

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows hall — downtown Redding's oldest brick building — was celebrated as a point of pride when built in 1888. "The I.O.O.F. hall will cost over \$14,000 and will be the finest building in the city," the *Republican Free Press* reported.

At the time, Redding had a smattering of businesses and the streets were dirt — muddy in winter and dusty in summer. A visitor during the era described Redding, established in 1872, as uninspiring and noted a swampy spot downtown. "From our hotel we heard the frogs sing all night. There were millions of mosquitoes," he wrote in recollections published in Shasta Historical Society's *1949 Covered Wagon*.

Redding was a city in the rough, but the addition of the Odd Fellows' two-story, Italianate-style building at the corner of Butte and Market streets was seen as evidence of its promise.

"Nature has been most lavish in her gifts toward you of this city," dignitary J.F. Pinkham told the crowd at the June 26, 1888, cornerstone ceremony for the building. He exalted the natural surroundings, purity of water, agriculture opportunities and mineral and timber assets, saying Redding was situated to become "equal, if not superior, to any other part of the globe."

Odd Fellows buildings often were among the first significant buildings in young cities, providing a center for the fraternal organization and a focal point for the community. The IOOF was popular and powerful in the 19th century. With a focus on fellowship and charity, its commands were "to visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead and educate the orphan."

The first Odd Fellows group in Shasta County was Shasta Lodge No. 57, founded in 1856 in the town of Shasta. Reading Lodge No. 271 was instituted March 6, 1878, by Grand Master F.P. Dann with 20 members. The "Reading" spelling reflects contention and confusion at the time over the city's name and whether it should honor early pioneer Pierson B. Reading or Central Pacific Railroad official B.B. Redding.

The Odd Fellows initially met in the Good Templars Hall. In 1885, they purchased the lot on the southwest corner of Market and Butte streets for a building, paying Judge C.C. Bush \$1,200 for the land. Construction began May 25, 1887. Holt & Gregg did the brickwork. Contractor was John Farhner. Architect was A.A. Cook of Sacramento, who designed many buildings in Northern California, including the Odd Fellows Hall in Red Bluff (circa 1882) and the 1889 Shasta County Courthouse in Redding.

The top floor of the Odd Fellows was devoted to the lodge. A large meeting room featured a two-door entry and high ceilings with embossed tinsplate tiles. High on a wall looking over the room was the insignia of the Odd Fellows — the all-seeing eye with the three-link symbol representing friendship, love and truth. The building's lower level had space for three retail shops.

There was much fanfare at the building dedication on Jan. 25, 1889. The event had orations, recitations, lodge exercises, a community ball and music, including "a solo from the sweet voiced Miss Litsch of Shasta, who sang 'The Star the Night Adorning,'" according to the *Republican Free Press*. The newspaper noted plentiful refreshments, "a profusion of edibles such as Shasta County can produce and the Redding ladies (all of whom are good cooks) can prepare."

Redding Odd Fellows showcased their new building to hundreds of out-of-town guests in October 1900 when the lodge hosted the Grand Encampment of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows of California. The event drew some 500 people. Redding's population was 2,940.

"To accommodate the biggest crowd the town has ever attempted to entertain, every residence in Redding has been thrown open to provide sleeping quarters for the guests," the *San Francisco Call* reported.

Anticipating the many guests, Redding leaders signed a contract for eight electricity-powered street lamps. *The Morning Searchlight* announced the transaction in a story headlined: "It is now our time to shine — Redding is soon to be lighted by electricity."

The *Los Angeles Herald* reported Redding "ablaze with lights and bedecked in bright colors," noting an immense arch spanning Market Street showcasing Odd Fellows emblems outlined "with hundreds of electric lights."

The encampment featured speeches, marching drills, banquets and a ball. "Redding presents the most beautiful appearance in all its history," the *San Francisco Call* reported.

Redding Odd Fellows celebrated the final payment on their downtown building on March 6, 1903, by burning the mortgage in an iron pot. “Many a member of the lodge breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the paper go up in smoke and down in ashes,” *The Searchlight* reported.

Flames of a much different sort brought the Odd Fellows building into the news in 1905 when a fire started in an upstairs closet on the afternoon of July 18. “The blaze reached the rafters of the building and necessitated an hour’s hard fighting by the entire fire crew before it was conquered,” the *San Francisco Call* said.

*The Searchlight* predicted losses would not exceed \$10,000, and reported most damage was due to “the flood of water the firemen were compelled to use to subdue the flames between the ceiling and the floor.”

The lodge bounced back. In January 1907, a story in the *Sacramento Union* said: “The Redding Lodge of Odd Fellows is one of the most substantial branches of The Order in the West, owning as it does, one of Redding’s most advantageous business sites and buildings ...”

Firth Brothers (later Mark Firth Company) had a long run — from the early 1890s into 1944 — in the ground-floor retail space, offering an eclectic mix of merchandise.

“What a strange store,” Mabel Frisbee wrote in Shasta Historical Society’s *1972 Covered Wagon*. “It had a big basement simply packed with everything you could imagine. The fire regulations would never permit such a thing now, but everybody went down there and thought nothing of it.”

Merchandise was stacked floor to ceiling on the main floor. Clerks climbed rolling ladders to retrieve items. Owner Horace Firth made change for sales, sitting “on a raised platform in the middle of the store so he could watch everybody,” Frisbee recalled.

Thompsons’ Clothing Store, a Redding retail landmark for 80 years, began in 1926 in the Odd Fellows building. The menswear merchandiser was the place to go for everything from suits to coveralls to Boy Scout uniforms. Jay Thompson, whose grandfather Harry Thompson and great-uncle Russell Thompson, started the store, says longtime residents often share recollections with him. “A lot have good memories of getting their first charge account there.”

Thompson, born in 1954, remembers going beneath the store as a kid. “The basement was dirt then. That’s where they kept the mannequins. It was scary to go down there.”

He also recalls it was common to smoke in stores. One of his jobs was emptying ashtrays. “There were ashtrays all over the store,” he says.

Big changes came to the Odd Fellows building in the 1970s. An addition with a kitchen, dining room, elevator and other upgrades was undertaken and the building joined a mix of businesses melded into The Mall. The Mall roof was peeled back decades later to create an open-air plaza. With the shared roof gone, the Odd Fellows building regained visibility. But the appearance is much changed from its glory days. Windows have been filled in and are hidden, along with the original brick exterior, beneath a light-tan stucco coating.