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Corner home to many tenants



Montgomery Ward and Company's department store occupied the northwest corner of 7th Street and Minnesota Avenue from 1938 to 1971. Following a remodeling project, the Board of Public Utilities moved into the building in 1974. Postcard from Harold Henre.

(Editor's note: This is the 28th in a series of "then and now" articles on places and things of interest in Kansas City, Kan., compiled by area historian Margaret Landis in observance of the 100th birthday of KCK in 1986. Much of the information has appeared in past editions of The Kansan.)

(Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.)

Since 1882, the northwest corner of 7th Street and Minnesota Avenue has had three occupants.

They are:

- Wyandotte County Courthouse (built in 1882), which moved to 7th Street and Ann Avenue in 1927.
- Montgomery Ward Department Store (built in 1937), which moved to Indian Springs Shopping Center in 1971, and
- The Board of Utility general offices since 1973 when refurbishing began.

Sale of Property

The Wyandotte County Commissioners received bids in 1928 for the sale of the old courthouse site. The high bid was \$180,500. When litigation tied up the proceedings, the bid was canceled. Hiram Northup sold the county the land in 1882 for the courthouse. His heirs contended they had title to the land. After the case had gone through the courts, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Wyandotte County owned the property and had proper title.

A bid was made in 1931 and another in 1935. County commissioners rejected both bids because they considered them too low.

On March 25, 1937, *The Kansan* reported the county commissioners sold at public auction the old courthouse property as the site for a large modern department store for \$180,000 cash to J.W. Perry, Kansas City, Mo., banker and financier. Montgomery Ward and Company, Chicago, would occupy the building.

Million Dollar Project

A contract for the construction of the new Montgomery Ward & Co. Department Store building was awarded Oct. 28, 1937 to the Swenson Construction Co., K.C., Mo.

The new building of Georgian Colonial design was built with red vitrified brick with Bedford cut stone trim. The three-story and basement building was the largest of its kind in KCK. The design and construction were supervised by Montgomery Ward under terms of a 30-year lease with an option for additional occupancy.

Opening of the Store

The store was described as "three stores in one.: The basement was a complete hardware store including refrigerators, washing machines, radios and other electrical appliances.

The main floor on the Minnesota Avenue level was the big family store for men, women and children's wearing apparel. Women's fashions and millinery were on the mezzanine.

The second floor was a stock room and for storage.

North of the main store, entrance from State Avenue, was a one-story extension used as a motor car service department for tires, batteries and accessories.

The store was formally opened to the public June 9, 1938. Officiating at the opening were executives of Montgomery Ward and KCK officials.

Mayor Don C. McCombs recalled: "...that the store stands on historic ground, the place having been through generations, the site of the Wyandotte County Courthouse where much legal history was recorded; where many of the brilliant lawyers of Kansas practiced and where far-reaching court decisions were handed down."

After his speech, Mayor McCombs received a pair of scissors and snipped the white satin ribbons that signified the formal opening.

Farm and Hardware Store

Montgomery Ward opened another retail store on the southwest corner of 8th Street and Minnesota Avenue on Feb. 13, 1947. The new store sold hardware and featured farm equipment "from nails to tractors."

Annexation Program

A large scale annexation program that started in Mayor Paul F. Mitchum's administration (1955-1964) and continued through Mayor Joseph H. McDowell's (1964-1971) and Mayor Richard F. Walsh's (1971-1975) administrations resulted in the westward expansion of the city.

Among the shopping centers that were built was the Indian Springs Shopping Center, 47th and State Avenue. Many stores and business places on Minnesota Avenue moved to Indian Springs when it opened in April 1971...including Montgomery Ward.

BPU New Tenant

When the commission form of municipal government became effective in April 1910 a commissioner of water and public lighting was elected. The Water and Light Department operated under the commission form of government until the election of April 2, 1929 when the Board of Public Utilities (BPU) was established (the office of the water and light commissioner was abolished). A BPU board operates the municipally owned utilities.

The offices were previously in the old City Hall on the second floor. The move to 8th Street and Nebraska was in September 1963. The expanded facilities at 7th Street and Minnesota Avenue were opened August 5, 1974.

In refurbishing the buildings, the design was by Byers and Glenn, KCK, architects. Miller-Stauch Construction Co., Inco., KCK, was the general contractor for the project.

Though some of the exterior facade of the building has been modernized, the basic Georgian Style remains.