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September 2025

Old Broadway in Fresno

Recently, on several of the Facebook sites pertaining to Fresno history, there has been a good deal of discussion about buildings on Broadway Street downtown. Those discussions have centered around the time prior to the late fifties and early sixties when most of the old Broadway buildings were destroyed in the name of "redevelopment."

Strangely, I had been talking about some of these buildings and businesses with my dad and my son, Daniel, for the past several months. Daniel is an engineer for the City of Fresno, and he is currently working on a nine-story parking structure that will be located almost exactly on the site of one of the most beautiful and most lamented buildings on old Broadway. I am speaking of the old Carnegie Library. While the City was doing some preliminary digging on that site, they found the streetcar tracks buried where Broadway used to be. Daniel and I were discussing the idea that the City should consider incorporating a Jim Savage monument to the Carnegie Library in that parking structure. He said he was planning on doing that, but he needed to present that at exactly the proper moment. So, while we wait for that proper moment, let's discuss some of the other buildings that were on Broadway.

Now to be clear, there is still quite a bit of Broadway Street left. From Olive Avenue south to Tuolumne is still intact and in use. Sadly, most of the really cool old buildings on that portion of Broadway are gone, but the brick Mayflower Apartments building is still there, even though the owner painted the bricks black. There are two of the old business buildings still standing around the Mayflower north of Tuolumne: The old Parker Nash & Packard dealership still stands, although it is now the Kepler Neighborhood

Charter School. Another old Broadway building still stands at 1418 Broadway and is housing Blair Media.

Once we go south on Broadway, we can only go a short distance. The street has been mostly cleared of the old buildings and is completely blocked off from passage. The Hotel Fresno, built in 1912, was once the most elegant hotel between San Francisco and Los Angeles. It still stands where the street is blocked off, but it is a mere shell of its former self. It ceased hotel operation in 1980, and sat vacant until a few years ago. It recently reopened and is now being renovated as an affordable housing facility.

Across from the Hotel Fresno is a parking lot. That parking lot used to be the Carnegie Library. Begun in 1901 and completed in 1904, it was one of the earliest and costliest of the Carnegie Libraries. The grant from Andrew Carnegie was for \$30,000, which was a fortune in those days. It was the first public library building in Fresno County, and served for many years until it was torn down to make way for that lovely parking lot in 1959.

Just north of the Hotel Fresno was the White Theatre. Built in 1914 as a vaudeville house, it became a movie theatre by about 1926. In its prime, this theatre featured some of the finest traveling theatre companies that could be found anywhere. It seated 1256 people. Sadly, by the early 1960's the White Theatre had evolved into an adult film only type of theatre. Needless to say the upholstery was not cleaned regularly.

The White Theatre was what is known as a "hemp house." No, not THAT kind of hemp house! It means that it had a full rigging system, capable of flying scenery and lighting equipment. It also had a full compliment of painted backdrops and sets! This I know for a fact, because when the theatre was torn down in 1966, Fresno State became the owner of all the set wall pieces, some furniture, and all the backdrops from the White Theatre. Most of them have not been used since then, and they still exist in the basement of Fresno State's John Wright Theatre. Over the course

of the last 50 or so years, they have been moved and shuffled around several times. We took some of the backdrops out to look at them about 30 years ago. After carefully unrolling them, we discovered that they still looked pretty good. The painting technique was amazing! We then carefully rolled them back up and replaced them in the basement. The basement was flooded by an electrical infrastructure contractor two years ago. I'm afraid to ask what happened to the White Theatre stuff.

More parking lots and ugly modern buildings appear as we move south along the remnant of Broadway until it is completely blocked at Mariposa Street by the Fresno County EOC office. But back at Fresno and Broadway, an epic piece of Fresno History still stands...The Crest Theatre!!!

With its badass neon sign, like the Hotel Fresno, the 1947 Crest Theatre is not quite up to its former glory, either. But, at least it is still there! Still in business as a concert venue and a movie house showing indie films and hosting other special events. The interior alone is well worth the visit. It seats something like 1250 people!

Broadway disappears for the next three blocks, now covered by parking lots and ugly city and county buildings, and Grizzlies Stadium. On Tulare, across from Grizzlies Stadium, there is a parking garage. That garage sits at what was roughly the corner of Broadway and Tulare. The Hughes Block Building, built in 1887, was located there. It was an office building built by Thomas Hughes. Across the street was the 1887 Hughes Hotel, also built by Thomas Hughes, and the subject of last month's report.

Past Inyo Street, Broadway returns. And this section is really interesting because it still has some of the old buildings. Starting in about 1915, Broadway was Highway 99 as it passed through downtown Fresno, before Golden State Boulevard and the new Highway 99 were built. This section of Broadway was nearly entirely dedicated to automobile care and sales. Before that it was all about horse and buggy care, with the Carmel Harness &

Saddlery building, built in 1917 for Carl Melikian, still located at 748 Broadway and now home to Tioga-Sequoia Brewery.

Along this section of Broadway there were tire shops, auto parts stores (like Pep Boys), engine rebuilders (like Schedler and Kirsch), upholstery shops, and even automobile wrecking yards. Yes, wrecking yards! But the cool thing about those wrecking yards is that they were all indoor wrecking yards. There were several of the along Broadway, and remnants of some of them still exist.

How it worked is that the wrecking yard company was housed in a one story building. There is an alley behind the building. They would purchase a car that was to be parted out, then drive the car inside the rear of the building. There was a very large freight elevator in the rear of the building. The elevator would then take the car to the basement, where it would be disassembled, and the parts would be either stored in the basement or brought upstairs for resale.

Baskin's Auto Supply is one of these. The building was built in 1917 by the current owner's grandfather, and was used exclusively as an auto parts wrecking yard and parts sales business. The family has owned the building and business for over 100 years. They are probably the oldest family owned business in downtown Fresno. The building is currently owned by Richard Baskin. His son, Bruce, runs the business. They no longer operate as a parts store, as their business morphed into the upholstery side of automobile care in the late 1950's and has remained as such. Their neon sign is listed on the Historic Building Registry.

The Baskins just happen to be friends of mine. They did the upholstery on several of my and my family's vehicles (including the seat in my firetruck), and I have spent many hours in that building. The basement still has parts in it from the 1930's. Richard, Bruce, and Bruce's brother Mark all have a huge soft spot in their hearts for history. Mark has recently restored a

1920's Rio Grande gas station near Broadway and Los Angeles Streets. They all are huge downtown Fresno supporters.

A few weeks ago, I spoke with Bruce about Jim Savage dedicating a plaque at Baskin's Auto Supply. Bruce was very happy with the idea and said his dad would want to talk with me about it. If the chapter and our Humbug approve, I will speak with Richard when I return from Oregon. There is absolutely no place to mount a plaque because the front of the building is all glass, but we could easily put a granite plaque in the window, in a fashion similar to the Mochi place in China Town. Bruce thought that would be a great idea.

I would also like to approach Mark Baskin, with the chapter's blessing, and discuss either a plaque or a monument at his Rio Grande gas station. I believe that is the last existing gas station in the downtown area. While it is no longer in business as a gas station, it certainly fits into old Broadway nostalgia, and represents a very accurate 1920's gas station restoration.

Starting in the 1960's, this gas station was Fred Thorpe Speedometer Service for many years. After Henry Delgado, the owner of Fred Thorpe's, died in the late 1990's it sat empty for many years. Then, about 2010, it was burned badly by some homeless people who broke in. They also burned to oblivion the nearby Trolley Car Diner, but that is a story for another day. The fact that the gas station survived and is still there is just a small miracle. It is the last of the original old gas stations in downtown Fresno.