

# Higher [NYC skyscrapers] by Neal Bascomb (2003)

1924 began a rivalry between two architects [William Van Alen (VA) & Craig Severance (CS)] that used to be partners, but now wanted their name on the tallest building. VA was the designer & CS the businessman, but a magazine came out with CS getting all the credit for a design, it was over. CS could make money, but VA had the ideas.

The advances in steel quality, electricity & the safe elevator [1853 Otis] allowed men to build higher & make the land pay. Before steel framed buildings, load-bearing masonry walls would require 6' wide basement walls & only leave 50% of the bldg space rentable. The wood structures of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 proved the need for fire resistant bldgs. William Jenney is noted for the post & beam design of skyscrapers, but he couldn't have done it without Bessemer's stronger steel.

A good site for a skyscraper seldom came on the market, but William Reynolds found one for Walter Chrysler (WC) & George Ohrstrom (GO) found one for the Manhattan Company. But they had to piece them together. At that time, zoning allowed a bldg to rise vertically on the edge of a 100' wide street straight up for 250' before stepping back 1' every 5'. So only the limits of steel & profit restricted them & general conscientious was 63 flrs for max profit. The best workers for heights were Mohawk Indians.

1928 Chrysler hired VA to design the best & tallest skyscraper. "Spare no effort or time." He demanded VA give it his best. Since his best was usually limited by a client's budget, it was the commission of a lifetime. The land at 42<sup>nd</sup> & Lexington was worth only 2 cents psf in 1878, but in 1928 was worth \$200 psf. Fred Ley was the contractor with an estimated cost of \$15M. It was to be 68 flrs, 809' & 900,000 rentable SF. It would have tunnels connecting it to Grand Central a block away.

1929 GO hired CS [who hired Yasuo Matsui]. The land was at 40 Wall Street. Starrett brothers would build it at an estimated cost of \$20M. It started at 850,000 SF & 840' tall. The construction was run fast & efficient [4 flrs/week]. After losing the race for the tallest, they tried to get the definition changed.

WC gave VA a free hand to make his the tallest, but it had to be in secret [to be unveiled at the end]. In the end he paid for 2400 workers, 21000 tons of steel, almost 4M bricks, 35 miles of pipe & 750 miles of wire. VA was not the businessman & didn't get a contract & when the market collapsed it was hard to get paid anything.

In the meantime, two-acres at 34<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> became available when the Waldorf-Astoria moved. John Raskob [from GM] wanted to build the Empire State Building (ESB) & hired William Lamb to design it. Starrett brothers would build it at a cost of \$43M [actually 25 due to the depression], reaching 1000' into the air, 80 flrs, 3M SF. ESB didn't make a profit until 1948.

The roaring twenties lived up to its name. Cars on the road went from 7M to 23M; trading volume on the NYSE went from 178M to 930M; the NYSE climbed 76% in one yr before it

started falling 24Oct29 [some dropped 90%] & everything stopped. NYSE 1929 high of 452 to 1932 low of 52.

20May46 an army plane flying in thick fog crashed into the 58<sup>th</sup> flr of the Manhattan bldg. It fell into disrepair & was bought by Ferdinand & Imelda Marcos and now owned by Donald Trump. And on 28July45 a B-25 crashed into the 78<sup>th</sup> flr of the ESB

#### Milestones:

1846	284'	Trinity Church, NYC
1885	555'	Washington Monument
1895	984'	Eiffel Tower, Paris
1906	612'	Singer bldg, NYC
1909	700'	Met Life Tower, NYC
1913	792'	Woolworth bldg, NYC
1930	927'	Manhattan bldg, NYC
1930	1046'	Chrysler bldg, NYC
1931	1250'	Empire State bldg, NYC
1972	1368'	World Trade Center [original], NYC
1973	1451'	Sears Tower, Chicago
1998	1483'	Petronas Towers, Malaysia
2003	1671'	Taipei 101, Taipei
2010	2717'	Burj Khalifa, Dubai
2013	1776'	One World Trade Center, NYC

#### Quotes:

“An architect without a client is like a composer without an orchestra.”

“Aim for beauty: originality will take care of itself.” (Cass Gilbert); Three rules of Architecture:

“Get the job! Get the job! Get the job!” (H. Richardson); Make no little plans, they have no magic...” (Daniel Burnham); “It is difficult to shake the confidence of people when they are flush with money.” “Don’t tell me it can’t be done. Tell me how to do it.” (GO)

Books: The Man Nobody Knows [Jesus the businessman] (Bruce Barton); Skyscrapers & the men who build them (William Starrett)