on their illegal—but mostly tolerated—trade. Baker City Council's solution was to order Police Chief Ed Jackson to evict them from the block. Construction of the Rogers Hotel and the Pacific States Telephone and Telegraph Company buildings required demolition of several of the shacks. Besides, what new upscale business wanted to be located in the same block with a row of prostitution cribs?

Three other buildings were scheduled to enhance First Street within the next couple of years: the Rand Building (1906) on the northwest corner of Washington Street, the Shoemaker Building (1907) on the southwest corner of Court Street, and the Pythian Castle (1908) on the southwest corner of Washington St. All three buildings were to be constructed of Pleasant Valley tuff stone, the same material used in the recent

construction of the Jett Building (1901) on the northeast corner of Valley and First streets and the city's most distinctive new building, Baker City Hall (1903).

The first new building to be completed on First Street at a cost of \$30,000 was the Rand Building, constructed for attorney John Rand and wife, Edith, daughter of Baker County pioneers of 1862 William and Johanna Packwood. After the Metropole Hotel was moved off the corner lot, construction of the Rand Building commenced in April 1906 and was completed eight months later. On December 10, 1906, 2,000 people attended Queen City Furniture's grand opening of its business in the 20,000-square-foot ground floor and basement.



Rand Building, constructed in 1906 for John and Edith Rand at NW corner of 1<sup>st</sup> and Washington streets.

Rand moved his law office from the Lynndale Building on Main Street to the second floor of his new building, as did District Attorney Leroy Lomax, soon-to-be Circuit Court Judge Gustav Anderson, and City Attorney Joseph Heilner, son of Sigmund and Clara Neuberger Heilner, owners of the Neuberger-Heilner store.

The Rand Building's occupants—downstairs and upstairs—changed over the years. Queen City Furniture was gone by 1930. For 46 years, the first-floor tenants were Eastern Oregon Light & Power (1939-1946) and its successor, California-Pacific Utilities (1946-1985). Many Cal-Pac records were lost in the 1985 fire. Second floor offices in the 1940's were occupied by, for example: doctors Charles Grant and Charles Houser; Sears, Roebuck and Co. mail order services; and the photographic studio of Rand's son, J. Langdon Rand, who had learned photography in Detroit, where he met his wife, Leona. Langdon managed the Rand Building and other properties of his parents. A sample of second-floor tenants in the 1960's and 1970's

included: District Attorney Jesse R. Himmelsbach; Ellingson Lumber Co.; Baker Business College; and American Red Cross.

The 1985 fire was just the final fire, but it was not the first or even the second fire to ravage the Rand Building. On March 25, 1908, hack driver Lou Freeman discovered a fire that began in the basement. According to a newspaper article, "As he drove by, a window exploded and smoke and flames came out the front." There was so much smoke that Fire Chief Manny Fox and his volunteers "could hardly see once they gained entrance to the basement" and one firefighter "had to be carried out." Estimated damage to Queen City Furniture stock was \$27,000 and to the building \$3,000, the cost of replacing the ground level flooring and stairs to the basement.



*John Langdon Rand.*

The Rand Building suffered its second fire in 1938. Amateur photographer Herman Webb (1908-2007), who began taking photos with a box camera at age 17, took seven photos of the fire. (All seven photos may be seen on Baker County Library's historic photos website at <http://173.201.75.33/webphoto/>, along with over 300 more photos in the Herman Webb Collection.)

A chronology of Webb's seven photos shows more and more smoke coming out of the Rand Building. In the first photo, smoke is billowing from both stories at the west end of the Washington Street side. In the final shot, the whole Washington Street side is enshrouded in smoke, and on the First Street side smoke is pouring from three places in the large Sears & Roebuck sign that extended the full width of the building. Webb did not note the month and day of the fire, so I have not yet learned the fire's cause or extent of the damage.

1985 was a watershed year for Baker City. The Rand Building, the last of the grand old structures to disappear from Baker City, burned down. On the plus side, however, that year marked the beginning of Baker City's downtown restoration with the uncovering and reconstruction of its 1890's facades and, most important, rescue of the Geiser Grand Hotel from the wrecker's ball in the 1990's.



*Edith Ganzaga Packwood Rand.*

I'll end this history of the Rand Building with a list of a few other old buildings that are no more: Union Pacific Depot; St. Francis Academy (the whole block at 1950 Church); Baker City Opera House (2200 Main); Sagamore Hotel (present site of Ace Hardware parking lot); Sommer Building (present site of U.S. Bank); the upper floors of the Neuberger-Heilner Building (1901 Main) and Kennedy Building (1902-1906 Main); the wood frame Presbyterian Church; and the brick Methodist Church with its steeple from which the town was serenaded every noon by J. Roscoe Lee's carillon bells. Every building in Chinatown (Auburn between Resort and Powder River) has disappeared, including the two-story brick Joss House (present site of the police station parking lot); and the two-story brick Wing-Hing-Yuen general store (1722 Resort) north of Clark Auto Electric.

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