Attorneys bring Florida Street landmark back to life

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

For decades, downtown merchants and attorneys peeked through the windows of the old Varsity Shop building in the 300-block of Florida Street and dreamed about restoring it.

But it took the energy and persistence of two young attorneys to bring the Italian Renaissance-style building, vacant for years, back to life.

"I just loved this old building," said Danny McGlynn, who with Chris Glisson converted it to the law offices of McGlynn, Glisson and Koch. For years, locals have called the building the old Varsity Shop, probably because that name remained on the facade long after the Varsity Shop closed its doors. However, in its nearly 90-year history, the building has housed several different businesses including Capital City Press and Gulf States Utilities.

Conveyance records indicate that it was built in 1912 by Alvin E. Rabenhorst, although Rabenhorst family members have found no record of his use of the property.

In 1919, the property was purchased by Charles Phelps Manship Sr., then editor and publisher of the State-Times. At that time, the newspaper offices were on the north side of Florida Street directly across the street from the building Manship purchased.

In 1923, Manship moved the State-Times offices to the building. Only a brief mention of the move is made in the May 7, 1923, issue of the State-Times.
Danny McGlynn uses the same office Todd Garland did when the building was the Varsity Shop.

"Please excuse us," the article reads. "This is moving day and you housekeepers who have had to move, know how it is. Just multiply the moving of a household about a hundred times, and you have the problem the Times had in moving its plant from the old to the new building. Heavy pieces of machinery had to be taken down and carted to the new structure, and delicate machines had to be dismantled, moved and set up again."

Two years after the move to the new building, Manship's company, Capital City Press, began publishing its second paper, the Morning Advocate.

The late Ernest Guaynard, former managing editor of the States-Times, recalled earlier days of the local newspapers in a column in the States-Times July 26, 1982.

In those days, the newspaper sporting events. Rougeun's
received the latest news from local newspapers Capital City Press, began publishing.

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the moving of a household about a Florida Street building. In 1937, Capital City Press built a larger building next door and moved the newspaper offices there. The electric company, which became Gulf States Utilities, moved into the building vacated by Capital City Press. Gulf helped with the move.

"We sold all kinds of appliances," said Gulf, who was sales supervisor for Gulf States. The most modern refrigerators, ranges, washers and all small appliances and lamps were on display on the first floor. The accounting offices were upstairs.

"We called it the management floor upstairs and the working floor downstairs," said Gulf.

Gulf States moved its offices to North Boulevard about 1956. For a short time in the mid-1960s, Ad Department moved the Florida Street building.

"The" Garland Sr. and a group of partners opened the original Varsity Shop in 1916 in the old Mayor Hotel at 218 Third St. After the States-Times moved to the Italian Renaissance-style building, the Varsity Shop moved into the old States-Times building on the north side of Florida.

In 1957, Garland's son C.L. "Tod" Garland Jr. came into the family business as president of the Varsity Shop. In 1970, he moved the business across the street to the building vacated in 1956 by Gulf States Utilities. He removed the original granite front and created a store front with show windows.

"The store was just the bottom floor and just for men," said Tod Garland's daughter, Lisa Garland, who remembers both stores in the 300 block of Florida. Todd Garland's son, Ted Garland, remembers his father's office upstairs. "The back was always downstairs. The offices and storage were upstairs," he said.

In 1973, the Garlands sold the business to Godchaux's of New Orleans, which operated the company for several years before it closed 1979. For years the building remained vacant.

In the mid-1980s, the building was purchased by Phil Witter, who recalls wading into the basement with water up to his knees. Under the water was the granite from the original front.

Witter loved the way the building was originally designed with skylights to allow light to enter. "It is a wonderful building with that clear story in the center," he said. "That's so unusual for a building that age."

Witter was frequently contacted by locals who had an interest in buying the building. McGlynn tried to purchase it in 1984, but the deal fell through. So he and his partner purchased the old Louisiana National Bank building on Third Street, where they stayed for four years.

"Danny never gave up on this building," Glisson said.

Recently Amy Brassell opened a new restaurant at the northeast corner of Florida and Third, the same site that Garland had used. At the back of the second story, McGlynn and Glisson created a large conference room with several offices for the public and a public stairways had never been accessible to the public.

McGlynn took the office upstair at the northeast corner of Florida and Third, the same office that T. Garland had used. At the back of the second story, McGlynn and Glisson created a large conference room with several offices for the public and a public stairway leading to a large outdoor deck.

On Oct. 13, 2000, McGlynn and Glisson moved the offices to the second floor of the newly restored building.

McGlynn and Glisson have gotten rave reviews for their restoration of the building. A conference room at the back of the cafe is available for small receptions, and the entire down stairs can be used for larger events during evening hours.

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Although architect Craig Savoie helped with some of the technical aspects of the renovation, the plans they used was mainly their own. McGlynn and Glisson worked hard to develop a layout that would work for the new business and totally gutted the inside," Glisson said.

He recalls that when the Alexander Garvin, architect, thought they were going to buy a house next door, he had to pull the flooring out, the covered that the original floor concrete with a second layer of concrete over that. Then they were layers of wood, basically, finally old carpet.

"There were metal ceilings and accentual tiles on the original skylights. I removed temporary walls that had been put up over the years. I located antique pocket doors junkyard in New Orleans for conference rooms and offices. And they created impressive stairway at the center of the building, since the two rail stairways had never been accessible to the public.

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