James Drug | Vintage medicine bottle. Courtesy of Tim Zager

STORIES IN STRUCTURES

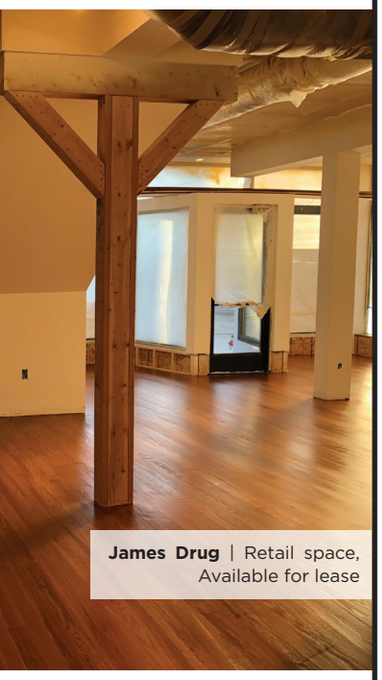
OLD BECOMES NEW IN ELY, MINNESOTA

By Lindsey Marschka

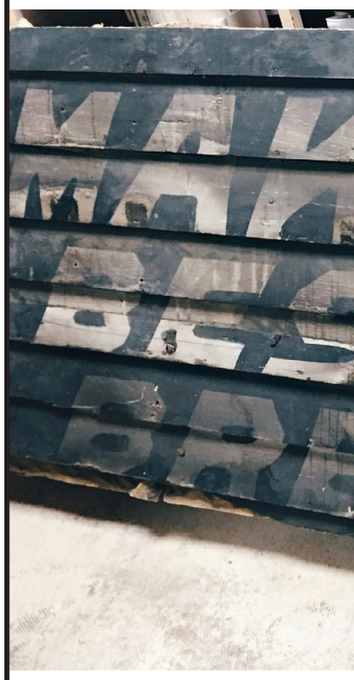
Your reflection is bouncing back through the dusty 1930s porthole window. It's the top in a group of three nestled in the Pepsi blue door, ripe with age and stained fingerprints. One gentle push and you're in the lobby, adorned with Art-Deco lines and abandoned film reels, the speckled terrazzo floors taking on a life of their own as their zig-zag pattern appears through the marks buffed by your path. You forge your way through the foyer's double doors, flip the breaker and suddenly - color. The bulbs that have been stagnant for years are still vibrant. Reds and greens shimmer from the sconces flanking the curved stage. Light beams peer in from holes in the brick corners, illuminating clouds of dust and insulation falling from the ceiling. There's beauty in ruin, here in the brief moment between past and future as the dust stirs, and stories emerge.

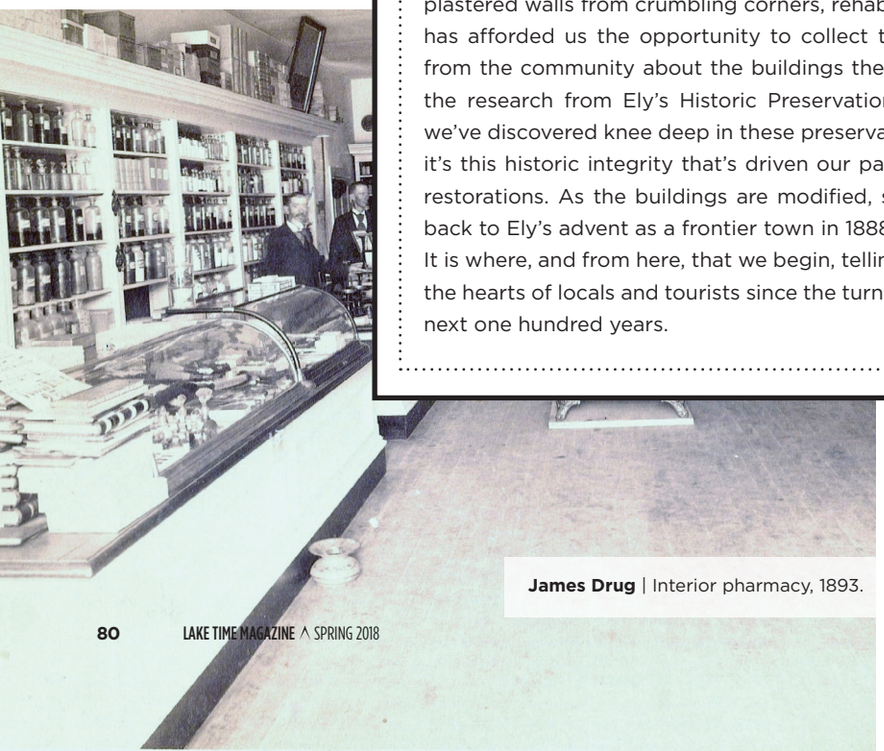
A new narrative is taking shape in Ely, Minnesota. No doubt that this region is a treasure of tales, rooted in the land of iron and water, in the ancient rocks and great lakes that shape the landscape. Tucked away in the apex of the USA on the edge of the Northwoods and the gateway to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Ely is a place modeled by mining and tourism, heralded and held dear for its remoteness. Yes, backpackers, canoe enthusiasts, and fisherman flock here. And yes, the lake is just steps away from where we live, work, and play. Lately, its downtown district is garnering attention, with historic preservation and entrepreneurship in the limelight. The resurgence of its buildings and stories inspire the lifestyle many Americans are leaning towards: something memorable, charming, walkable, and social. Those coffee shops with exposed brick and expansive windows, or restaurants with an urban feel and 'pizazz of the past.'

While we've spent countless hours in dark musty basements pulling out old boilers or tearing plastered walls from crumbling corners, rehabilitating and preserving Ely's oldest structures has afforded us the opportunity to collect tidbits, quick tales, and heartfelt monologues from the community about the buildings they cherish. The stories shared from passerby's, the research from Ely's Historic Preservation Commission, and the objects and features we've discovered knee deep in these preservation projects are at the heart of the work. And it's this historic integrity that's driven our passion, ironed out our purpose, and fueled the restorations. As the buildings are modified, so too are the stories. The stories originating back to Ely's advent as a frontier town in 1888. The stories that adapt with each generation. It is where, and from here, that we begin, telling tales of seven structures that have captured the hearts of locals and tourists since the turn of the century, so that they may live on for the next one hundred years.

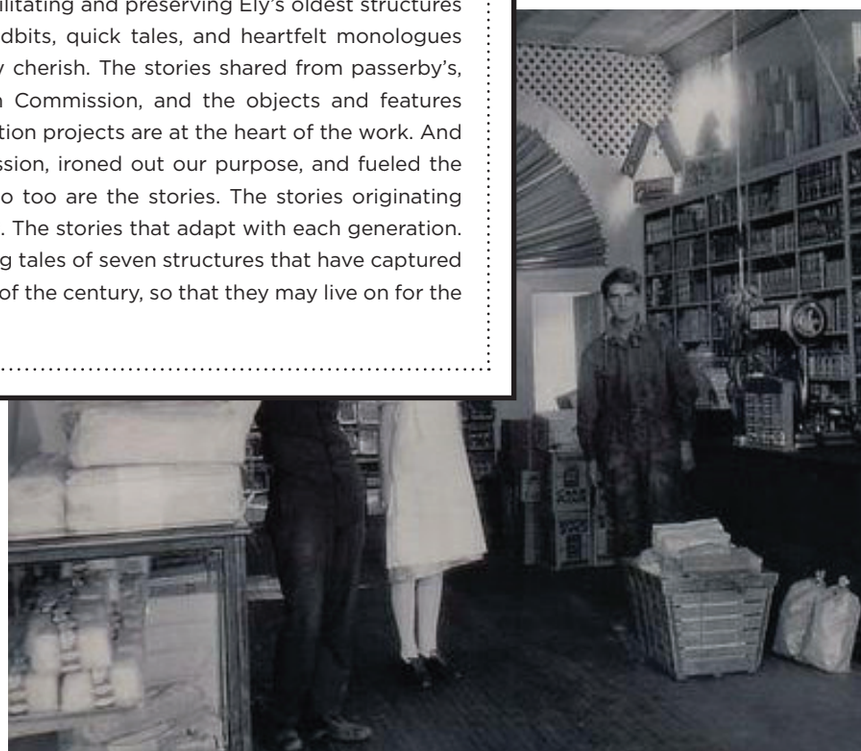


James Drug | Retail space, Available for lease





James Drug | Interior pharmacy, 1893.



James Drug | Ghost sign, late 1800s

James Drug | "Makes Best Bread" ghost sign uncovered behind stucco siding, 2017.

Insula | Kovall and Sons Grocery, 1910s.

James Drug | 101 E. Chapman St.

Where else could we begin but with the building that still sports the same name it was given 130 years ago? The James Drug on the corner of Chapman and First Avenue in downtown Ely first swung open its doors in 1888, the same year as Ely's incorporation. It was August when town doctor, C. G. Shipman unexpectedly met his partner, a young, traveling apothecary from Duluth named Abijah S. James, who had fainted in the hotel lobby next door. After nursing him back to health that summer, Shipman convinced the pharmacist to open up a medicine shop on the first floor of the new building in the heart of town. The two became quick business partners, with James sustaining the business until his death on a buying trip in Chicago in 1916. Soon after Abijah's death, a rumored fire broke out, inspiring the owners to add on stucco siding. His son Raub, a graduate from Harvard, took over the shop until his death in 1944, ironically while also on a buying trip in Chicago. While peeling back the layers on the exterior for the window rehab project, an original painted advertisement of the Duluth Flour Company was unveiled after years of hiding. It adorned the words, "Makes Best Bread" in rusted reds and faded whites against a gritty, black wooden backdrop. Known around the globe as 'ghost signs,' these hand-painted advertisements were commonly used in the decades prior to the Great Depression. Now, Crapola Granola makes artisan sourdough bread, a sideline to their trademark granola in this same building. As the longest continuous running business in Ely, the James Drug closed its doors in the late 1990s. Today, it lives on with newly remodeled retail space where the pharmacy once stood, in addition to busy offices on the second floor.

> "THERE'S BEAUTY IN RUIN, HERE IN THE BRIEF MOMENT BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE AS THE DUST STIRS, AND STORIES EMERGE."

Insula | 145 E. Sheridan St.

The northeast corner of Minnesota became home to many groups of immigrants in its boom years from the 1880s until World War I. Logging and mining has always attracted the adventurous and enterprising, and Ely quickly became a thriving small city at the eastern edge of the iron ore formation. It was the largest community on the Range in the early years, with Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Slovenian, Italian, Croatian, Russian, Czech, and even Arabic spoken on the streets. Although this melting pot of cultures proved challenging, it brought plenty of diversity in skills and talents to the area, which laid the foundation for entrepreneurs to thrive.

The building where Insula now operates has a rich history on top of Sheridan Street. Most folks remember the sticky buns at Vertin's Cafe. Or its bustling downtown grocery store when it was Piggly Wiggly. Some even reminisce on its time as a Western Union and Greyhound Bus Station, a hot spot for travelers. But there aren't many people around these days who remember its first use, unearthed with old bookkeeping receipts found in the basement.

If you ventured back in time to this locale in 1917, you'd likely see John Kovall Senior directing construction on his new building. Immigrating from Slovakia to the United States in 1889, John Senior brought his family to Ely so that he could begin his career working in the mines. A couple decades later, with the help of his sons, he became an entrepreneur on Ely's main street, opening up Kovall and Sons Grocery & Meat Market. Soon after John Senior's death, the building was sold to a Slovenian and Norwegian, Matt Vertin and John Rikhus. They ran the meat and grocery business, eventually licensing it under the name Piggly Wiggly. Later Vertin's Café thrived here,

Insula | Kovall and Sons Grocery receipts, 1928-1932. Found in basement of what is now Insula Restaurant.

Salerno Building
Early 2015

Salerno Building
2017

Salerno Building (L) Early VFW army green painted beadboard. Salerno, 2017. (R) Choosing colors and material, State Theater and Salerno Building.

before it sold and reopened in 2015 as Insula Restaurant. Last year marked the 100 year building anniversary, the same time it was given a reboot by none other than Kovall Construction, as its exterior was restored to the original brick that their great-grandfather John Senior once laid. Now, the back of the building is being restored with new windows and expanded space for the thriving Insula Restaurant.

Salerno Building | 242 E. Sheridan St.

Just up the street on the corner nestled on top of Sheridan Street and Third Ave, the Salerno building sits next to the Ely's State Theater. Built in the early 1900s, this stately building is a behemoth of living patterns and discoveries, leading with its faded army green color palette that decorates the original bead-board walls, stained with booth lines. This corner spot once housed a saloon, then the VFW club and later, a Five-and-Dime store. You can imagine what it must have looked like in its heyday as a gathering space, packed to the brim with people reminiscing. Just underneath, a protruding rock outcrop juts under the sidewalk and into the basement, visible from the stairs as you descend down. It reminds us what created this land of lakes 2.7 billion years ago, back when geologic time morphed basalt lava into a bedrock of granite and greenstone. Its later layer of iron ore ties back to the mining history that built this town from the ground up. It towers next to the hand-hewn lumber post and beams of varying shapes and styles throughout the basement. The office space upstairs is a maze of twelve rooms filled with distorting glass block windows and delicate trim detailing in the doors. Ducking through tiny entrances and peeking through keyholes, each room offers a fresh perspective.

The sun-soaked space on the first floor was made new by fresh windows and fully rehabilitated exterior, the reds and grays carefully chosen to fit its historic period. Interior sections will be restored, and the booths may even make a comeback in the spot where they once stood. The Salerno may be known as the social spot once again as it connects to Ely's State Theater, with offices upstairs providing space for new business owners and entrepreneurs to craft their ideas while the basement houses meeting spaces for events and conferences.

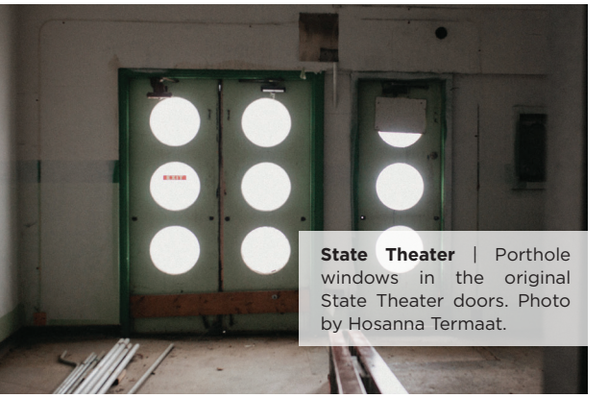
State Theater | 238 E. Sheridan St.

Ely's only surviving movie palace, the Historic State Theater built in 1936, holds a special place in the hearts of all who have passed through its doors. While we've heard many accounts of its life since the 1930s, the stories from the most recent past are striking in their frequency. The crumbling ceiling, covered with duct-taped garbage bags to catch water. The savvy locals who knew to bring an umbrella into the auditorium for protection against droplets of water and the occasional fallen tile.

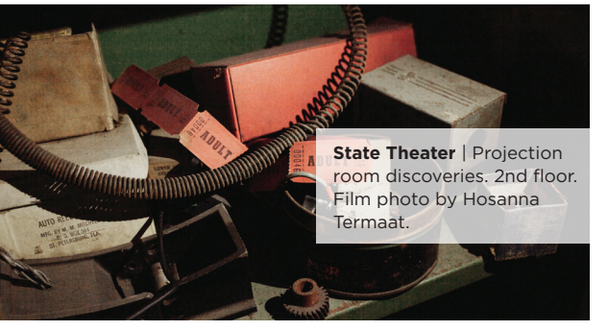
THE SHOWING OF WAYNE'S WORLD OR GHOSTBUSTERS, WHEN IT WAS SO PACKED THAT PATRONS HAD TO SIT ON THE FLOOR TO CATCH A GLIMPSE.

The projectionist who mimicked the crowd's reactions to moving scenes in War and Peace while changing over reels, or the mood in the room when Lash LaRue, Harrison Ford's Bullwhip instructor, graced the stage in the 1940s. A gathering space for locals and travelers, for date nights, and an entertainment hub for all, this spot is a symbol of Ely's strong, enduring community.

State Theater | Restored marquee. Film photo by Hosanna Termaat.



State Theater | Porthole windows in the original State Theater doors. Photo by Hosanna Termaat.



State Theater | Projection room discoveries. 2nd floor. Film photo by Hosanna Termaat.

Jakich Building | Mural painted by traveling artist during Great Depression.

Jakich Building | 2nd floor before rennovation, 2017.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Art-Deco theater is its lesser known sections. A select few know its projection booth, really know it - tucked away on the second floor above the historic foyer - its stash of old booklets and notebooks, trinkets and reels hidden in seclusion. When venturing up the narrow, winding staircase, square cuts in the brick alternating in size face the auditorium, where the arc projectors would screen films. These still stand next to an old bingo board stuffed away in the tiny closet. Rusted red tickets and original manuals of the high-fidelity sound systems from the 1930s were uncovered, as well as notebooks preserved in tin drawers, including one addressed "To Ma."

The building was placed on the National Register in 2015 and a complete renovation is underway. The auditorium will show films and live theater, in addition to a second screening room in the adjacent Salerno Building. As the renovation work is completed, the search is on for a prospective movie theater tenant to continue its legacy into the next generation.

Jakich and Portage Buildings | 16-18 E. Sheridan St.

You wouldn't know it from the outside, but the stuccoed Jakich building was once the Slovenian Sunday polka hot-spot, sitting mostly unchanged for 70 years.

Imagine the dynamic, textured rhythms emanating through the walls and onto the streets, billowing from the group of accordion players in this classic 3.2 bar.

If you were lucky, you may be offered a swig of whiskey from the owner's stash. Walk in to the main floor space today, and you'd see skilled demolition expert David Levander propped up on a ladder by his mukluks, delicately pulling nails from the walls to uncover historic treasures beneath. One of these ornate findings in the Jakich stands out with its eye-catching, stamped metal tiles that line not only the ceiling, but also the walls. The 1900s saw a big boom in decorative metal ceilings, but by the 1920s, they were pushed to the wayside as less ornate, more modern styles took shape and World War II accelerated the collapse of the industry. Most of the remaining molds for ceilings and trim were melted down for the war efforts. Here, they remain, along with a mural painted by a traveling artist looking for work during the Great Depression. The wilderness scene mimics Ely's surroundings as it connects back to its "end of the road" charm.

Its sister structure known to all as the Portage bar may have once been connected by the wall next to its stairs that lead to the second floor. This spot, notable with its dollar bills stapled to the ceiling tiles and tiki-themed bar scene, was a hip joint for all the years it was open. Many remember when the local taxidermist drove his motorcycle through the back door and out the front, or its tales of the early years when the saloon was in full swing, and a boarding house allegedly existed upstairs. Legend has it that there were buttons underneath the tables that would "call" women down from the maze of eight rooms overhead. We even found the low-voltage wires on the walls when peeling back its layers, next to covered up floor-length windows and camp scene murals. It's a space saturated in stories, in memories tucked in the rips on its green, worn booths. A sauna is even built into the back corner upstairs, and an old safe behind the bar unopened from the 1960s still lingers next to the cramped, coal-lined basement.

Tanner Hospital | 204 E. Camp St.

Perhaps the most intriguing structure of all in Ely is the iconic Tanner Hospital building, known to locals as "The Castle." It's an architectural marvel with bay windows and arches, a turret on the corner, and faded pastel-yellow brick. This one-of-a-kind structure was built in 1904 by infamous socialist Finnish doctor, Anterro Ferdinand Tanner. A. F. Tanner was a big fan of natural light, and when you live in a lake town, you're bound to stumble upon stellar views. He knew this all too well 115 years ago, when he developed his hospital building with 101 windows and a turret extension overlooking Shagawa Lake. It was said that the doctor built the extension as a therapeutic wing for patients recovering from surgery, with a balcony that was added on just three years later. Tanner's socialist views interfered with the mining captains of the time, who, according to local lore, ran him out of town after only a couple years in business. The building then changed hands, transitioning to Carpenter's Hospital when Dr. Carroll Carpenter took

over. An apartment complex called “Lakeview” thrived from the 1950s to the 1980s. Where patients once gazed out onto the water, residents later watched thunderstorms cascading across Shagawa Lake. Those residents from the 1950s-70s tell tales of dodging bats in its narrow staircases, coal shoveling in the sketchy basement, and the parties. Edgy 1960s wallpaper uncovered mimics this vibe, with animals enjoying cocktails dressed in groovy garb. Pass through Ely’s downtown and gaze at this structure for more than five minutes, and you’ll likely find yourself listening to countless accounts of past memories or competing with tourists for the perfect building selfie. The Castle was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 before closing its doors. It’s a tricky project to develop a plan for, but architectural and engineering work has been completed already, with future uses in brainstorm mode. As we inspect its foundation, its bay window arches and complex structure, we realize that although it’s a building in distress, it has great potential. It is the gateway to transformation, and it’s worth saving.

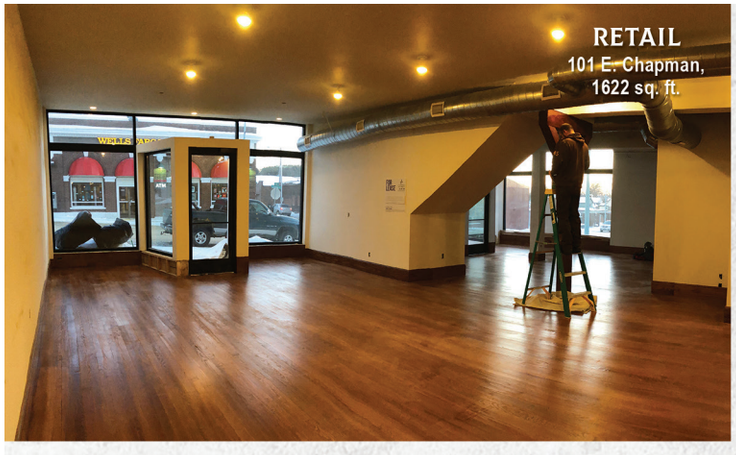
Ely’s historic buildings have already nurtured start-up businesses, manifested community hot spots, and connected the older and younger generations. These special places arise organically where people choose to come together, and from the local stories they cherish and wish to see persevere. Just as stories, buildings are designed to last and like stories, buildings exist beyond the bounds of their immediate use, beyond the intentions of their architects and contractors and owners. These structures have served as monuments of memory with stories nestled in the dust and crippled bricks. Preservation projects go beyond simply saving one or two buildings: they make the cities and towns around them better places to live. Buildings, like stories, are treasures to be passed on.

Special thanks to Celia Domich and all involved with the Historic Preservation Commission. Thanks also to Ely Echo, Ely Winton Historical Society, and to all who shared their stories and photos through social media!

Want to keep tabs on the happenings in Ely? Follow us on Instagram @elyhistoricrehab or our Facebook page, Alley A Realty in Downtown Ely.

Tanner Hospital | Finnish Doctor Anterro Ferdinand Tanner's Hospital, early 1900s.

Tanner Hospital
wallpaper circa 1950s-1960s



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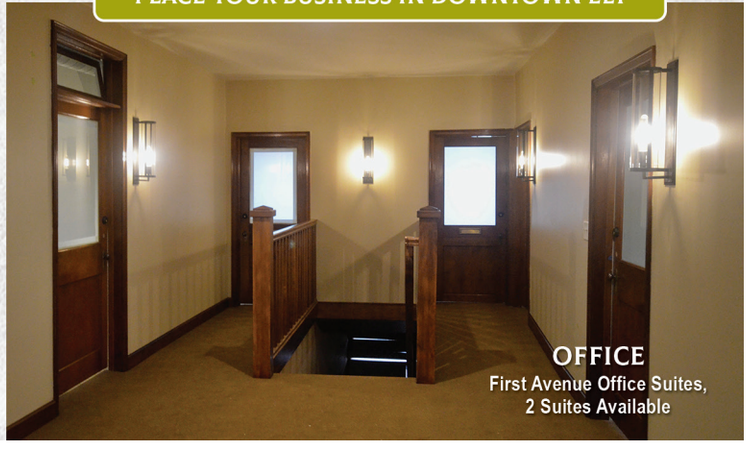
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