

A new story for old building



Architect Charles H. Biggar's 1938 rendering of the bank that would one day become the Chain Cohn Stiles building.



The Chester Avenue side of the newly renovated Chain Cohn Stiles building.

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To architecture aficionados, Chester and 18th is one of the best intersections in Bakersfield. On the northwest corner is the Sill Building, a marvel of the Modern style; directly across Chester is the Beaux Arts beauty rescued from a cocoon of stucco last year; the mid-century tower at the intersection's southeast corner isn't much to look at, it's true, but the grand Haberfelde down the block does what it can to enhance the general curb appeal.

And then there's the building on the southwest corner. It's an old two-story — no one can say precisely how old, but old. Most recently a Goodwill store, the structure has been home to a succession of banks for most of its long life.

But it will have yet another use Monday: Chain Cohn Stiles officially puts out its shingle after a six-month, seven-figure renovation that has brought energy and commotion to a downtown

Please see **BUILDINGS / D2**



FELIX ADAMO / THE CALIFORNIAN

Three and a half years ago, two of Patty Reis' children were murdered. "What I'm afraid of is forgetting the sound of their voices and being stirred by them, if I do," she says.

Herb Benham CALIFORNIAN COLUMNIST

Steps to 'new normal' after losing children

She's had dreams. In one, her late son, David, brings home his F/A-18 and parks it in the family's driveway at their house in Rosedale.

"Given that we're a Chevron family, he backed in, so that the jet would be facing outward when he wanted to leave," said Patty Reis, referring to the oil company's stringent rules and regulations.

Three and a half years ago, early New Year's Day, Reis' two oldest children, David, a Navy fighter pilot, and Karen, a recent UCSD graduate, were gunned down in San Diego by David's roommate, who later committed suicide.

The murder was national news and Patty and her husband, Tom, fielded thousands of emails and texts. Six hundred programs were printed for the funeral, and ushers ran out of them. The program featured a picture of David, 25, and Karen, 24, as toddlers and a quote from Leonardo da Vinci: "When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been and there you will always long to return."

David, the oldest of the four Reis siblings, was an exuberant, gifted pilot who said during one of his first flights, "Holy s... I'm flying a Hornet!" At the Rosary, little sister Melanie leaned over her brother's coffin, smiled and said, "Please take me flying in your dreams."

Karen Reis was described as "intense, brilliant, loyal and mercurial."

Through it all, the Reises exhibited a kind of grace under pressure that seemed almost inhuman.

How does one family get through something like this? Losing a child is the test of a lifetime, but two children is a sacrifice for the ages.

Tom, 62, still works for Chevron. Patty, 57, is a lactation consultant at Memorial and volunteers as the director of WarmLine, a counseling service for parents of young children. Melanie, 22, graduated from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and is interning with Disney. Mark, 21, attends BC and works at Action Sports.

Remember, survive

Several weeks ago, I emailed Patty and asked how she was doing.

In early 2012, a week after David and Karen had died, I'd sat on the Reises' sofa and listened to Patty and Tom talk for four hours about their children. I can't remember ever being so impressed by anyone. I sensed that the Reises might have agreed to talk to me to deliver a subliminal message:

We will honor, remember and survive. Patty emailed back and we met at Dagny's, the downtown coffee shop. We talked for 2½ hours.

"I know there is a new normal and that I should get there but I'm still in transition," she said.

Going back to work right away was not the new normal. Fortunately, she had a wonderful boss who told her to take as much time as she needed.

"I couldn't see patients because I was too shell-shocked," she said. "I couldn't remember my passwords or how to fill out the medical forms."

When Patty finally did return to

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These are Herb Benham's opinions, and not necessarily The Californian's. His column appears Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. Call him at 395-7279 or write hbenham@bakersfield.com.

Dining Out

Anytime is Sushi Time when fish is this fresh

A worthy rival emerges in small northwest spot

BY PETE TITTL
For The Californian
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It's great when a sushi restaurant shows flair and imagination, particularly in the rolls and the names of the rolls. But what's even more important, crucial really, is the freshness of the fish.

Sushi Time, a new place in the northwest, has that part down pat, and there's a sense of joy in both the staff and the menu that will make it a worthy competitor to Love Sushi and Sushi Moon on that side of town. Though it's new, it's off to an impres-

Inside

Craft Beer House nearly ready to open at former Garden Spot location. See The Dish, **D7**

sive start in so many areas.

Experience helps. The restaurant is owned by Jennifer Jhon and her mother, Moon-Sook Kim, who has worked at Korea, Love Sushi and Akira and is married to head chef Eunsoo Jhon, formerly of Miyoshi.

The location is a bit tough to get to and it's small, tucked away in the middle of a strip shopping center obscured by a McDonald's at the intersection with Hageman Road. The spot used to be a great cupcake

specialty place; the interior has been redone with a four-seat sushi bar near where the chef works and booths and tables scattered through the small dining area.

On our first visit, we sampled several chef's specialty rolls, including the salmon lover (\$10.95) and a fancy roll called the crunch shrimp roll (\$7.95). We also ordered one of the combination entrees, beef with shrimp and vegetable tempura (\$13.95).

The star of that night was the salmon lover, the most perfect looking and tasting salmon sushi we've had in quite some time.

The fish is thinly sliced atop rice wrapped around a California roll,



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Please see **DINING / D2** The flamingo roll is a popular dish at Sushi Time.

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Little is left from the building's past as a bank. The best example is found here in the basement. The incinerator was used to destroy bank records and just beyond it is what looks like a fire-proof door. Inside are pipes and strange noises.

BUILDINGS

CONTINUED FROM D1

corner quiet and forlorn since 2012, when Goodwill closed up shop.

The building is the first owned by the firm, which left its longtime office space at the Bank of America tower this weekend, said managing partner David Cohn, who bought the property with partners Matt Clark and James Yoro after forming a limited liability company.

Cohn had already inspected at least three other downtown buildings during his search before walking through the doors at 1731 Chester Ave.

"I immediately remembered being there with my dad when I was 10 or 11 years old and thinking, wow. Look at what's occurred in that period of time," said Cohn, 65, in an interview Thursday.

"Who would have thought when I walked into this building with my father all those years ago that this was going to be the home of our firm. It was weird. Really weird."

Another lost treasure?

The partners closed escrow on the 30,000-square-foot building late last year. Cohn declined to divulge the purchase price but the net assessed value of the property, according to the most recent figures from the Kern County Treasurer-Tax Collector's office, is just over \$2 million.

Keys in hand, Cohn turned to architect Paul Skarphol and contractor Dave Whitezell with his challenge:

Convert the big, open barn that was Goodwill into a modern workplace for the 30-member firm. Oh, and while you're at it, cut some windows into the 17-inch-thick reinforced concrete walls to let in a little light.

"The windows were pretty interesting," said Whitezell, a master of understatement. "We did some pilot holes to figure out how thick it actually was. We had a guy come out to X-ray the wall to find out where the rebar is. We went back to the engineer a few times."

The massive blocks were cut by a concrete saw with a 36-inch blade and wedged out onto old tires placed strategically on the sidewalk below.

"What was dramatic to me," Cohn said, "was one very short video where a crane is dropping a part of the window into one of those huge dumpsters and the dumpster is rocking around when it falls in."



JOHN FARRAND / THE CALIFORNIAN

This vault ventilator is still operational in one of the safes from the original Anglo-California National Bank building at 18th and Chester.

Chain Cohn Stiles Building

Just how old is the building at 1731 Chester Ave.? That's a hard one to answer, and Jorge Barrientos, director of marketing and public relations at the law firm, should know. He's done months of research.

Some sources indicate the building was erected in 1938; others seem to hint that portions of the structure might date to 1889.

1873: Kern Valley Bank is established, surviving for 37 years. Solomon Jewett co-founded the bank with his brother, Philo. It was a first for the area.

1874: A single-story building is erected at the southwest corner of Chester and 18th.

1888: A two-story brick building is erected at the same corner.

1889: Kern Valley Bank holds a grand opening. The very next day, on July 7, 1889, the building is gutted in the great Bakersfield fire that destroyed most of the town. The bank rebuilds the

same year, and over the next several decades, additional tenants move in.

May 12, 1911: Kern Valley Bank closes by order of state examiners after the bank defaults.

Sept. 12, 1912: Kern Valley Bank premises are up for sale.

June 23, 1913: Kern Valley Bank building is sold to National Bank of Bakersfield for \$31,000.

March 25, 1938: Construction is approved for the new home of Anglo-California Bank.

Aug. 11, 1938: Anglo-California Bank opens.

Aug. 4, 1954: Plans are announced to remodel Anglo California National Bank. Other banks housed in the building later were Crocker National Bank, Wells Fargo and Washington Mutual.

2000-2003: Vacant

2002: Goodwill Industries opens a storefront.

2012: Goodwill closes and building is vacant.

Sources: Barrientos credits the Kern County Museum, The Bakersfield Californian, Beale Library, city and county records and others.

It was while crews were knocking around in the ceiling and manhandling blocks of concrete that Cohn and his team were able to see the bones of the building. Could there be, underneath all the updates and remodels, another lost architectural treasure like the one catty-corner to their building?

"I was a little disappointed," Cohn said. "Once we tore down the T-bar (ceiling), I think both Skarphol and I were hoping to see some cool architectural elements to a ceiling. They weren't there."

What Cohn did see, on the roof, was a demarcation he believes is the only remnant of a particularly interesting feature on the 1938 version of the structure, designed by noted Bakersfield architect

Charles H. Biggar. The front entrance of the Art Deco design for Anglo California National Bank was at a 45-degree angle, facing diagonally out from the corner of Chester and 18th.

A remodel 16 years later scrapped that facade, obliterating the Art Deco touches in favor of a mid-century design and adding a drive-through and two entrances, on Chester and 18th. The bank eventually would be renamed Crocker National, which many longtime Bakersfield residents still remember.

"When the developer took over the property and leased it to Goodwill in 2002, I think the Crocker Bank version was the look," Cohn said. "I remember there was some kind of tile on the north side of the building, a smooth surface. The developer came in and put the stucco exterior on it and the sconces, which I know were not there before."

A fresh, new look

The firm has left the exterior alone, except for the paint: several coats of olive green hide Goodwill's peach hue, and black accents add drama. Cohn was inspired



JOHN FARRAND / THE CALIFORNIAN

The front entrance to the newly renovated Chain Cohn Stiles building. The lighting fixture is similar to one that managing partner David Cohn saw in Seattle. He ordered the piece and his wife, Debby Cohn, tweaked it to fit the lobby's aesthetic.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL SKARPHOL

The vantage point of this circa-1940s postcard is east of the intersection of Chester and 18th, looking west up 18th. The gorgeous Sill Building, a marvel of Modern architecture, is to the right, with the enormous Coca-Cola sign on top. The Anglo California National Bank is to the left, with the American flag flying over it. Though the building no longer looks like this, the bones are still there. Chain Cohn Stiles opens its doors at the renovated structure on Monday.

by the color scheme on a house in his friend's neighborhood. He knocked on the door and the homeowner was obliging enough to hand over some extra paint.

"I was comparing the colors side by side," Cohn said. "It's not a huge difference but enough that I think it changes the look and character of the building."

Aside from the addition of the windows — five along the north side of the building — Cohn is most proud of the energy-efficient lighting and cutting-edge climate-control system he installed despite the fact that the existing unit was fairly new.

He has his wife, Debby Cohn, to thank for the interior's aesthetics. The foyer, inside the main entrance on Chester, is awash in soft grays and browns, the neutral palette imparting a contemporary feel.

The stunning focal point, just in front of the reception area, is a lighting fixture suspended from the ceiling that features three rings illuminated from within. The center ring is flanked by two smaller rings, one tilted whimsically. Cohn got the idea when he saw a similar fixture while touring a build-

ing in Seattle his son-in-law helped develop.

"Everybody is calling it the Olympic rings," Cohn joked.

The managing partner's office, in the northeast corner, has views of the Beaux Arts structure through one window; the other looks out on the renowned Sill Building, whose ground floor houses Sweet Cheeks Waxing and Vigorous Massage (ah, downtown).

The 18th Street entrance features an elevator lined with white marble and a staircase of beautiful green terrazzo flooring, probably a holdover from the 1954 remodel, a major overhaul that added the building's second story.

"The '50s was the perfect opportunity to get rid of the old and bring in the new," architect Skarphol noted.

The second floor, which has not been remodeled, is intended to be leased to tenants while the firm's entire staff will occupy the first floor, about 10,000 square feet divided among 18 offices, four conference rooms and several open work stations, Skarphol said.

The opportunity to consolidate his staff to one floor was a major benefit of the building's design, Cohn said. At the BofA building, on Truxtun and Chester, his employees are scattered over three floors.

"I think it's nicer and allows for more collegiality. I think that's good."

The basement will be used for storage and there's even a room down below for recreation, complete with a ping-pong table, kitchen and games, including a particularly self-deprecating

puzzle called "To Kill a Lawyer Jigsaw Thriller."

Throughout the building are reminders of its history as a bank. There are three vaults, with solid concrete walls.

"If there's ever a bomb, you know where to go," said Jorge Barrientos, the firm's marketing public relations director.

In the basement is an especially eerie reminder of the building's past. Just beyond the janitor's closet, in a small room illuminated by a naked light bulb, is an incinerator from the Kerner Incinerator Co. of San Francisco, dated 1914. Amid the charred remnants of old bank transactions was a yellowed member card dated Oct. 23, 1963. Some lucky soul had socked away \$239.

A few steps back from the incinerator is what looks like a fire-proof door, behind which is a dark, creepy room full of ducts and strange noises.

"I felt a gust of wind in there once," Barrientos said. "The hair stood up on the back of my neck. I'm not exaggerating."

But employees will mostly stick to the polished, chic ground floor, which boasts views of several of the buildings where the firm's founder, Morris Chain, worked earlier in his career.

"I really hope this is another boost for downtown," Cohn said. "Because I'm a little older than you, I remember downtown in the '50s when it was so vibrant. It was a treat to come downtown with your parents or grandparents, shop at the local stores. I have great nostalgia for that."

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