

Hall of Justice

Anthony Borgo

On October 16, 1894, the cornerstone of the new Plymouth Congregational Church was laid. The church had a house of worship on Center Street for many years, but feared that it was in too dangerous a location to continue having services. The new structure was located at 1443 119th Street. The site for the church was donated by the Standard Oil Company. The Plymouth Congregational Church remained at this property until 1928.

In 1928 the building was purchased and converted into an armory by the Indiana National Guard. After the State Guard occupied the building, it added the present front of the structure. The building design was patterned after the insignia of the U. S. Corps of Engineers. Some time later the State Guard added a brick addition in the rear of the property.

The Whiting unit of the Indiana National Guard was first organized as Company F. And later became Company C, 131st Engineers Regiment, during World War II. A majority of the Whiting unit served in the South Pacific during the war. During this time, the Home Guard drilled in the armory. In 1947, the reorganized unit was officially recognized by the United States government.

When Whiting first attempted to incorporate as a town, a meeting was held at Soltwedel's Hall. Soltwedel's Hall was a small lodge room in the Soltwedel Building located at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 119th Street. Many early associations and clubs used this building as a meeting hall. It stands to reason that this building was the first structure used as Whiting's city hall.

In May 1926 workers began cleaning up a vacated frontage lot at the corner of New York Avenue and 119th Street. Many citizens speculated that these preparations were an indication that the site would be the future home of city hall. However, City Attorney Charles Perel explained that the clean up was only part of the city's beautification project, and that he had not heard of the possible erection of a city hall. According to a 1926 newspaper article, "All I know about it is that the site will be leveled and cleaned up in order to beautify what is now nothing but a depository of unsightly rubbish."

A year later plans were finalized for a new city hall located at the corner of 119th Street and New York Avenue. The approximate cost of the new structure was \$175,000. Hamilton, Fellows and Wilkinson of Chicago served as the architects. The building was two-stories and served as both city hall and the police department. Whiting's fire department remained at the city's old city hall, which was built in 1917. Some years later the city's municipal headquarters were relocated to the corner of Fischrupp and White Oak Avenues.

In December of 1942, after prolonged negotiations, an agreement was reached between city officials, Whiting's armory board, and Indiana State Guard officials in Indianapolis for the transfer of Whiting's municipal headquarters. At this time, Whiting city hall offices, city court and police department were relocated to the armory building on 119th Street. The old, red brick building at the corner of Fischrupp and White Oak Avenues was cramped and the inadequate space had long been a headache for administration officials. Mayor James T. McNamara stated that this problem will be eliminated entirely when city hall moves into the roomy offices of the armory.

After the agreement was arranged, the firemen immediately started to revamp the old city hall to meet their needs. This proposed transfer of departments meant comfortable barracks for the firefighters. The second floor of the old city hall building now served as the fire department's sleeping quarters. This floor is where the city court, council chambers, and city offices were located. In addition, the police department enjoyed more room. Prior to the relocation of city hall, the police department was stationed in two tiny, dark rooms in one corner of the old city hall's main floor.

Six years after negotiations with the Indiana National Guard, Whiting's city fathers received eviction papers. In the Summer of 1948, the National Guard notified Whiting's Mayor Andrew S. Kovacik that they intended to take over part of its building that was being rented by city officials. The National Guard had grown and their Board wanted to provide recreational facilities for the men in the armory.

According to the terms set up by the national Guard and the bureau of armory buildings, city officials could stay in its present quarters until October, 1951. On this date, the city would then either have to build or rent new office space. However, at this time, there was quite the animosity going on between the City of Whiting and the National Guard.

Ever since the National Guard tried to oust the city administrators the previous summer there had been a riff. Commanding officers of the Guard blamed Whiting's civic leaders for the National Guard unit failing to present a good showing in the field during maneuvers at Camp Atterbury. Guard officers further charged that the administration occupancy of the armory denied the reserve engineer component adequate training facilities. According to a August 21, 1949 newspaper article, "National Guard allegations that two injuries to personnel while on maneuvers were also attributable to lack of proper training were similarly refuted by Kovacik, who said both men had received specialized training in their fields and that the city administration in no way could be held responsible."

A year later the future home of city hall was still being discussed. Whiting Deputy Prosecutor Thomas Cerajewski and hundreds of other citizens wanted to turn the six-story Central State Bank building at the corner of Indianapolis Boulevard and 119th Street into a new municipal complex. Cerajewski claimed that the bank structure could be purchased for around \$425,000, while a new building would cost well over \$500,000. He stated that the 6th floor would be ideal for council and court rooms, with the basement serving as a police station. Cerajewski further explained that an annex could be built to house fire engines allowing the trucks to leave for a fire in any direction.

City Attorney Gerald Haluska had his own idea about what Whiting should do about city hall. In August, 1953 he proposed that the city covert the McGregor Elementary School located on Oliver Street for use as a new city hall. Haluska felt that the McGregor building would be an ideal structure to house the various municipal departments. He further explained that the purchase price for the school would only be a fraction of what a new building would cost. In addition, Haluska stated that the Whiting School Board could probably part with the McGregor School because of the dwindling number of pupils, citing empty classrooms last semester due to low enrollment.

However, Whiting city fathers did not think that either of these plans were the solution to their problems. City officials said that Haluska's idea was impractical and couldn't meet all of Whiting's needs. Michael Blastick, chairman of the finance committee, emphasized that the McGregor building was much too small. He went on to state that the city was making long-range plans which called for a new building that would house the governmental agencies, as well as, the police and fire departments.

In 1954 the State Armory Board approved the sale of the National Guard armory in Whiting. Mayor Kovacik received word via a later that stated, "In the event this sale is consummated the present occupancy of this building by departments of city government will have to be terminated with the usual 30 days notice." Whiting's Mayor informed the Board, at this time, that the city was interested in the purchase of the building if the price was right. However, when Mayor Kovacik learned of the National Guard's proposed sale price of \$55,000, he exclaimed that it was too high.

Nine months later, Mayor Kovacik reconsidered the National Guard's asking price. The city decided to try to buy the building after the State told city administrators that they would have to

move out by January 15, 1955 even if the armory was not sold. The city council instructed John Paylo, city attorney, to submit a bid of \$57,000 for the armory. The State had set \$57,000 as the minimum bid it would accept for the Whiting armory.

A few days after Whiting submitted their bid the State Armory Board announced that it had accepted Whiting's lone bid for the armory. However, Whiting did not have the funds available to pay for the building. City Attorney Paylo stated that the city could raise the money either with a loan from a local bank or by floating a bond issue. He expected that the money could be raised within 30 to 60 days.

Under terms of the sale agreement, the national Guard was able to remain in the armory rent free until Company C vacated the premises. Company C of the 113th Engineering Battalion was allowed to occupy the building until the Indiana National Guard completed construction of a brand new armory located in the Woodmar section of Hammond. The State Guard anticipated the construction to take about nine months.

Although Whiting submitted a bid of \$57,000 for the building, city administrators could not raise the money. However, Standard Oil came to Whiting's rescue. The Standard Oil Company offered Whiting \$57,000 in exchange for 3.29 acres of land near the entrance to the refinery. In addition, Standard gave the city \$25,000 to clear up deficits in the Department of Water Works.

Mayor Joseph B. Grenchik announced in the Spring of 1965 plans to renovate city hall. At this time, department officers were enlarged and a conference room was added to the first floor of city hall. Likewise, a youth center was constructed in the gymnasium in the rear of the building. The youth center held dances where music was provided by both a juke box and live bands.

On May 6, 1968 a VIP showed up on the front steps of Whiting's city hall. Senator, Robert F. Kennedy made Whiting, Indiana one of his stops during his presidential campaign. The front-runner for the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination slipped in one last visit to Northwest Indiana on the day before the State's primary election.

Approximately 1,500 supporters eagerly awaited Kennedy's motorcade. Once he arrived at city hall, Kennedy apologized for arriving 3 hours late. Onlookers enthusiastically listened to an eight-minute speech, where the Senator stated he was glad to be in "Indianer." According to a May 7, 1968 *Times* account the crowd cheered after Kennedy exclaimed, "We came over the railroad tracks as 16 different trains came by. My first step, if I am elected president is to put an overpass over all of Lake County!" He added, "And I've taken 30 deep breaths of air and my second step will be to do something about air pollution." A month later Senator Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California.

Toward the end of 1986 workers completed remodeling work at city hall. The project created additional office space for city personnel. Upon completion of the renovations, Whiting's water and building departments were relocated from within the clerk / treasurer's office to unused office space in an older section of city hall. The second phase of the project consisted of transferring the Historical Society to the building's ground floor. The cost of the remodeling was approximately \$20,000 and included additional heating and air conditioning units, carpeting, and painting.

In March, 1990 the president of the Northwest Indiana Muscular Dystrophy Association questioned the City of Whiting's lack of handicapped accessible buildings. Bill Alms voiced his concerns at a Whiting City Council meeting, after a problem occurred at the Whiting Community Center. Alms told the Council that two youngsters were unable to attend an MDA-sponsored wrestling match at the Whiting Community Center because their 200-pound motorized wheelchairs, would have been too heavy to carry up the stairs to the Center's first floor.

At this time, Mayor Robert Bercik informed Alms that he would look into possible solutions

to the problem. There had been some discussion about installing elevators into the Community Center for several years. Similarly, Whiting's City Hall also had accessibility problems, with a flight of stairs leading to the front door and another flight to the courtroom where the city council meets. In a March 21, 1990 *Times* article Bill Alms stated, "If you have more than one step in a building, it's inaccessible."

Cole Engineering of South Bend informed Whiting city officials in March of 1992 that it would cost approximately \$500,000 to make city hall and the community center accessible to the disabled. The firm was hired by the city for guidance on how to meet the requirements of the American with Disabilities Act. ADA is a federal government mandate that requires all public entities to ensure that their buildings are accessible to the handicapped.

In June of 1993 Whiting's Board of Public Works began to take steps forward to make city hall accessible to all individuals, by approving an engineering contract. The Board expected to spend \$20,450 for the preliminary work, which was needed to determine what had to be done to install elevators in the building. The total cost of the entire project was approximately \$202,000. The federal government gave Whiting a time extension to complete the project because the city already had some engineering work done. In addition, the plan included installing elevators and remodeling restrooms to accommodate wheelchairs.

In September of 1994 Whiting opened bids for the final two phases needed to make city hall compliant with the American with Disabilities Act. Money was budgeted in 1994 to start phase three which involved renovating restrooms. However, the money for phase four had to come from the 1995 budget. Phase four included renovating the clerk's, the Water Department's and the judge's office. Work also was done on the hallways and stairway so that they met the fire safety code. In the end, the city paid approximately \$943,000 for the four phase project that included renovations of the Community Center and city hall.

In the winter of 2007, city officials drew up plans to utilize the area that once was used by the Whiting Boxing Club. The cost of the project was approximately \$600,000. The scope of the work was to create additional office space for city personnel. However, the remodeling of the 113-year-old structure required quite a lot of work to comply with modern fire codes and the American with Disabilities Act requirements. Thomas Vavrek served as the city's architect for the project.