Herman Kemna

By Richard I. Gibson

Herman Kemna was a native of Germany. He came to America at about age 30 to work as an engineer on the Great Northern Railway in Montana, but his true calling was as an architect.

Kemna was in Helena by the late 1880s working with the Wallace-Thornburg Construction Company. In 1889, the year Montana became a state, he designed the Broadwater Hotel west of Helena and its 30,000-square-foot pool, reportedly the world’s largest at that time.

Butte architect Henry Patterson hired Kemna about 1898, but after 1902 Kemna was on his own or in occasional partnerships with other architects in Butte.

Among his surviving designs is the 1906 Phoenix Block on Park Street, built for the Symons Company after a devastating fire in 1905 destroyed several buildings on that site. His work included upscale homes, including a bungalow on East Copper Street designed for Undertaker and Sheriff Larry Duggan. According to historian Irene Scheidecker, the home cost about $6,000 to build in 1910 – a pretty penny at a time when a simple home might cost $800. It still stands today, just around the corner from the site of Duggan’s mortuary on Main Street, which is gone.

Kemna also designed a new Thomas Block on Park Street to replace the previous building that burned in 1912. When the new block was completed in 1913, developer Adolph Pincus boasted “I am a firm believer in the future of Butte, and the fact that I am investing $75,000 in the new Thomas Block is very certain that I look to see this city keep right on growing and advancing.” Kemna’s Thomas Block still stands today.

One of Herman Kemna’s last major projects was the Butte Daily Post Building at the corner of Galena and Main Streets. The Post was the successor to the Inter Mountain Newspaper, and they moved their printing operation to the new $45,000 building in 1923 without missing a single issue of the paper. The Post was owned by the Anaconda Company beginning in 1913 and was ultimately merged with the Montana Standard and ceased publication in 1961. The building designed by Kemna saw various roles over the next 60 years but was severely damaged by fire in January 2020.

Kemna also designed buildings in Bozeman, Anaconda, and Deer Lodge, and he was one of the first members of the Butte Kennel Club in 1907. He raised championship bulldogs.

Herman Kemna died in Butte June 7, 1937, survived by his wife and two sons.

Photo is from MT Standard so you may have a better version. Post building.