

**419-429 N. Main, 433-47 N. Main (Colorado Block), 420-436 N. Main (now Last Chance Gulch), 427-443 Fuller, 1-17 Placer, 21-31 Placer- Origin of Empson Buildings**

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Why a Colorado pea-packer chose to invest in Helena, a place with which neither he nor his family seems to have any connection, was a puzzle, but John H. Empson had invested in Denver in the face of much doubt, a move that proved him right, so he arrived with credibility. Rather than being somehow enticed into the venture, Empson may have simply seen Helena's potential in a similar light as Denver's when, in April 1917, he announced the purchase of 3 ½ acres of downtown on which to build commercial property. <sup>1</sup>

427-443 Fuller and 21-31 Placer were part of a commercial block built by the Western Land and Development Company, one of the investment arms of a Colorado entrepreneur named John H. Empson, who made a fortune canning peas. Empson once challenged his associate, Luther Burbank, the famous horticulturist, to breed a type of pea that would survive the canning process. Burbank did so and named it the Burbank-Empson pea, the size and sweetness of which vastly popularized the product. While John Empson does not appear to have ever lived in Helena (although he stayed here during critical times for his projects), his company spent money in and around the city. His name was given to the enormous Mission-style office rabbit warren that occupied fully half the block on the corner of Placer and Main. Constructed in 1917, the Empson Block attracted automobile dealers and auto service firms, creating a kind of car shoppers' mall joined by a variety of other small businesses.

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<sup>1</sup> There was a Helena resident whose career interests paralleled Empson's investments, Lewis Penwell. Both actively promoted land development, and Empson's company rented space in Penwell's building on West 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. There may be at least a casual connection involving encouragement.

To Empson's credit, this concentration of enterprise appears to have been an intentional part of his business plan, linked to his intention of re-establishing space for tenants his structure displaced. Concurrent with this exchange was the foresight to advance old technologies into modern times. An example was the fusion of two separate blacksmith firms into a new company, Huber Jasmin & Ott, Huber's former Fuller Street business being joined with his competitor's on Main. Their new operation continued farrier services but embraced modern transportation opportunities by offering collision and metal failure repair expertise as well as manufacturing conversion kits allowing owners to transform their automobiles into small trucks.

Empson rapidly expanded his building, adding segments that filled the space along Placer Street from Main to Fuller and adding an alleyway to serve the area from Lawrence to Placer, all of which required the cooperation of the City of Helena, which was, for the most part, easily obtained. Indeed, the community must have been pleasantly astonished at Empson's enthusiastic investments. In one sweeping measure, the "Denver businessman," as they saw him, accomplished downtown improvements that would have taken others decades to see through. Now suddenly sprawling over the northern edge of the city's commercial district were modern auto showrooms, manufacturing plants, retail shop spaces, upstairs offices, apartments, and a hotel. Tenants from near and far rushed to share the Empson Block's new facilities and sheen of success, including Billings businessman L. C. Stevenson's Auto Warehouse Service Company, Trublpruf Tire from Great Falls, and Empson's own Western Land and Development Company. The Packard & Oldsmobile dealers, Swendeman Auto, and Peter Schiert's farm machinery dealership came in quick succession. Among the smaller shops in coming years at the location were the Sanitary Meat Market, Bennetts Sewing Shop, Aronson & McBride haberdashery, the Barclay Corset Shop, and Eck's Grocery, later to become the Main Street Market.



1930-50 Sanborn map, p. 121

Government offices, springing up during the war effort, found the Empson Block useful. The Federal Labor Bureau moved here in June 1918, followed by the Montana Employment Office. Later the Main and Placer corner was occupied by the U. S. Internal Revenue Service.

Empson, who had lost his wife in 1876, displayed an empathy for women in his enterprises. There were several female tenants, and the Helena Professional Womens' Club had offices in the Empson Block, which they felt free to sublet for events. When a catastrophic East Helena fire displaced many families, Empson quickly offered free Empson apartments for suddenly homeless women and children. He also made his alleyway available for use as the city ice skating rink in 1918. His most spectacular contribution, along with engineer and cattleman A. B. Cook, was the donation of land for Helena's new YWCA, along with a challenge to raise a matching cash amount in a month's time, effectively igniting the new facility into being.

Empson's original land purchase included lots across the street to the east of his massive new building, but the property was devoid of rear access, requiring Jackson Street to be extended for that purpose. With characteristic swiftness, Empson petitioned the city to obtain the proper rights. With characteristic sluggishness, legal wheels began to turn. It would be five years before Jackson Street would meet Empson's needs.

Empson, through his Helena agent, Thomas Mahoney, pursued his plans to build shops on the east side of Main Street. Negotiations and condemnation proceedings went on to get Jackson

open. There was also a short delay when wildfires threatened the city in 1920, and Mahoney called a hold on plans to protest city inaction on the issue. Meanwhile, Empson took stock of his bucket list and went on a world tour. Finally, in the summer of 1922, conditions were right for construction to begin. By this time, Empson's experience in erecting commercial buildings convinced the Mountain States Telegraph and Telephone to turn the construction of their new Helena headquarters over to him. Now known as the Colorado Building (433-47 N. Main, now LCG), the three-story structure at the intersection of Main and Placer created a handsome bookend for its smaller neighbors.

Next to Mountain States on the north, Empson built a single-story row of small shops (419-429 N. Main) anchored at the south end by the large IOOF building. In 1923, stores opened in the series of storefronts at the odd-numbered addresses 417 to 427 North Main Street. It quickly filled with tenants. F. J. Nye relocated his Harness and Saddlery shop there. A new jeweler, A. E. Peterson, moved in, as did a new confectionary, the Hazelwood. The space at 431 was claimed by C. M. Batch, a tailor, and M. C. Newman's meat market took 423 Main. The building would continue to be rented for decades. John Grainey's Helena Stamp Works was at 423 for decades, followed by years of Toi's Thai occupancy.

Empson's bucket list filling proved prescient. He died at his Longmont, Colorado, home in 1926, but his Western Land and Development Company went on, later becoming involved in the oil business. The properties he so dramatically assembled in downtown Helena continued to define the visual and commercial segment between Fuller and Main, later to become Last Chance Gulch. Much of the sprawling Empson Block of 1918 fell to Urban Renewal in the 1970s. Today its power plant smokestack towers over a parking lot. Across the street, along the 400 block, the small shops of the New Empson building continue to add to the variety and vitality of downtown.

<https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AKOMPNBGF14ZBS8N> *Burbank, Luther, (1849-1926), Luther Burbank: his methods and discoveries and their practical application. 1914-1915, New York; London: Luther Burbank Press*