

# A Different Brand of Americana: W.A. Sarmiento's Glendale Legacy

by Ara Corbett

**T**he current redevelopment project on the northwest corner of Broadway and Louise may not exactly rival Rick Caruso's Americana in terms of scale, but what it lacks in hype and tax revenue it more than makes up for in history. The long vacant, green aluminum-and-brick building at 225 East Broadway will soon be home to the Hollywood Production Center, marking its first occupancy since 2001 and its first major renovation in over 30 years.

I recently walked through the construction dust and noise of what used to be the lobby of the LA County Department of Public Social Services, and before that, Fidelity Federal Savings, with the building's architect, Wenceslaus Alfonso (W.A.) Sarmiento. Sarmiento, 85, is of course renowned for designing one of the most famous midcentury bank buildings in the country, Glendale Federal Savings at 401 North Brand. But in 1956, one year before conceiving what would become his masterpiece, Sarmiento was sent by the Bank Building Corporation of America (BBC) to bring the spirit of modernism to Glendale's Fidelity Federal. In his first year as bank president, Normal Hayhurst, like all postwar bank owners nationwide, wanted to leave behind the oppressive image of somber, wood-paneled chambers associated with the Depression in favor of a bright, colorful, open space where people could borrow with optimism and confidence. Sarmiento delivered.

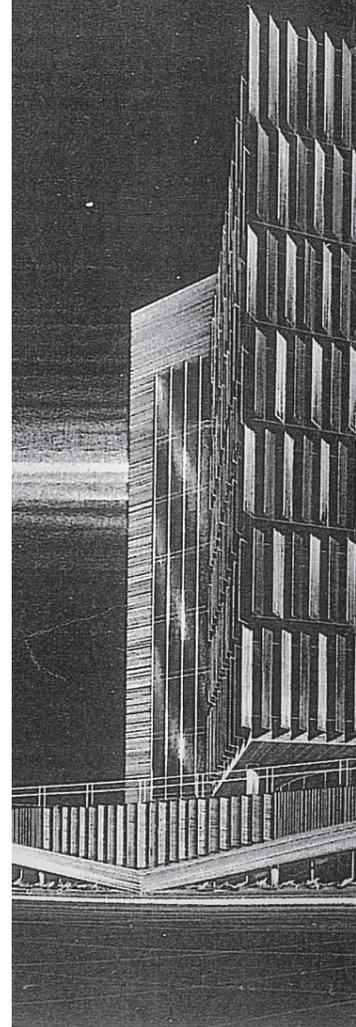
Despite Sarmiento's concession that the building's exterior was "not very great" (he was asked to remodel an existing building, which was later significantly altered by a separate addition by a different firm five years later), he brought an unprecedented elegance to the interior of Fidelity Federal's flagship office, particularly with its striking central feature: a "floating" circular staircase whose individual steps were in fact cylindrical boiler caps taken

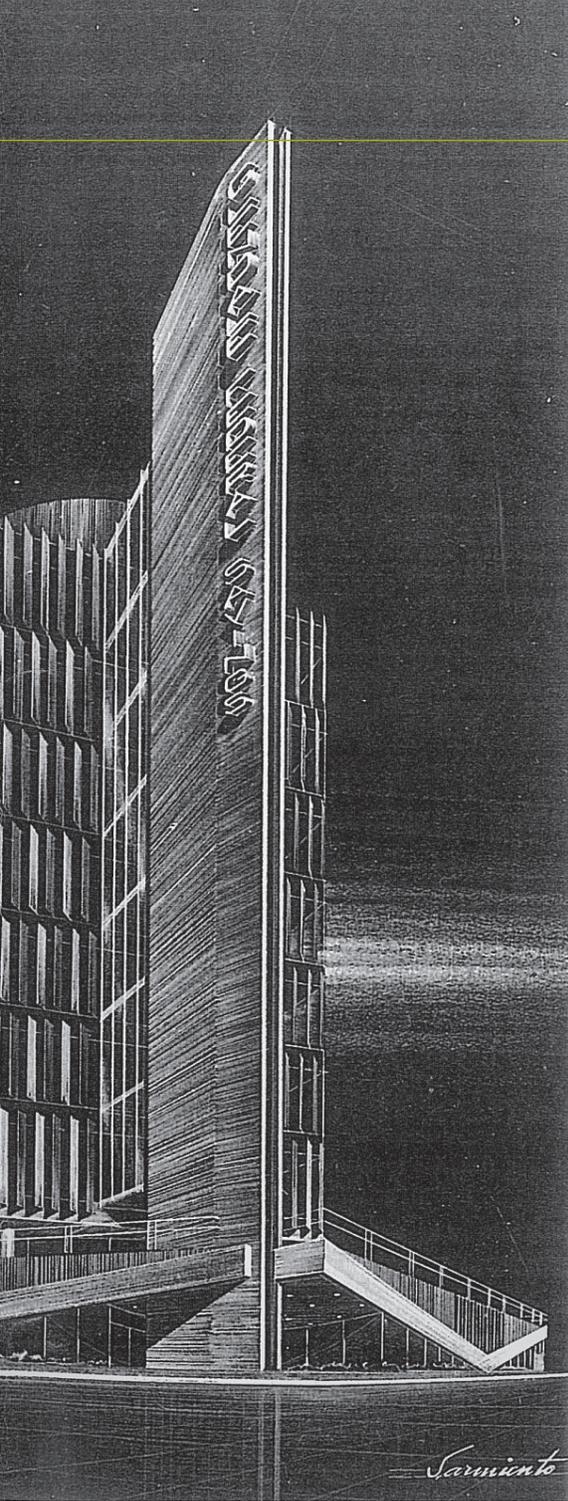
from discarded locomotive engines. But Sarmiento's reimagining old railroad components for the Space Age wasn't all that made Fidelity Federal unique. In an effort to marry part of the growing city's past with the futuristic floor plan, Hayhurst commissioned muralist Aldo Lazzarini to represent an image from 1798 along the bank's north wall: Spanish soldier Jose Maria Verdugo on horseback in front of what was then known as Rancho San Rafael, a 36,000-plus acre domain which included all of present-day Glendale.

Sarmiento suggested that the mural not be painted on the wall itself, but rather on a large canvas, fearing that Lazzarini's artwork might be destroyed or painted over in the likely event that the bank would expand. Fidelity Federal would indeed outgrow its Broadway headquarters and relocate to 600 North Brand in 1976, two years after Hayhurst's death, but it left in its wake a preservationist's nightmare. Sometime between November 1976 and when the LA County Department of Public Social Services took over the property in April of 1977, Lazzarini's mural disappeared along with all the elements of Sarmiento's staircase. (Sarmiento designed a similar staircase for the First National Bank in Lincoln, Nebraska, where it remains intact.) Those who knew Sarmiento called him, telling him that "they destroyed your building." But while Sarmiento harbors suspicions as to what happened to these

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PHOTOS Top: W.A. Sarmiento's sketch of the Glendale Federal Building on Brand Boulevard. Bottom left: Author's photo of W.A. Sarmiento. Bottom right: A 1956 rendering of Fidelity Federal building on Broadway.





treasures, he took the loss in stride: “That happened to several of my buildings...but I have to accept it because in American civil law, the owner of the building has the right to do any changes he wants.”

The fate of the original Fidelity Federal Building could hardly have been foreseen by Hayhurst, whose community activism and idealism were shared by his friendly business rival J.E. Hoeft, founder and chairman of Glendale Federal. True, both Hayhurst and Hoeft were in the business of making money, but that didn't preclude them from caring about and investing in the city in which they both lived. Hayhurst's list of titles defined public service: Athletics Director at Glendale High, principal of Hoover High, superintendent of Glendale schools, president of the Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis International, the Glendale AID, Community Chest, and the Glendale Chapter of the Red Cross, and board member of the Glendale YMCA to name a few. Hoeft not only began Glendale Federal with a mere \$5600 in 1934, his influence, like Hayhurst's, extended well beyond the financial world. Among his many notable achievements, he served as president of the Glendale Symphony Orchestra, single-handedly revitalizing it and bringing it to international acclaim. He also had a great vision for his hometown, and in giving Sarmiento full creative control over the design of his new headquarters, he hoped Glendale would be recognized for more than just Forest Lawn.



In fact, the Glendale Federal Building was not just a bank and breathtaking architectural triumph, but a place where Christmas carols rang from the giant Carillon bell console on the lower level, where the Rotary Club and other local organizations could use conference room space for free, where a small barber shop like Rudy's could operate for almost no rent just because Hoeft liked the owner. This was a pre-Countrywide time where there was more than a little bit of George Bailey

spirit in the belief that savings-and-loan presidents and their customers were all part of the same civic enterprise. Today, the same building, while eligible for the California Register of Historic Places, is not officially designated as a protected landmark since it does not have the consent of its current owner, the Palo Alto-based firm Nicholson-Vertex. Its long-term fate remains uncertain, but the careless discarding of the vintage two-toned blue louvers from the building's annex in January 2004 and the aesthetically incongruous “Hollywood Production Center” signage along the main tower are hardly indications of architectural integrity and care.

A 2007 Historic Resources Survey deemed the Fidelity Federal building ineligible for the state register, largely due to the loss of its original features. Yet even without the official designation, its current owners (ironically with the Hollywood Production Center as its main tenant) appear to have at least kept the building's character something of a priority. In fact, now that its louvers (added in 1959) have been removed, its façade looks more like its original 1956 artist's rendering than it has in 50 years. Yet one cannot help but share Sarmiento's thoughts that something meaningful has been lost since the heyday of Hayhurst and Hoeft, something more valuable than Lazzarini's mural, the whimsical staircase, and the lettering along the Glendale Federal tower: “The greatness of this country started in 1930...Why? Because people were hungry. There was not this satisfaction with yourself. It feels to me that the spirit of what was happening after World War Two [has] dissipated into nothingness. Our policy is that we want to be comfortable...And that...[is] perhaps more felt in our political life. There's not that spirit of, ‘We want to create something novel and something great,’ but just to continue. But playing it safe, you don't discover America.” Something to consider the next time you drive past Caruso's Americana, the Hollywood Production Center sign on Brand and Lexington, or the construction site at the northwest corner of Broadway and Louise.