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Historic Walking Tour

One of the special things about Downtown Durango is our history, and indeed our living heritage is still visible along our Main Ave. Start down at Rio Grande Land, the home of the railroad that literally founded our town, then saunter up Main and take a look at the historic structures, many of which date back to Durango's founding in the late 1880s and into the early 1900s. The odd number addresses are on the west side of the street, the even on the east.

500 Block of Main - The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad Depot – Imagine stepping off the train in 1882 at what was then the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad Depot. It remains remarkably unchanged and is a National Historic Landmark (just updated for safety and technology).

552 Main Ave. – Built in 1906, this building was The Belleview Saloon and Rooming House. This block was a focal point for the Italian-American community in Durango during the first decades of the 1900s. At 528 Main, there was the DiUbaldo Grocery; 532 Main housed a number of different saloons, though during Prohibition it had a sort life as a soft drink fountain.

605 Main Ave. – The Wetter Building is the oldest building on this block. Built as a boarding house in 1883, it housed a number of commercial ventures, including a soda water factory, the Durango Herald printing office, a tin shop and a grocery store.

643-645 Main Ave. – The La Plata Bottling Works and Saloon was owned by Adolph Coors until 1915. The brewery and bottling works were located at 643 with the saloon at 645 Main.

699 Main Ave. – The Historic Strater Hotel exemplifies the lavishness of the Victorian era. The building itself is an eclectic mix of Italianate, Romanesque and Renaissance architectural styles. The hotel opened in 1888. Tours of the classic hotel are available. Inquire about scheduling at the hotel front desk.

713 Main Ave. – The smooth, simple glazed tile storefront and large glass paned windows illustrate Durango's "modern" Downtown in the 1930s and 1940s. The building was in fact remodeled from its original Victorian era, red brick storefront to project the image of the progressive men's clothing store that occupied the building until just the past year.

801 Main Ave. – Built in 1892 by Charles Newman, this Romanesque sandstone building originally housed the Smelter National Bank (1892-1897). The bank sign remains visible on the back side of the building. Newman owned a chain of drug stores in Silverton, Alamosa, Animas City and Chama.

846 Main Ave. – This brick storefront was “modernized” with a veneer of Carrera Glass, a structural glass popular in the slick, streamlined surfaces of the architectural styles of the 1930s and 1940s. Carrera Glass is no longer made. Replacement of damaged glass has been possible because of the discovery of a stash of Carrera Glass that a WWII Veteran had brought back with him from Europe and had stored in his backyard. Much of this “cache” has replaced cracked original pieces.

863-871 Main Ave. – This showpiece of the Durango & Rio Grande’s land development company was intended to be a model of future buildings. The D&RG tried to require property owners to build in brick and stone as they had. Unfortunately, many didn’t, resulting in numerous fires of the early stick-built facilities.

900 Main Ave. – This Richardson/Romanesque style building housed the Colorado State Bank from 1892 until the bank’s failure during the silver crash of 1907. Burns National Bank operated in the building from 1910 until it’s merging with Bank of Colorado.

901 Main Ave. – The oldest bank in southwestern Colorado, the First National Bank of Durango moved south from Animas City in 1881 and operated here from 1882 to 1980. The elaborately detailed Queen Anne brickwork building with Romanesque sandstone arched windows was built for \$18,219 and replaced an earlier frame building that burned in 1892.

945 Main Ave. – Now recreated as El Moro Spirits and Tavern, the facility was originally the El Moro Saloon. El Moro lays claim as the site of “Durango’s Strangest Shootout.” In January in 1906, Sheriff William Thompson raided the saloon in the midst of a poker game and hastily covered then confiscated a roulette wheel that was also in play. On the sidewalk in front of El Moro, Thompson confronted the city marshal, Jesse Stansel, for his lack of enforcement. The two men exchanged insults and guns were drawn. When the smoke cleared Sheriff Thompson was dead and Marshal Stansel was injured. At Stansel’s court trial, eyewitnesses gave conflicting reports of who drew and who fired first and whether or not drinking was involved. The marshal was acquitted. Thompson’s ghost is said to still enjoy the whiskey set out for him at the restaurant.

965 and 969 Main Ave. – The 900 block was the saloon district, and these two buildings were at the heart. Notorious madam Bessie Rivers ran The Horseshoe Club at 969. After the saloons closed, two different families by the name of Wong operated cafes into the late 1950s.

975 Main Ave. – Built in 1892, the four-story, French Second Empire structure characterized by the mansard roof, has a varied history as a salon, a post office, a bank and a hotel. References to French culture were often included in Victorian commercial architecture.

990 Main Ave. – Built in 1889, the Schneider block housed the Keeley Institute, a reform group devoted to the cure of liquor, opium and tobacco habits. One of four Colorado branches, the Institute operated between 1892 and the turn of the century.

1001 Main Ave. – An early Durango movie house, The Gem Theater was located in the building in 1915. The building's original 1890s storefront is gone, but the brick designs on the wall facing Main bring a unique element to the Downtown.

1015 Main Ave. – The cast iron and pressed metal front was made by Mesker Brothers of St. Louis, and likely came to Durango on the train. These early “pre-fab” products were popular because they were durable, fire resistant and inexpensive.

1138 Main Ave. – The first occupant of this building was the Windsor Hotel. The Durango Democrat (eventually the Durango Herald) moved into the first floor around 1910 and remained there until the mid-1950s.