The Amazing deWaal Block in Riverside For Bridges June ’23

When a building has been around for over 113 years many changes have taken place both inside and outside its walls. To survive the passing years, not only is a little luck needed but also the capacity to adjust to changing times. The Poffenroth/ deWaal Block located on 4th Street at Meredith Road is a beautiful and enduring example of adaptability and beauty.

The brick and sandstone block was cleverly built along the rising streetscape of Edmonton Trail in 1910, by Henry Poffenroth a German from Russia immigrant. The 2 storey Edwardian Commercial block had seven storefronts on the main level and eight 2 bedroom apartments upstairs. Two years after completing the block, Poffenroth exchanged it for a farm in DeWinton with Lyndsay Elliott. The major downturn of 1914 resulted in tough times in Calgary and when Elliot passed away in 1920, the Block came under the ownership of Canada Life Assurance. Around that time Theo deWaal, a recent Dutch immigrant, became the custodian. He and his family of four lived on site in a separate two bedroom, 2 storey apartment. He started to put money away in order to purchase the building, probably costing about $20,000.

It was common for newcomers to offer support to their later arriving countrymen and Theo deWaal was no exception. He supported activities of the new Dutch community and welcomed individuals to board at his place, prompting it to be known as the Dutch Block.

Originally a stable was located out back for the horses but as cars became more common it was converted to a garage. The streetcar ran on steel tracks along 4th Street.

Responding to the challenging 1930’s depression years, the large apartments were converted to over 30 single rooms, with shared bathroom and cooking facilities. Many single men from different cultures lived here and steady work was hard to find.

Some interesting tidbits: as a sideline Theo deWaal made and sold a special highly sought after liniment called Gypsy Ointment. After the heating was converted to gas, the original coal room in the basement was converted to an air raid shelter. Music has been a common theme here, with 2nd generation Ted and his son John, both drummers involved in the local music scene. A music studio, operated by John deWaal, for 40 years was in the basement until 2019.

In the early days businesses that occupied the main floor included barber shops, cigar factory, dry good stores, ‘ladies outfitters’ and over time there were small grocery stores, a long standing shoe repair shop, butcher, bookstore, jewellery, furniture and drug stores.

By 2000, with the deWaal Block showing its age a decision needed to be made about its future. John, the third generation of deWaal owners, and his wife Mari Jo made the bold decision to restore the block to the greatest extent possible. On the exterior, there was sandblasting of paint covered bricks and repair of window sills, which required sourcing of matching sandstone from Ohio. Wiring and plumbing were both modernized. The 2nd floor rooms were converted back to larger units. Many of the original building features can still be seen - the pressed tin ceilings and steel radiators, wooden floors and claw foot tubs upstairs. In 2010 the deWaals were recognized with a city of Calgary Heritage Authority Lion award for their restoration efforts. For history buffs a more extensive explanation of the heritage features can be found on the Calgary.ca website ‘Inventory of historic resources” under Poffenroth/deWaal Block.

After almost 100 years in the family, the deWaals recently sold their heritage building. The new owners intend to continue with current tenants. Let’s hope this iconic landmark on one of Calgary’s oldest streets in Riverside continues to stand the test of time.

Now that we’ve got some nice spring weather, plan to take a walk down 4 Street to see the deWaal Block and all that it has to offer.

* Deb Lee, Heritage Committee