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Friday, December 22, 2017, 9:17 am

By:

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Above, "The Abbott" near the start of construction circa 1926.

It's easy to think, if you don't know the history of East Lansing, that controversies over big redevelopment projects are a relatively new thing. But the history of the northwest corner of Abbot Road and Grand River Avenue, going back about a hundred years ago, tells us otherwise.



That spot is now vacant?the "big bank building" recently demolished [2] along with smaller commercial buildings [3] nearby in preparation for what the property owner and the City hope will be a major future development project for "The Park District." [4]

In 1926, a group of real estate investors set out to build at 100 West Grand River Avenue what would probably become the biggest commercial project to date in East Lansing: a four-story, multi-use commercial building featuring primarily a bank and, on the north side, a new movie theatre.





It did not come off without significant local controversy. We learned about this thanks to the website on East Lansing history ^[5] produced by Kevin S. Forsyth, graduate of East Lansing High School and Michigan State University.

Forsyth tells the story ^[6] of how, as the four-story building known as "the Abbott" began, "a group of local concerned women" started to question the inclusion of a movie theatre. They were worried about the potential bad moral influences on young people from popular films.

To try to circumvent possible problems, "the Abbot"s developers accelerated their construction efforts, endeavoring to make the theatre a *fait accompli*."



The women's group, facing pushback, suggested a compromise, namely to ban movies on Sundays. City Council decided to ask voters what they thought.

According to Forsyth (who in turn is relying on Justin L. Kestenbaum's edited volume, *At the Campus Gate: A History of East Lansing*), when it came to asking the voters for their opinion, "The lone dissenter on the council was O.J. Ayres, who, as it happens, was a prime figure in the corporation which built the Abbot building."

Local business owners and students of Michigan State College (which became MSU) objected to the idea of a Sunday ban. The *State News* backed the plan to show movies on Sunday, noting reassuringly that the films would be shown "under the supervision and censorship of East Lansing businessmen."

In response, the women's committee upped the ante, "convincing the city council to change the impending vote from an informal opinion poll into a binding charter amendment." More people showed up to vote on this issue than in the council election the month before. Says Forsyth, "the Sunday movie ban was soundly defeated by a vote of 520 to 398."

Below: Photo showing the State Theatre on the west side of Abbot Road, on the north side of the State Bank building. (In the 1980s, the by-then derelict State Theatre was demolished to make space for a parking lot and drive-through for the bank.)



The first movie shown at the State Theatre was "a silent comedy with Marion Davies" playing the title role in a film called *The Fair Co-Ed*.

Forsyth notes dryly that nobody in the controversy seemed to remember that there had already

been a movie theatre opened and subsequently closed in East Lansing, just across Abbot Road. This was a theatre called the Elmac, which had existed in the building that now holds the bar called P.T. O'Malley's.

Below: Based on the car, we are guessing the following photo is from the 1950s:



Here's "the Abbott" looking from MSU's campus north across Grand River Avenue:



Here are two images of the same building looking from the southwest, with the corner of Evergreen Avenue and Grand River Avenue in the foreground:



Much isn't clear about this building's history from the records in East Lansing's Building Department, including when the "modern" facing was put on the building, as shown below in a photo from shortly before demolition. The Building Department's records on this property seem to be largely missing.



Thanks to archivist Whitney Miller of the MSU Archives and Historical Collections and thanks also to the owner of the photos, ELi is able to show you the five remarkable photos of what rose at this location from 1926-1927.

Thanks to Head of Technology Services Lauren Douglass and Collections and Technical Services Librarian Amber Laude of the East Lansing Public Library, ELi is also able to bring you the above photos of the site in the years and decades after construction.

For high resolution of all these photos, click here [\[7\]](#). ELi is grateful to these archivists and librarians for helping us find and share these images.

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