



# MainStreetNews

THE MONTHLY JOURNAL of THE NATIONAL TRUST MAIN STREET CENTER

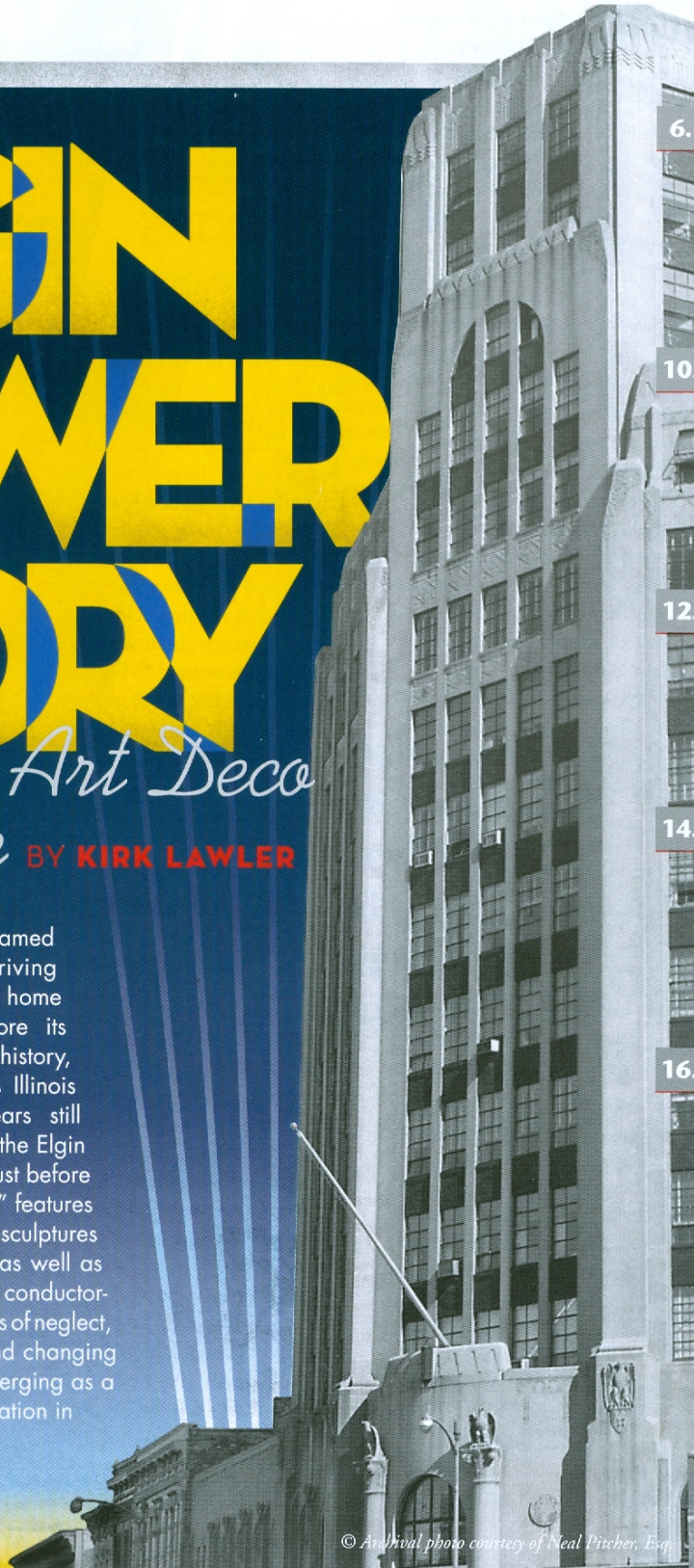
## in this issue

# THE ELGIN TOWER STORY

*Saving an Art Deco Landmark* BY KIRK LAWLER

The Elgin that was once "Famed The World Over" as a thriving manufacturing center and the home of classic watches that bore its name may have passed into history, but the chief symbol of this Illinois community's prosperous years still presides over its downtown: the Elgin Tower Building. Completed just before the Crash of '29, "the Tower" features some of the finest Art Deco sculptures and bas reliefs in the state, as well as one of the last remaining conductor-operated elevators. After years of neglect, ill-advised modernization, and changing uses, the Elgin Tower is reemerging as a show piece for historic restoration in a revitalized town center.

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### 6. Preparing for Streetscape Construction

In the fourth of our series on implementing a streetscape project, Donna Dow of Durant, Okla., focuses on the three major aspects of the planning phase, which takes place between design and construction: timing, bidding, and preparing customers and business owners for the inconveniences of the construction process.

### 10. Shop Talk

Listening to co-workers, employees, and customers is the cornerstone of a healthy work environment. In our fourth installment of Shop Talk, retail consultant Margie Johnson discusses common listening habits and offers the do's and don'ts of "active listening."

### 12. Sharp Rise in Shopping Center Vacancies

While the number of abandoned box stores and empty strip malls has risen dramatically over the last six months, shopping mall construction is continuing at a furious pace. What can your community do to protect itself from departing chains and/or unwelcome retail development?

### 14. Network Notes

Read about the remarkable transformation of State Center, Iowa, which is using its historic assets to boost heritage tourism, and check out a number of funding and educational opportunities, including HOPE VI Main Street grants, secure online contributions through [preservationnation.org](http://preservationnation.org), and form-based zoning classes.

### 16. New at the Trust

Join us in welcoming Elise Tinsley, who is joining the National Trust Main Street Center consulting services staff. Also check out the Trust's new publication on *Fire Safety in Historic Buildings*, and a long popular book on operating easements.

NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION®



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## INTERNATIONAL STYLE COMES TO ELGIN

The first thing a visitor to Elgin notices about the Tower is its sheer size: at a height of 186 feet it is visible for miles around, anchoring the skyline and looming over the three- and four-story late 19th-century storefronts that form the backbone of the town's traditional business district. The dramatic break in stylistic continuity

with neighboring buildings, where rough brick facades with brightly painted prefabricated steel cornices abut polished granite and sheer expanses of smooth limestone, leaves a lasting impression. Had the Great Depression not intervened, it is likely that Elgin would offer more buildings from the

Exterior ornamental bands in low relief: Eagle or phoenix?

© Kirk Lawler



decorative movement; as it is, only one other, much smaller example of the style survives.

The design of the Elgin Tower presents a bit of a puzzle, incorporating a curious pastiche of classical and modern elements that may be disconcerting unless appreciated in an historic context. Designed by W.G. Knoebel for the St. Louis Building and Equipment Company just three years after the Parisian exposition that gave Art Deco its name, the Tower is best approached as an early, transitional example of the style.

While the uninterrupted vertical piers, upper-floor setbacks, and tightly controlled bands of ornament bound together with the familiar zigzag pattern are consistent with the vertical aesthetic of the time, the rows of fascia that establish a rhythm across the flanks of the building, the columns topped with Corinthian composite capitals that mark the entrance, and the eagles that provide a sculptural motif all around the exterior reflect Greek, Roman, and Romantic architectural conventions. Naïveté on Knoebel's part?

Perhaps, but it is just as likely he included these traditional elements to make the new building more palatable to provincial Elginites (it was modern, but not *too* modern) and appeal to the conservative bankers who ordered its construction.

Acanthus leaves, astragals and sea dragons adorning the lobby belie the builder's commitment to modernity.

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## DASHED HOPES & BROKEN WINDOWS

Stylistic compromises notwithstanding, the Tower's predominantly Art Deco design was a forward-looking choice by the directors of the Home National and Home Trust and Savings Banks that occupied the ground floor, reflecting a vision of Elgin as a "progressive city of the future." After decades of uninterrupted growth and prosperity, the town's civic leaders felt they had little reason to worry about what lay ahead: Elgin seemed to be on as solid a footing as the new skyscraper that challenged the ether. Five months later the stock market collapsed. By 1932, the Home banks were in receivership.

Most of the opulent appointments that had made the ground floor of their headquarters a sensation were torn out and sold to pay creditors, beginning decades of decline. In 1937, a Walgreens took residence in the space and, while its tenancy brought in much-needed revenue for 20 years, the store required light and visibility. As a result, much of the granite exterior cladding was removed to make way for plate glass.

The economic boom that followed the Second World War saw the highest level of occupancy in the Tower's history, but by then the Art Deco style had passed out of fashion and little respect was paid to its vestiges. The ensuing decades

saw the introduction of faux paneling, acoustic ceiling tiles, drywall, and fluorescent light fixtures as "modernity" was redefined.

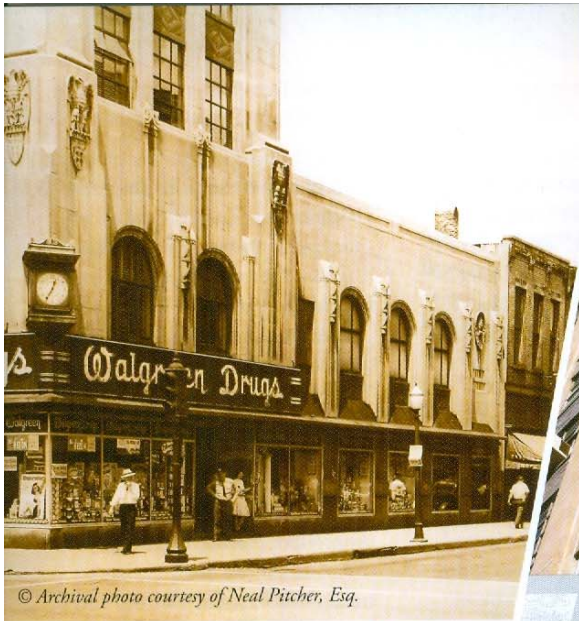
The value once placed on the integrity of craftsmanship and the quality of materials was abandoned: the "quick fix" became the order of the day. For years owners came and went: the old Walgreens space stood vacant, cracked windows were simply boarded up, roofs were permitted to leak. The building's waning fortunes mirrored that of the town as a whole: the Elgin National Watch Company, unable to compete with foreign manufacturers, closed its doors and laid off scores of workers.

▲ The lobby on opening day, May 4, 1929. With its counters of Botticino marble, hanging lanterns of solid bronze, desks of Italian walnut and velour drapes, the stately chamber conveyed the owner's faith that the completion of the building marked "a new period of Elgin's progress in business and finance." ▶



© Archival photo courtesy of Neal Pitcher, Esq.





© Archival photo courtesy of Neal Pitcher, Esq.

▲ In the forties and early fifties, the soda counter at the Tower's Walgreens lured Elgin residents downtown.



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▲ Many early visitors to the new office block were startled by its imposing 15-story height. Being "neither a steel worker nor an aviator," wrote a reporter who gazed from the roof, it took a while to get used to the "sitting on top of the world sensation."

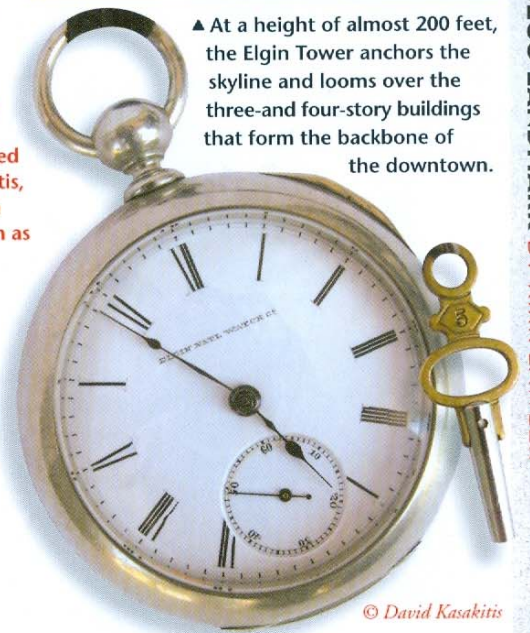
► Founded in 1864, the Elgin National Watch Company produced nearly half of the pocket watches in the United States before it closed in 1964. The watch pictured at right belonged to James Anthony Kasakitis, storeowner in Girardville, Pa., and has been passed down from generation to generation as a valued heirloom.

“Built just before the Great Depression, the Elgin Tower reflected the owner’s vision of Elgin as a ‘progressive city of the future.’”

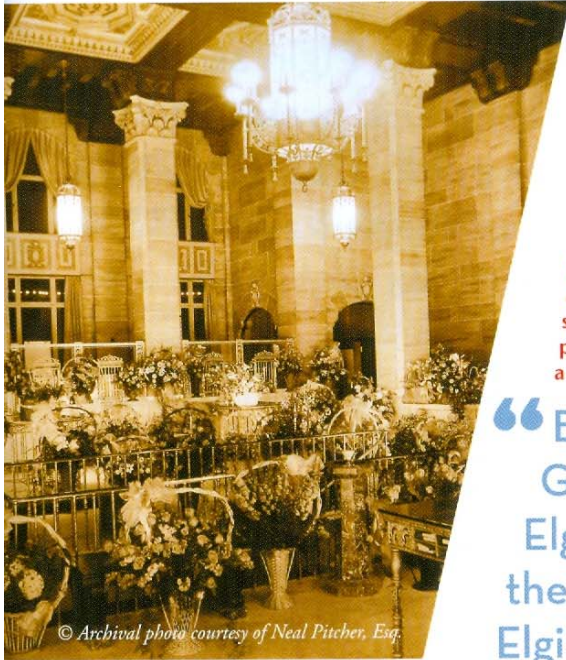


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▲ At a height of almost 200 feet, the Elgin Tower anchors the skyline and looms over the three- and four-story buildings that form the backbone of the downtown.



© David Kasakitis



© Archival photo courtesy of Neal Pitcher, Esq.

## NAVAL OFFICER TURNS TIDE

The Elgin Tower was saved from inevitable demolition in 1978 when it was purchased by William Stickling, a retired U.S. Navy commander. Stickling used his pension money to finance repairs and made the Tower his second home. “Bill Stickling loved this place,” remembers attorney Neal Pitcher, a tenant and the building’s present steward. “He would work 18-hour days, then fall asleep at his desk.”

Stickling’s dedication culminated in a half-million-dollar renovation in 1997 that saw the façade restored to its original appearance with impressive fidelity. Working from original plans, Stickling oversaw the replacement of missing stonework, fashioning cladding and moldings from granite and limestone shipped from the same quarries that supplied the original builders.

His hard work aside, Stickling was able to secure support for his efforts due to another

shift in values: during his tenure many Americans became disillusioned with the cookie-cutter approach that typified urban renewal projects and suburban developments and sought out an authentic living environment rooted in a past that predated “model cities” and bland suburbs. Small towns fit the bill, people relocated, and “restore and reuse” became the new order of the day.

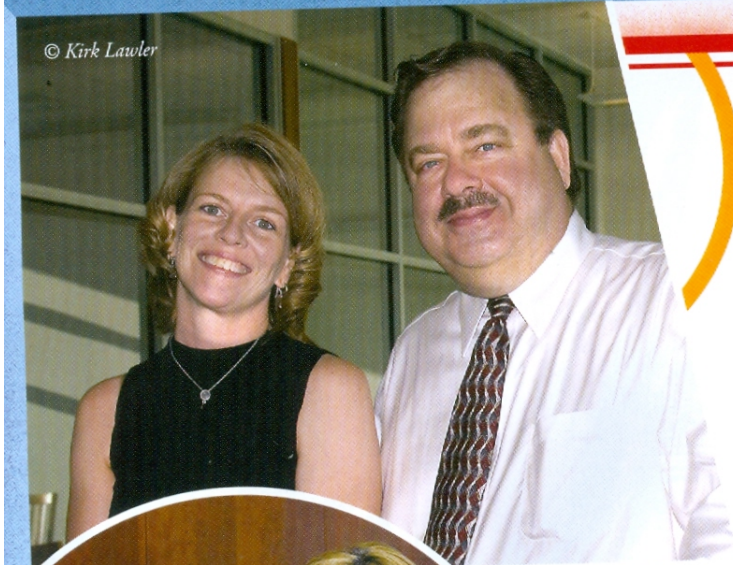
This change in direction got a boost in Elgin when the municipality instituted its Façade

Improvement Program, which reimburses property owners for 35 to 50 percent of the cost of repairs and upgrades and provides a consulting architect to ensure that work maintains the integrity of original building designs. Many of the town’s historic buildings have gained a new lease on life thanks to this program, and it was an important source of funding for Stickling’s ground-level restoration a decade ago.

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◀ Neal Pitcher, manager of the Tower, and Tracy Rady of the Sticking Foundation, which was formed to ensure future upkeep of the building.



hemorrhaging money. "Winter heating bills were running \$18,000 a month," Pitcher recalls. "That was more than the income generated by all of the leased spaces put together and more than we spend on energy in a year now."

aspects, it is clear as he shows visitors around that he takes quiet pride in the recent progress that has been made to reinvigorate both.

The Sticking estate moved quickly to sell off the late owner's other holdings to pay off outstanding debts and finance a new heating system. Upgrading from steam heat controlled by a timing clock to a mix of gas and electricity not only cut costs but also enabled tenants to control the temperature of their offices, making it possible

Tonya Hudson, executive director of Elgin's Downtown Neighborhood Association, grew up in town and remembers the central business district as a place people avoided. "Now," she says, "I see it as an exciting, progressive place, providing urban amenities like public transportation, fine dining, and beautiful parks on a smaller, more comfortable scale."

And the Tower's place in the revival? "The building's unique



© Kirk Lawler

“Now,” says Hudson, “I see Elgin as an exciting, progressive place, providing urban amenities like public transportation, fine dining, and beautiful parks on a smaller, more comfortable scale.”

◀ Tonya Hudson, executive director of Elgin's Downtown Neighborhood Association and Elgin Tower tenant: "The building stands as a symbol of our city's accomplished past and its promising future."

for some to keep weekend hours without having to heat the entire building.

While Pitcher's professional background is in law, not history, he has developed an enhanced appreciation of local history during the course of directing meticulous, floor-by-floor renovations of the Tower.

"Preservation is the right thing for downtown Elgin: that's what we have to offer," he said recently. "We can't compete with the new developments on the basis of what is most modern and up to date, but [downtown's] historic buildings ... certainly have charm that new construction could never imitate. We can make the central business district quaint, warm, and appealing just by bringing it back around to the way it looked in the '20s."

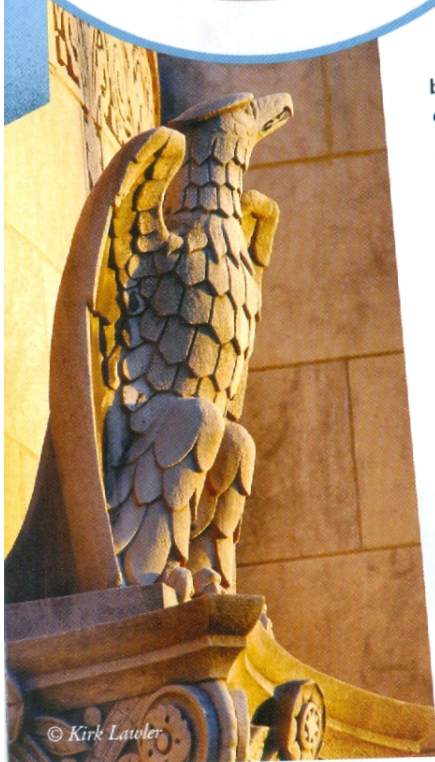
design helps to call attention to Elgin's distinctive architecture," says Hudson, "and it is architecture that should be preserved. Sometimes when people think of revitalization they think of tearing things down and starting all over again. I know there are always times when you can't bring buildings back because they are too far gone, but overall we've been careful to preserve when it is realistic to do so and the Elgin Tower is a good example of that. I hope that eventually it will be fully restored to its former glory."

Despite the Sticking Foundation's commitment to respect the historic integrity of its charge, there have been times when the dictates of government have trumped matters of principle. Just recently one of the telecommunications companies that have cellular transmitters on the roof canceled its lease because a state agency would not permit it to upgrade existing

*continued from page 3.*

## NEW MANAGEMENT, NEW CHALLENGES

Before Sticking passed away, he set up a foundation to ensure the future upkeep of his Elgin properties. By the time Pitcher was asked to take over management of the Tower in 2003, however, the building's future was again imperiled by overdue repairs, rents that were out of step with the market, and an outdated physical plant that was



© Kirk Lawler

▲ An eagle looks to the sun: Art Deco meets Greek Revival.



antennae on the grounds that the new equipment would not be appropriate for a vintage building. The canceled lease resulted in lost income to the tune of \$24,000 per year. “That money would have financed the renovation of another floor, which in turn would have generated additional income,” relates Pitcher with obvious frustration.

The state has also mandated replacement of the conductor-operated elevators by 2011. For the time being, Elgin’s fire department has allowed the Tower’s distinctive textured glass and wood office doors to remain in place, but that feature may eventually go the way of the elevators for safety reasons.

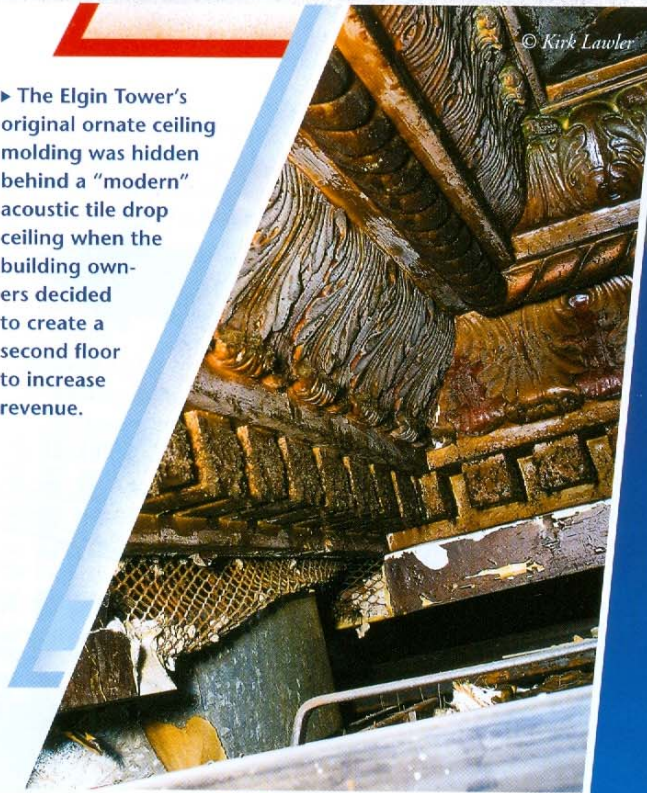
## DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION IN DIFFICULT TIMES

With the sudden onset of the current recession, plans for further restoration of the Elgin Tower have been placed on hold, but if people continue to appreciate the character and quality of the building and the neighborhood around it, the downturn may have limited long-term impact. Hudson remains optimistic. “Right after the Tower was built, the nation experienced worse economic problems,” she says, “but we pulled through then and we can certainly do it now.”

She notes that while many private developers have shelved schemes until economic conditions improve, the City of Elgin is proceeding with a six-year, \$31,000,000 street restoration and storm sewer upgrade project, as well as river-front beautification efforts and a grant program that would subsidize projecting signage for small businesses.

“It may just play out that the timing of all this was fortuitous,” she comments. “When people are ready to start investing and

► The Elgin Tower’s original ornate ceiling molding was hidden behind a “modern” acoustic tile drop ceiling when the building owners decided to create a second floor to increase revenue.



© Kirk Lawler



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Sometimes the smallest artifacts retain the greatest charm: the original brass padlock still secures the lobby’s mailbox. ►

relocating again, our major infrastructure improvement ventures will be out of the way and they won’t have to deal with the disruption that’s always part of the package. It is a hopeful perspective, and one that the Downtown Neighborhood Association works to convey to our businesses and residents.”

*Kirk Lawler is a professional photographer based in Lisle, Illinois. He specializes in the architectural and editorial fields. His first degree was in local history, and he has donated hundreds of hours as a volunteer photographer to cultural and civic improvement groups around the state.*

*Many thanks to Loyola University (Chicago) graduate student Adrienne A. Sage, whose research was instrumental in securing a place for the Elgin Tower on the National Register of Historic Places. Adrienne was a chief source of information on the early history of the building for this article.*



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