

FIGGE BUILDING (COMMERCIAL BUILDING)
(Schmelzer Building)
511-513 E. Genesee Street
Saginaw
Saginaw County
Michigan

HABS No. MI-403

HABS
MICH
73-SAG,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DISCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Northeast Region
Philadelphia Support Office
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, P.A. 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS
MICH
73-SAG,
1-

FIEGE BUILDING (COMMERCIAL BUILDING)
(Schmelzer Building)

HABS No. MI-403

Location: 511-513 East Genesee Street
Saginaw, Saginaw County, Michigan

USGS Saginaw, Michigan Quadrangle
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
17.262400.4812860

Significance: Possibly the tallest timber-framed building in Michigan, the Fiege Building, designed by prominent Michigan architect William T. Cooper, represents the stabilization of a lumbertown's economy and was associated with the rise of ethnically German businessmen in the Saginaw valley. The building was built by John Schmelzer, a first-generation American of German descent and an entrepreneurial businessman, as a furniture store.

Description: This is a nine-story timber framed building with reddish-brown brick masonry walls. Its dogleg plan is the result of the shape of the triangular block and the angle of East Genesee Street. The building at one time used both 511-513 E. Genesee and 112-114 Lapeer Street as its address.

The building's north and south-facing street facades are each divided in three bays by brick piers which rise to the eighth floor window heads where they terminate in flattened arches. The arches are trimmed by molded brick and stone, with stone keystones. The ninth story lies below a large and deep decorative metal cornice. This cornice is heavily denticulated, supported by large brackets, and marked on the fascia by circular windows, three per bay. Simply molded single-hung wood sash tripartite windows fill each bay and brick spandrels mark the interstitial floor-ceiling lines. The roof is flat with a small parapet.

The building's appearance is altered at the the first and second stories, on both street elevations. The central entry and flanking show windows are boarded up. Aluminum siding was placed over the brick walls up to the third story window sill line, carried on wood furring. The window proportion of the second story windows was altered also, and shutters added between the window bays. An original elevation drawing (page 10) shows the original Genesee Avenue entrance shaded with a suspended flat awning and glazed with flat plate glass. The second story windows are shown tripartite and transomed.

FIEGE BUILDING
(Schmelzer Building)
HABS No. MI-403 (Page 2)

The east and west-facing building facades are now blank. However, several original windows have been bricked in on the upper floors, particularly on the east wall, where several window openings appear. Both walls are painted with advertising. The west wall clearly reads, 'Fiege's Fine Furniture' with the less legible statement, 'Draperies--Floor Coverings Since 1854' below. This sign is repeated on the east wall. The east wall retains an earlier sign placed on the extreme upper left of the wall on the side facing East Genesee. The most legible word is 'Schmelzer' with some illegible words obscured by the later sign seen below. One word appears to be 'Crosley' on the extreme edge of the wall. Crosley was a brand of refrigerator sold by the John Schmelzer furniture store in the late 1940's. Previous signs read, 'Not Eventually, but Right Now, See Schmelzer's for Furniture and Carpets, Stoves, Rugs, and Bedding. Pianos. '.

The building plan is simple, as the building was designed and intended for a furniture showroom and sales building, very similar in program to a warehouse (pages 11-13). Two elevators, one freight and one passenger, are placed in the northwest corner of the building. An open stair rises the height of the building, enclosed only between the basement and first floor and part of the first floor run to the second floor. The basement was intended for a furniture packing and shipping area, with the furniture deliveries arriving in the basement by chute from the sidewalk. The basement is fireproof, with concrete columns, walls and first floor slab. The second floor has the most partitions and contained office and clerical areas. Upper floors were unpartitioned display and sales areas.

The structural bays follow the tripartite division expressed on the exterior. The angle of the building creates some uneven, trapezoidal structural bays. The building's footprint is small in relation to its height; the building contains approximately 4,000 gross square feet per floor, for a total of approximately 36,000 gross square feet total. The net area of the building is somewhat less, and existing rentable and/or usable area still less.

The Saginaw City Assessor's records list the building as having a steel frame on piles, full concrete floored basement, and hardwood floors. However, the columns, beams, and girders are timber with plaster surrounds on expanded metal lath, as evidenced by columns opened for a 1986 reuse feasibility study. The building is listed as being steam heated with plaster, pine, hardwood and metal interior finishes. The first floor is a high-ceilinged space. The columns are covered with a plaster classical column cover. The stair railing is wood with small square balusters and the elevator doors are the sliding type. Modern finishes, carpet, wallpaper, and paint obscure historic finishes. A remodeling done in 1949 added ribbed plywood and "futuramic" flexible spotlights to the finishes. This remodeling also added an office mezzanine, which is now gone.

History:

JOHN SCHMELZER AND SCHMELZER FURNITURE: John Schmelzer was born in East Saginaw in 1857, the son of German immigrants. His father, Nicholas Schmelzer, operated a grocery store in East Saginaw and John Schmelzer worked for him, as was common at the time. John Schmelzer was too young to participate in the Civil War. In the late 1870's, the Schmelzer grocery added small household goods such as lamps and rugs to their stock. This move was so successful that the household goods and small furnishings took over the grocery business. By 1893, the Schmelzers had converted to a furniture store, and John had taken the business over from his father.

The Schmelzers earned the gratitude of many East Saginawians after the disastrous fire of 1893, which destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses. The Schmelzer furniture store sold furniture on generous credit terms. John Schmelzer's obituary stated that the store "staked" fire victims to complete sets of furniture. While a great philanthropic gesture, this was also a smart business move. In this, Schmelzer Furniture acquired great publicity, and a grateful clientele. Around 1900, Schmelzer moved the main store to 514-516 E. Genesee, across the street from 513 E. Genesee (Steele Block), then occupied by the Ewen Wycoff furniture and upholstering business.

By 1902, Schmelzer was listed at both 511-513 and 514-516 E. Genesee. He may have taken the Wycoff business over; he is known to have taken over other smaller furniture businesses. By 1912, the old three-story Steele Block was inadequate for the store's needs and Schmelzer hired W. T. Cooper to design a new nine-story building, completed in 1912. In this store, a varied selection of furniture from "plain cottage suites to the most expensive" (Metropolis, p. 39) was sold. Schmelzer is supposed to have pioneered in Saginaw the practice of showing the furniture arranged in rooms, as most furniture stores do today.

Schmelzer's other business interests were varied and successful. He had an interest in the first successful oil well drilled in Saginaw and was one of the founders of the Bancroft Hotel Company. He was a member of both the Saginaw club and the Saginaw Country Club. He was a director of the Bank of Saginaw, and also chairman of the Bancroft Hotel Company Board of Directors. According to his obituary, Schmelzer considered the furniture business a hobby, even though he owed his fortune to it and had spent over fifty years engaged in the business. He died at the age of ninety, in 1947.

FIEGE BUILDING
(Schmelzer Building)
HABS No. MI-403 (Page 4)

BUILDING HISTORY: The Fiege Building (Schmelzer Building) occupies the site of one previous building. This building, 'Steele's Central Block,' (listed in directories as Steele Hall) was shown on the site in 1877, but tenants were listed there as early as 1873. A succession of tenants including a hardware store and grocer occupied the building until 1881. In 1881, the furniture firm of Furstenau and Walker occupied the building, and continued in occupation until 1889, when the furniture and upholstery firm of Ewen Wycoff entered the building. Schmelzer Furniture is listed at this address in 1902, occupying the three-story building before the nine-story building was built.

According to the *Saginaw Courier Herald* of January 23, 1912, the proposed construction schedule stated that the existing three story building would be demolished in March of 1912. The *Saginaw Daily News* of that date recognized this announcement in an editorial citing the project as evidence of confidence in the future of Saginaw and the need for more such modern structures to replace the older business and retail buildings.

On January 29, 1912, Schmelzer took out a large ad: "As we intend to tear down our present store and build a mammoth nine story building..." to advertise a month-long or longer large clearance sale to make way for the demolition of the existing building. Plans may have been delayed somewhat since a huge blizzard hit Saginaw the third week of February, leaving drifts and piles 6-8 feet high on Genesee Avenue. A later announcement on March 12, 1912 confirmed the demolition and publicized the new elevation (page 10). Any speculation that the nine-story building was built as an upward addition to the previous three-story building should be heavily discounted; these news reports of the time, as well as sound structural practice, disprove that theory.

The proposed schedule had new construction commencing in April, with the building expected to be ready for occupancy in September. The building permit was taken out March 30, 1912, for \$34,589.00. Construction seems to have continued throughout the year. However, the building was not actually opened until Thursday, December 19, 1912.

The weather was a possible delay; the massive snowfalls of the winter created floods that spring which nearly rivaled a great 1904 flood. Carpenters struck in the spring of 1912, and this also may have delayed work. Plumbers struck later in the year. The first floor and basement were described in the January newspaper articles as being of fireproof design and the building was designed with sprinklers. However, sprinklers were not installed.

This is somewhat a puzzle, since Schmelzer avoided a major loss in another of his Saginaw buildings in April of 1912, when lightning started a fire in the west side Schmelzer store. The fire started in the basement but was extinguished by the sprinkler system, limiting his damage to \$ 3,000.00.

The Schmelzer store continued at this location until 1960, when ownership passed to the Bay Development Company, an interest of the Henry Fiege & Son, Inc. furniture store. Fiege's Furniture occupied the building from 1961 to 1983, when Fiege's moved to a new location out of the city. The building has been empty since then.

ARCHITECT: The building was designed by the local architectural firm of W. T. Cooper & Son. W. T. Cooper practiced in Saginaw from the late 1870's through the early 1920's. William T. Cooper designed some of the most prominent structures in Saginaw, such as the Auditorium, Armory, City Hall, Saginaw Club, and the fireproof Bearinger Building. He was born in Detroit in 1851 and came to Saginaw in 1877, having studied architecture in Detroit. However, he began working as a bookkeeper with the lumbering firm of Eddy and Avery, and also worked for other lumber-associated companies. These contacts served him well as a gradual flow of consultation projects led him to establish his architectural practice.

Cooper was active in the Michigan Society of Architects and was considered one of the state's leading architects. His son Harold became an architect and his father's partner until Harold's death in 1914. After 1914, J. Frederick Beckbissinger, another prominent Saginaw architect, joined Cooper in partnership until about 1923, when Cooper retired. Cooper died in 1933, nearly 82 years old.

CONTRACTOR: The Fiege Building (Schmelzer Building) was built in 1912 by Albert Ryckman, a local contractor specializing in heavy construction and masonry. Ryckman was born in Sanilac County, Michigan in 1863, the son of a Canadian immigrant who came to Michigan in the early 1850's. Ryckman became an apprentice carpenter and later a journeyman. From about 1909, he worked as an independent contractor and builder in the Saginaw area. He built several prominent Saginaw buildings, such as the Auditorium Building, the Schmelzer Apartments, the 1912 Germania School (Lincoln School, HABS # MI-399), YWCA, and many residences and factories.

DESIGN AND SIGNIFICANCE: Both Schmelzer and W. T. Cooper traveled to Chicago to get information and inspiration for the proposed building, which was described as a thoroughly modern structure, with electric lighting and two electric elevators. The building does display a Chicago school influence, with tripartite windows, restrained classical detail, and a base-shaft-top early skyscraper design. The building was described in the Saginaw News, September 3, 1960 as having been for years northeast Michigan's tallest store building, and Saginaw's tallest until the twelve-story Second National Bank was built in 1925. It is possibly Michigan's tallest timber-framed structure.

Seven and eight-story timber framed warehouses were built in St. Joseph, Missouri and in Minnesota in the 1880's and 1890's, and no doubt in Chicago and elsewhere. Timber framing, also known as mill framing, with large chamfered columns, beams and girders, is more fire-safe than cast iron, which has a low tolerance for high heat and flame conditions. Cast iron deflects and fails, where a large timber will char but retain its structural capacity. After the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906, concrete framing became more popular, since it was considered to be more fireproof and was often less expensive than timber. Steel, or a combination of cast iron, steel and timber, was also used for this type of structure. It is therefore somewhat unusual to find a nine-story mill-framed building built in 1912. The use of this framing for this building may be due to the availability of timber in Michigan and the familiarity of the architect and the builder with the system. Cooper is reported to have studied similar Chicago buildings and may have been influenced by what he saw there.

The Michigan Bureau of History has found that this building is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for its engineering importance as a nine-story timber-framed structure. The Bureau of History knows of no taller extant timber-framed structure in Michigan. They also considered the building significant for its ethnic association with Schmelzer, a German-American, and for its commercial importance as a major Saginaw furniture store emblematic of the stabilization of Saginaw's economy. Its design, by prominent Michigan architect William T. Cooper, is also significant for its dignity and classical/renaissance references.

- Sources: Advertisement, John Schmelzer Furniture. Saginaw Daily News 29 January 1912.
- Advertisement, John Schmelzer Furniture. Saginaw Daily News 5 February 1912.

Advertisement, John Schmelzer Furniture. Saginaw Daily News 14 December 1912.

Atlas of Saginaw County. New York, NY: F. W. Beers & Co., 1877.

Bates, William R. The History, Commercial Advantages, and Future Prospects of the Saginaws... East Saginaw, Michigan: E. Lyon, Steam Power Book and Job Printer, 1874.

Building Permit List. Saginaw Daily News 30 March 1912.

The County of Saginaw: Topography, History... Saginaw, Michigan: Imperial Publishing Company, 1896.

"Death Takes Trade, Civic Leader Here." Saginaw News 10 August 1947.

"Development Group Buys 9-Story Schmelzer Building" Saginaw News 3 September 1960.

Dustin, Fred. Saginaw History. Saginaw, Michigan: Saginaw Museum, 1949?

Eaton, Leonard K. Gateway Cities and Other Essays. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1989.

"Fifty Years Is A Long Time" photo caption, Saginaw News 18 July 1938.

Gardner, H. W., comp. Greater Saginaw. A Presentation of Her Resources, Achievements, and Possibilities. An Authentic Compilation of Her Industrial, Financial & Civic Activities. Saginaw, Michigan: Saginaw Daily News, 1912.

Gross, Stuart D. Saginaw, a History of the Land and the City. Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, 1980.

History of Saginaw County, Michigan. Chicago, IL: Charles C. Chapman & Co., 1881.

"John Schmelzer Will Build Nine Story Building." Saginaw Courier-Herald 23 January 1912.

S. H. Knox & Co., Saginaw, Michigan. Views of Saginaw and Vicinity. 1904. Portland, ME: L. H. Nelson Company, 1904.

"Lone-Voice Hanley Charges Short-Sighted View as City Approves Feige Razing." Saginaw News 30 January 1992.

Mills, James Cooke. History of Saginaw County, Michigan. 2 Vols. Saginaw, Michigan: Seemann & Peters Publishers, 1918.

"Mr. Schmelzer's Latest Enterprise." Saginaw Evening News 23 January 1912.
p. 4.

"New Nine-Story Schmelzer Building" Saginaw Daily News 12 March 1912.
p. 1.

"Proposed Renovation of the Fiege Building." Report for the Saginaw Central City Development Corporation, Toshach and Sobczak Associates, Inc., Saginaw, Michigan. May 23, 1986.

R. L. Polk & Co. Saginaw and East Saginaw City Directories. Various years, 1868-1985.

Saginaw 1905-6: Saginaw, Michigan, The Metropolis of Saginaw Valley. Saginaw, Michigan: n.p., 1906.

Saginaw, Michigan, U. S. A., 1857-1907 Semi-Centennial Souvenir. Saginaw, Michigan: F. S. Spencer, 1907.

Standard Atlas of Saginaw County, Michigan. Chicago, IL: George Ogle & Co., 1916.

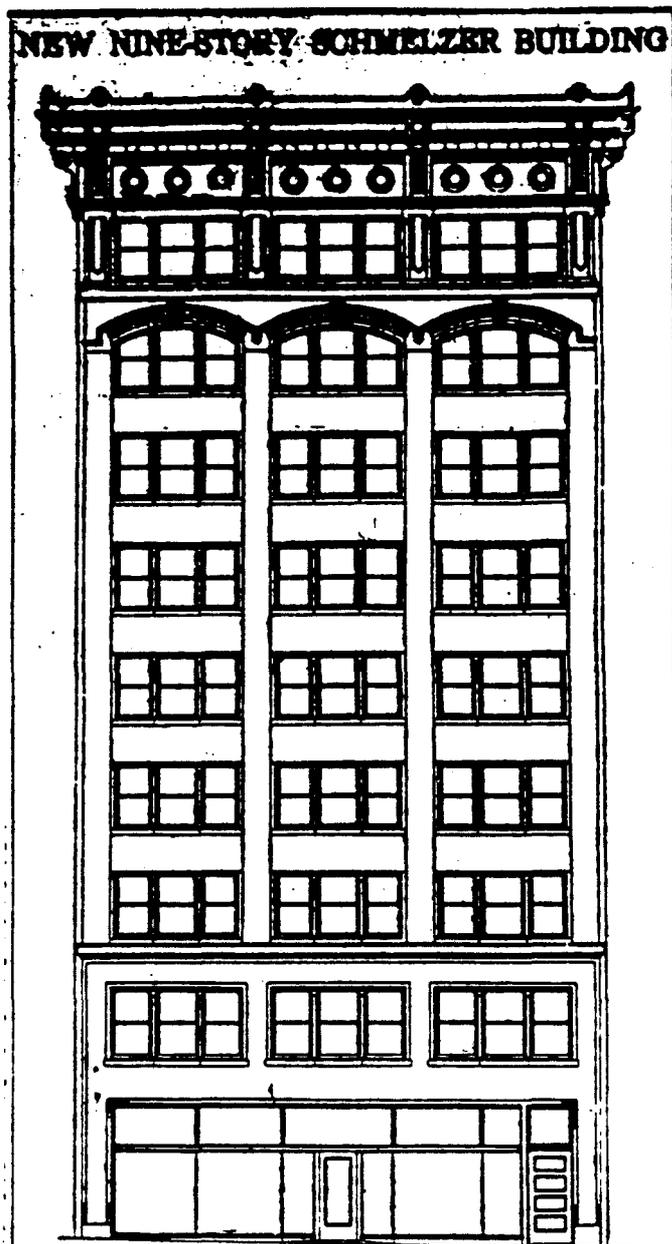
"Those Good Old Days." Saginaw News 27 April 1947.

"Those Good Old Days." Saginaw News 14 May 1950.

"\$ 3,000 Fire in West Side Store." Saginaw Daily News 12 April 1912.

"William T. Cooper, Architect, Dies." Saginaw Daily News 12 May, 1933.

Historian: Irene Jackson Henry, R. A., NCARB
Henry & Henry Preservation and Architectural Consultants
11850 Eden Trail
Eagle, Michigan 48822
June 21, 1994



W. T. Cooper, Architect.

This structure will be erected on the site of John Schmelzer's present store on the east side of Genesee avenue, between Jefferson and Warren avenues. Work on tearing down the old structure will commence at once.

GENESEE STREET ELEVATION
Fiege (Schmelzer) Building, HABS No. MI-
511-513 East Genesee Street Saginaw, Michigan
Source: The Saginaw Daily News, March 12, 1912.