

Decorah's Historic Downtown

K.I. Haugen Building

In the fall of 2014, the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission (DHPC) began a lengthy process to nominate the city's business district to the National Register of Historic Places.

The district consists of some 130 buildings, mostly on Water, Washington and Winnebago streets. Over a period of seven months, a group of about 15 volunteer researchers gathered information and photographs of the buildings.

It was turned over in May to project consultant Jan Olive Full of Iowa City, who is incorporating it into the formal nomination and hopes National Register status will be granted by the U.S. Department of Interior by the end of 2017.

This is the last in a series of Decorah Newspaper articles on individual buildings. It was written by DHPC member Judy van der Linden based on research done by Lee Zook and Jan Olive Full, with input from Charles Casterton, building owner.

A number of buildings in downtown Decorah prominently display an important name or date on their facades.

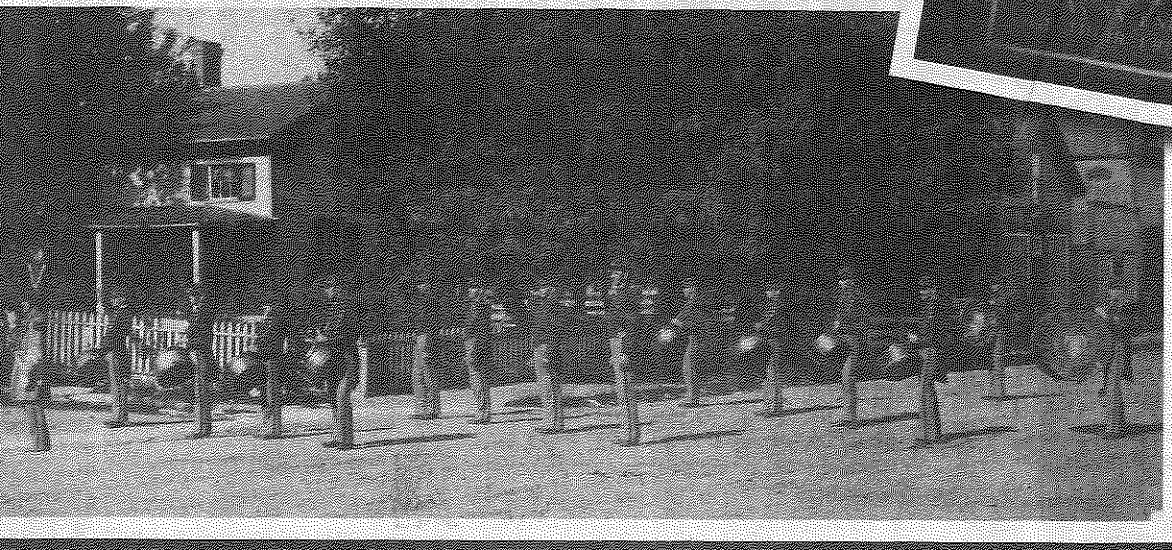
One of these is the long-time home of Decorah Furniture Company at 311 W. Water Street. The front of this extra wide, solid brick building features the



Above, an old photo of the K.I. Haugen Building in Decorah. (Submitted photo)

Above, the K.I. Haugen building today. At right, the plaque Haugen received after 50 years in business. (Submitted photos)





At left, photo taken from West Water Street, near its intersection with Court Street of the Decorah Light Guards, drilling in the intersection. At the far right is the first K. I. Haugen building, a frame one which sat essentially where the current building sits now. The photo is undated, but must have been taken after 1876, when the Guards group was formed. (Photo courtesy Cam Forde)

ate "1890" and the name "K. I. Haugen" in its center peak.

It was built by Klemet Iver Haugen, who emigrated to the U.S. from Norway in 1867 at the age of 17. Four years later, "K. I." moved to Decorah and took a job clerking for Christopher Syverson's grocery store. The grocery was a frame building that stood about where Decorah Furniture now stands.

Haugen and his cousin purchased Syverson's business in 1877, continuing to rent the building. In 1881, Haugen became sole owner of the business. An image of the building, with Haugen's name on a hanging sign out front, can be seen in an undated photo of the Decorah Light Guards, drilling on the corner of West Water and Court streets (photo courtesy of Cam Forde).

According to one Decorah newspaper article, Haugen at some point tore down the 20 x 40-foot frame store and replaced it with a single brick building to accommodate his growing business. That building was replaced in 1890 with the modern, two-story, double-wide store that stands today.

Historic structure expert Jan Arne Full recently identified the 1890 building's outstanding architectural feature is its cornice or crown molding, located above the second story windows. The ornate structure projects well out from the top edge of the building and is

made of large and small brackets, paneled frieze (decorative) bands and acanthus leaf medallions.

Right after its construction, Haugen dubbed the building his "Big Daylight Store," but not because of its appearance. The name referred to a dramatic change he decided to make at that time in his business hours. It was common practice to keep stores open from early morning until as late as 9 p.m. on weekdays, and sometimes until 10 p.m. or even midnight on Saturday nights. K. I. felt this was unfair to his employees, and announced his new store would be open "daylight" hours (until 6 p.m.) on weekdays, and open late only one night a week on Saturday. He encouraged other downtown merchants to do the same.

Haugen's changes were at first resisted by other merchants, but within several months, all stores were closing earlier on weekday nights. Decorah newspaperman Bill Hart wrote that Haugen was well respected and popular with his customers and, not surprisingly, also with his employees.

His store's merchandise included groceries, shoes for the entire family, ready-to-wear ladies clothing, fancy needlework supplies and rugs, carpets and curtains. A newspaper article from 1905 said the latter could be found in the store's "carpet room" on the second floor. Haugen in one ad described his store as "The Largest

and Handsomest in Northern Iowa."

Haugen's career spanned 55 years, from 1877 until 1932. On the occasion of his 50th anniversary in business, he was presented by the Chamber of Commerce with a plaque of appreciation that is now on display in Decorah Furniture. Current building and furniture storeowner Charles Casterton said the plaque was brought to him after it was found in a garage behind Haugen's former home on Fifth Avenue.

Haugen's store closed in 1933, and the building served as Hutchinson Grocery from 1933-46. Around 1950, it was purchased for \$31,000 by the Veterans of Foreign Wars as a new home for that organization. A newspaper article about the purchase noted that the lower story was being rented out to Standard Appliance Co., and that two apartments occupied the front part of the second floor.

In 1958, Decorah Furniture Co. moved into the Haugen building from its location across Water Street. Decorah Furniture had been founded in 1909 by Harry Schremser, Ike Leytze and Henry Ness. Like many early furniture stores, it had licensed embalmers on staff and included full undertaking services.

Over the years, the business' owners included Robert Olson, Roger and Roberta (Olson) Fjelstul, and finally Casterton,

who purchased the business and building in 1979. He noted the interior showroom space is narrower than it once was, because inside walls were "moved in" some time in the past. There are still apartments on the second floor and an antique neon "Decorah Furniture" sign still lights up the front window.

This year, Decorah Furniture will mark 108 years in business, and half of that time has been spent in the same location — the former K. I. Haugen building at 311 W. Water St.

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