

Historic building is out of time

By John Kass

The aging man with nowhere to go stood in the dusty lobby of a once-famous Loop office building that nearly a century ago led to the downfall of Illinois Gov. John Peter Altgeld and is now is waiting for the wrecker's ball.

One minute John Nelson was talking about a dead ancestor who had fought in the Spanish-American War, a corporal named Ubaldo Buonini, the youngest man in his platoon.

Then—as if the next thought were a perfectly normal extension of the first—Nelson, the Unity Building's elevator operator, abruptly remarked that he has spent the last 47 years of his life as an invisible man.

He hadn't planned on it. It just happened. He had been in that building for so long that like so many other workers, in other buildings just like this one, like the cleaning ladies and the cigar counter clerks, the janitors, messenger boys and blue-haired secretaries, he had stopped being noticed as the years went by.

Instead of being John Nelson, 67, a professional elevator operator, he became, somehow, just a balding guy in a brown uniform with a perpetual grin.

"I've had people staring holes in the back of my head for 47 years," said Nelson, who has worked at the Unity Building, 127 N. Dearborn St., for the last 20 years. "For years I considered it, wondering if they thought about what goes through the mind of an elevator operator.

"I'm looking around now, at this lobby, hoping to find a new operator's job, and I finally realize that people looked at me as if I wasn't there," Nelson said. "As if I were an inanimate object." He clanged shut the iron grate and nursed the old elevator up to another floor.

"That's the way people have been looking at this building lately," Nelson shouted down through the grate to a visitor in the empty lobby below. "It used to be a place of action and excitement!"

The stories the Unity Building, across the street from the Daley Center, could tell would be of backroom politics, of the ward heelers, courthouse weasels and bit players trudging through its musty hallways.

Several of Chicago's mayors



Tribune photo by Walter Kale

Rich in history, the Unity Building, 127 N. Dearborn St., is doomed to be torn down.

have put their political offices there. It is the kind of building that passersby don't notice, a place for elderly but once nattily dressed men in old Panama hats and double-breasted suits who still keep a shine on their shoes.

It is part of Chicago's history, giving way to new steel and glass. The Unity and others on that block are to be torn down later this month to make way for retail towers and offices in the name of progress.

Altgeld, then a prominent developer, also had an idea of progress. He looked at that real estate 98 years ago and decided to construct his dream skyscraper to replace clumsy structures built after the Great Chicago Fire. To erect the finest office building in the world, he told friends in 1891, was "the great ambition of my life."

But within a few years after Unity was built, and indebted to a tough, ham-fisted Democratic Party boss, Altgeld would see his political ambitions crushed and his finances ruined, according to Waldo R. Browne's 1924 book "Altgeld of Illinois."

The 16-story building, with 600 offices, was hailed as Chicago's new "skyscraper" when it was completed in 1892.

To finance the project, Altgeld got a \$400,000 loan in 1891 through the Chicago National

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Tribune photo by Walter Kale

Longtime Unity Building elevator operator John Nelson doubts that he's drawn much notice.

Building

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Bank, controlled by John R. Walsh, an Irish immigrant who started on the streets of Chicago as an 11-year-old newsboy and willed his way to control of the bank and the Chicago City Council.

By 1892, Altgeld campaigned for and was elected governor. And Walsh wanted control over the state's patronage army. Altgeld refused the political boss.

A depression hit the city, Altgeld's building defaulted on the loan interest, and Walsh showed no mercy.

The governor, so highly regarded that perhaps he could have been elected president, lost \$500,000 on the project and was plunged into financial ruin as the building was sold into receivership.

"There is so much history here that it boggles the mind," said John Nelson as he brought his elevator back to the Unity's marble lobby.

"But we're alike. The past is unacceptable to the ideas of progress. This building's going down, and I have to find someplace to go."

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