

The Borden Building: Representing the Past and Present of Mt. Pleasant

As I was walking up to my car one Tuesday afternoon, I was unpleasantly surprised to see a little green envelope under my windshield wiper. It was, of course, a parking ticket. I rolled my eyes and thought, “What a great way to start the semester.” I spent the whole day in an aggravated mood, and at work that evening I had to ask my client where the City Hall was so I could go there to pay my parking ticket. He laughed and pointed up the road and said, “That big building right there is the City Hall. I’m surprised you don’t know, considering you drive by it 5 days a week.” I was shocked. The beautiful brick building that I had been admiring for months was in fact the City Hall, also known as the Borden Building. In the next day leading up until when I actually paid my ticket, I found out that the City Offices have not always occupied the building, and that it was in fact a condensed milk factory back in the early 20th century. I was immediately fascinated. Upon entering the building, I was completely entranced by its elegance. I was shocked at how such a historic exterior could have such a modern interior. Ever since that moment, I have been interested in learning more about this building. After researching many aspects of the Borden Building, I have realized that it is central to Mt. Pleasant’s past and present in a number of ways.

Early History of the Borden Building

In 1907, a group of farmers and businessmen from Mt. Pleasant went to Howell to investigate the condensed milk factory that was in operation there.

Upon inspection, the men realized that it was a great enterprise and that something similar should be built here in Mt. Pleasant.¹ The headquarters of the Borden Condensed Milk Company, in New York City, sent a representative to Mt. Pleasant to inspect the plot of land and make sure it was suitable to build a facility on. Two requirements of the building were that it must be near a water source and a railroad, both of which were necessary to help the factory run smoothly.² The environment obviously had a huge role in the location choice for the condensed milk factory. The plot of the building, the North side of West Broadway, was the perfect choice because it was located on the bank of the Chippewa River and also the Ann Arbor Railroad ran right through the area. The company also needed a warrant that there were at least 1,000 cows in the area to supply the milk.³ The agents sent by the headquarters were thoroughly impressed with the location, and were pleased to find that in the last census (the 1900 census), there were a reported 13,800 cows and heifers in the area. In 1908 the decision was made to validate the deal, and the three acre plot of land for the building was acquired from the Ann Arbor Railroad. Ownership of the factory was given to the Borden family.⁴

¹ Cumming, John. This Place Mt Pleasant. Pg. 157.

² Cumming, John. Pg. 158

³ Westbrook, Jack. Then and Now: Mount Pleasant.

⁴ "History of Ownership and Development Efforts Mt. Pleasant Condensed Milk Factory (Borden Building)"

The main building itself was enormous, being 289X70 feet and two stories high. “No. 1 quality Boyne City Brick”⁵ was used on the exterior of the building, and white brick on the interior. A huge, looming 125 foot smokestack was the towering beacon of the whole building. A coal shed measuring 70X40 feet was also erected. At the time, builders boasted that asbestos roofing in a “pretty gray color” would be used.⁶ The workers obviously did not know the dangerous affects that asbestos can have on the human respiratory system. It is also important to report that while laying the foundation, “workers were hampered by springs which kept erupting as they dug the footings.”⁷ In order to deal with this blow from Mother Nature, pumps had to be brought in to continually drain the area so the men could keep working.⁸

To help me understand the inner workings of the factory, I had the pleasure of sitting down and talking with Glenn Stacy. Mr. Stacy is a man who started working at Borden’s Condensed Milk Company in 1935 after graduating from a correspondence school in Chicago. He was one of the men in charge of weighing the milk after it had been collected from the dairymen. According to him, the factory owned 18 trucks which collected milk from about 600 different farms.⁹ After being weighed in the receiving station, the milk was dropped into

⁵ Clarke Historical Newspaper Document. “Our new Condensed Milk Factory as it wil appear when completed.”

⁶ Clarke Historical Newspaper Document.

⁷ Cumming, John. Pg. 159.

⁸ Cumming, John. Pg. 159.

⁹ Stacy, Glenn. Personal Interview. 11/9/12.

the holding tank. From there, it was pumped into the boiler room to be cooked down and condensed. As it was heated, the moisture evaporated out. As Mr. Stacy recalls, about 18% of what was left was the actual milk. It was then packaged on site mechanically. 12 cans were filed at one time, and 24 cans were put to a case. The cases were then stored in the warehouse before being shipped off to different parts of the country including New York, San Francisco, and Chicago.¹⁰ Upon doing further research, I discovered that on average there were only about 55 males and 9 females running the whole factory,¹¹ and that about 200,00lbs of milk per year was processed.¹²

I was also interested in how all of the equipment was powered and cleaned, and Mr. Stacy was an enormous help in answering my questions. He told me that in order to clean all of the tanks and equipment, water was pumped out of the river and mixed with chemicals. This could sometimes pose a problem for the workers because every once in a while the river was frozen. The river was an important resource to the factory, in that it provided the water needed to keep all the equipment clean. Thus, the environment played a role in constituting the location of the factory. After cleaning the equipment, Mr. Stacy clarified that the water was dumped back into the river, chemicals and all. It is possible that this was harmful to the river, but it was done in a time period before they had regulations for these kinds of actions. I also learned that the building was powered

¹⁰ Stacy, Glenn. Personal Interview

¹¹ "Thirty Seventh Annual Report of the Department of Labor of the State of Michigan"

¹² Michigan Municipal League. "Mt. Pleasant City Hall Now in Historical Borden Building."

by coal, which was a popular source of power at the time. The coal would come in big car loads right up to the back of the factory to be unloaded. That railway is no longer there.¹³

Mr. Stacy is very proud to have worked at the Borden Condensed Milk Company, and I don't blame him. It was a beautiful factory that proved to be a rich resource for the area. At the same time, it seems to not have been very damaging to the environment. In fact, many of the processes were clean. Mr. Stacy suggested that no "sludge" or waste products were produced in the condensing process.¹⁴ As a boost to the economy, the Borden Building provided an outlet for farmers to sell their milk. Normally, it was a painful chore for farmers to process the milk from their cows into butter.¹⁵ According to Isaac Fancher, author of *Past and Present of Isabella County*, the factory was "paying a liberal price for milk from the farmers. . . The price has been such that a great many farmers have invested in cows for the purpose of selling the milk to this factory."¹⁶ Mr. Stacy agreed with this statement, and told me that not only did the factory give farmers an incentive to start dairy farms, it caused farmers who already owned cows to buy even more.¹⁷ This information is reflected in census data. In the 1910 census, it was reported that there were 10,835 dairy cows in

¹³ Stacy, Glenn. Personal Interview

¹⁴ Stacy, Glenn. Personal Interview

¹⁵ Fancher, Isaac. *Past and Present of Isabella County Michigan*. Pg. 277

¹⁶ Fancher, Issac. Pg. 277

¹⁷ Stacy, Glenn. Personal Interview

Isabella County.¹⁸ By 1920, there were a whopping 17,138 dairy cows.¹⁹ In order to accommodate this growth in the number of cows, trees had to be cut down to create grazing land. This illuminates one of the indirect effects the Borden Building had on the environment.

Failed Attempts

Unfortunately, the Borden Condensed Milk Factory was closed in 1960. From there, the building sat vacant for 40 years after 15 failed attempts at restoration. Over that period, the ownership of the building changed many times. On the first attempt at restoration in 1975, it was suggested that the building be a community center. That idea was voted down. In 1980 the Department of Social Services thought about relocating to the Borden building, but decided not to. In 1986, attempt 4, it was suggested by Michael Panyard that the building be turned into a small shopping center. Unfortunately, during the negotiation process Panyard became ill and the deal fell through. More recently in 1992, Mid-Michigan Community College thought about buying the building and turning it into classrooms. However, they decided it would be cheaper to go elsewhere. Finally in Fall 2002, J.E. Johnson presented a plan to turn the building into the City Hall. The city finally accepted the offer.²⁰

The Borden Building Becomes the City Hall

¹⁸ United States Census Bureau. "Census of Population and Housing: 1910 Census."

¹⁹ United States Census Bureau. "Census of Population and Housing: 1920 Census."

²⁰ "History of Ownership and Development Efforts Mt. Pleasant Condensed Milk Factory (Borden Building.)"

It was a blessing for the city of Mt. Pleasant when the final and successful attempt at restoration was made. The building had been an eyesore for the downtown community as it sat decaying, contaminated, and vandalized. As stated by the city website, “Redevelopment of the factory proved difficult as the property was often overlooked as too small for developers with historic rehabilitation experience or too big for dreamers with minimal resources.”²¹ While the future of the building at one time seemed bleak, there was finally a right fit for the building. In order to get sufficient funds to be restored, tax revenues needed to be collected and the old City Hall had to be sold.²² Certain regulations also had to be followed since the building had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1983.²³ All 223 windows and 8 cupolas were restored to almost exactly to what they used to look like when the Borden Factory was up and running.²⁴ Restoration and construction was somewhat trickier than expected. The same springs that gave the builders problems when the footings were first laid gave the workers problems in the new parking lot area. Contaminated materials, such as the asbestos roofing, lead paint, and unidentified tanks of liquids had to be exposed of. However, some of the original bricks from the structure were able to be saved and re-used as the building was made to look exactly as it had in the beginning of the 20th century. Using a photograph of the

²¹ Michigan Municipal League. “Mt. Pleasant City Hall Now in Historical Borden Building.”

²² Michigan Municipal League. “Mt. Pleasant City Hall Now in Historical Borden Building.”

²³ National Register of Historic Places. “Michigan Condensed Milk Factory.”

²⁴ Keep Michigan Beautiful, Inc. “KMB 2009 Awards Recipients- The President’s Plaque Award: City of Mt. Pleasant—Borden Building Restoration Project”

building from 1910, the building was able to be restored to almost exactly the same as it had been back then, except the 125 foot chimney was never recreated. While the exterior of the building is right out of the early 1900s, the interior is far more up to date. It currently holds 75% of the city municipal offices, and the city's commission chambers are located within the old boiler room.²⁵

The restoration of the Borden Building had some direct effects on the environment. Firstly, the Greg K. Baderschneider River Walk Trail was expanded to include the area to the North of the building so tourists and pedestrians alike could enjoy its beauty. The area by the river is well groomed and paved trail has been added to the landscape. Secondly, more land was altered and pushed around as extra public parking was added around the building. Thirdly, the springs that plagued the workers in both the 20th and 21st centuries needed to be dealt with. By a stroke of innovative genius, they were harnessed and channeled into a beautiful man made pond on the NW corner of the building.²⁶ Though changes have been made to the area, the Borden Building continues to shine as a beacon of the past in a more modern world.

Conclusion

The Borden Building is essential to understanding the history of Mt. Pleasant. In a time when the Great Lakes states were being pushed into dairy farming, the Borden Condensed Milk Company provided an incentive for farmers comply as well as an outlet for their product. In doing so, the surrounding

²⁵ Michigan Municipal League. "Mt. Pleasant City Hall Now in Historical Borden Building."

²⁶ Michigan Municipal League. "Mt. Pleasant City Hall Now in Historical Borden Building."

landscape was altered. At the same time, the characteristics of the landscape were what made it so desirable a location to build on in the first place. Today, the impacts on the landscape are more localized to the area directly surrounding the building. However, that doesn't mean that the building and its function are any less important in serving the needs of the community. The Borden Building has stood the test of time and is still influencing Mt. Pleasant in the present.

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