

## J.G. Link, the Architect of Billings

John Gustave Link changed the face of Billings with the buildings he designed, many of which are still in daily use.

Link was born in 1870, and grew up in the Bavarian region of Germany, where he attended from the Royal Academy of Arts and Industries. Following graduation, he came to the United States in 1887 for further study in St. Louis. He started practicing as an architectural draftsman in Denver in 1888. In 1893, he won a prize in a contest for designs for the Minnesota State capitol, and moved back to St. Louis to open his own office. It was in St. Louis that Link met and married Martha Welling.

Link moved to Montana in 1896, first settling in Butte where he supervised the construction of the first School of Mines. In 1900, he came to Billings, and created a partnership with C.S. Haire. They were contracted to build the Billings Brewery and the original Parmly Billings Memorial Library (now the Western Heritage Center). He opened an office in Billings, and moved permanently to the city in 1904, though he maintained offices in Butte and Helena as well. In 1909, Link and Haire designed additions for the state capitol in Helena.

One of the big commissions shortly after his move to Billings was to design the new St. Patrick's Church (now St. Patrick's Co-Cathedral). The church was consecrated in 1908, and was built for some \$75,000, which included materials, labor, furnishings, and religious fittings and décor. Link evidently felt shorted, and sued the diocese for unpaid fees of \$618.95. In April 1909, an ad appeared in the Gazette that the church and the lots it occupied were to be sold at auction to satisfy the lien. Happily for the parish, the suit was settled out of court and the church was not auctioned. As Link was a member of the St. Patrick's parish, this was likely an awkward time, but he was later retained to design the church's rectory.

Link and Haire, and later the J.G. Link and Company firm were involved in designing many other prominent projects in Billings. These include Billings City Hall, the Hart-Albin building, the Northern Hotel, St. Vincent's Hospital, the Masonic Building, the Montana Power building, the Greyhound Depot, numerous churches and schools and many more.

Link designed numerous public buildings around the region, including schools, banks, courthouses and hospitals. His designs were built in Kansas, North Dakota, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington and Oregon as well. Link's designs also include additions to the



*Billings City Hall, 1941*

Montana State Capitol building in Helena and for the Montana buildings at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904.

He had other business interests as well. Link was deeply involved in the oilfield developments along the Montana-Wyoming border. He also was interested in mining, and told a harrowing story to the *Gazette* in 1910 about struggling up a mountainside through heavy snow and camping in three feet of it with his business partner to protect a mining claim. Apparently, they had to be on the site at midnight on New Year's Eve or their claim expired.

He was active with the Knights of Columbus and the Elks Club. Professionally, he was active with the Montana Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the Montana Association of Architects, even serving as president of both organizations simultaneously. He also served as president of the state's Board of Architectural Examiners.

In the early 1920's Link designed the Fratt building at 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave N and N 29<sup>th</sup> St, and as part of his fee, received the former Fratt family home that occupied the site. He had it hauled to 142 Clark Avenue and moved into the three-story home with his wife and children in 1922. Link lived there until his death in 1954 at the age of 83. After that time, it became the home of his daughter and her family.

Sources:

Billings Branch, American Association of University Women, *The Seven Arts in Billings, 1930-1940*, AAUW Billings, 1941

*Billings Gazette*, "Church Won't Be Sold", May 11, 1909

*Billings Gazette*, "Long Journey to Hold Claim", January 14, 1910

*Billings Gazette*, "Pioneer Billings Architect Dies", January 6, 1954

*Billings Gazette*, "Sheriff's Sale", advertisement, April 14, 1909

Stevens, Karen and Dee Ann Redman, *Billings A to Z*, Friends of the Library, 2000

Wright, Kathryn, *Historic Homes of Billings*, Falcon Press, Billings, 1981

Photo Credit:

Billings Public Library collection