



## Marathon Building Worthy of Preservation

*Editor's Note: In 2004, Historic Littleton Inc. has focused on modern, or post - World War II, architecture. One of Littleton's most prominent modern structures is the Marathon building. HLI board member Doris Hulse worked at Marathon Oil for many years and researched and wrote this article.*



The Marathon Oil Company Building at 7400 South Broadway was begun in 1955 and opened in 1956 as the company's Denver Research Center. Its solid masonry construction utilizes varied hues of native Colorado red Lyons sandstone laid in what is known as "University of Colorado" style. The Littleton Historic Resources Survey of 2000-2001, conducted by Thomas and Laurie Simmons, described the building as a significant representative of the International Style, with its horizontal lines, grouped windows, lack of ornamentation and flat roof. They further pointed out its walls of varied height, the flat metal hood sheltering windows along the front (west) facade, and the inset glazed area at the center (the front lobby) of that facade. At the southwest corner of the building is an angled projection with large, floor-to-ceiling windows that enclose the cafeteria.

The view from the cafeteria, its adjoining patio, and the front row of offices is of the entire Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, from Pikes Peak to Longs Peak, and of the changing sea-

sons in the South Platte Valley below.

The office complex with its accompanying laboratories occupies a large landscaped campus entered by a curving drive. The site is second by only a few feet to being the highest point in Littleton.

Ohio Oil Company was the name of the company when the Center was built; its corporate headquarters were in Findlay, Ohio. It had been active in the Rocky Mountains since 1914 and was an important part of the general surge for oil and gas exploration and production during the post-war energy boom. The company had grown large enough by 1954 to need a research department.

The first step was to hire Dr. W. Jacque Yost as its director. Next they contracted with Battelle Institute of Columbus, Ohio to research a site. Battelle surveyed oil company research centers in Dallas, Houston and California, asking them where they thought research people would like to live, and where, if they were to relocate their own facilities, they would prefer to go.

Dr. Louis Gibbons, who became the head of the Center's chemistry department, says that in every case, the answer was Denver.

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***Historic Littleton Inc. is dedicated to preserving the historical and architectural heritage of the greater Littleton area through advocacy and education.***

Their reasons included the strong area universities and libraries. "Also, Denver had attractive civic activities," (even then!) They thought it was an atmosphere conducive to research.

The company chose Wilbur Watson Associates of Cleveland to design their Denver Research Center. Wilbur J. Watson, a distinguished engineer and bridge designer, founded his company in 1907. He is described as having developed a carefully stated philosophy of the relationship between engineering and aesthetics. One of his bridges in Cleveland is designated historic and has been restored. Dr. Gibbons and Dr. Fred Poettmann, newly hired head of the Center's engineering department, worked with the Wilbur Watson architect and mechanical engineer to design the layout and mechanical specifications.

They needed to find a site with eighty acres because other research centers had said that you need room to expand. The local realtor had a couple of locations to offer. Dr. Gibbons says the first one they viewed was along I-25 south of Denver. "It was a cloudy day, and you couldn't see anything of the mountains. The second was the Broadway site. While we stood there the clouds rolled away, and there was the view of the entire mountains. We decided then and there, 'This is the

place.'

Marathon was the marketing name used by Ohio Oil Company, and in a few years the entire corporate name was changed to Marathon Oil Company. Many Littleton residents



and former employees will remember the large profile figure that stood above the Center's entrance: Pheidippides, the Greek runner who raced across the plains of Marathon. The company's slogan was, "Best in the Long Run."

The Denver Research Center played a strong role in a company that is still a major player in the regional, national and international petroleum world. It arrived and developed here during Littleton's period of unprecedented growth from a rural hamlet to a city.

The opinion that the site and the area were appropriate for research and academically-minded people proved true.

Patents, publications and new ideas flowed from the Center for more almost half a century. Dozens of the Center's employees and spouses have taken active and influential roles in our community, many continuing to do so.

With changes in company operations, the Center's activities shifted from basic research to technical services support for the rest of the company. The Center was finally closed in December 2000.

To quote Diane Wray, Englewood historic preservation consultant: "The Marathon Oil property undoubtedly exhibits the highest quality of craftsmanship and materials in its exterior masonry and in its interior public spaces—lobby, auditorium, library and cafeteria...It is also significant for its site planning. On a prominent topographic feature of Littleton, it was clearly a pioneer of the early corporate office parks that integrated commerce and site-planning in a suburban setting, a form that became a national trend resulting in ex-urban corporate office parks like the Denver Tech Center.

"The Marathon building represents possibly the earliest and undoubtedly the largest and finest example of the International Style in post-war Littleton."

—by Doris Hulse

# Knight-Wood House Placed on National Register

The Knight-Wood House, at 1860 Littleton Boulevard, was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places. This is the third property in Littleton to be individually listed on the National Register. Other properties include the former Town Hall building and Geneva Lodge. Two and one half blocks of downtown Littleton are also listed on the National Register.

The Knight -Wood house is an excellent example of Craftsman Style Architecture, with a stucco exterior, a gabled roof with wide overhangs, decorative beams under the gables, a covered front porch with square tapered columns and the original double-hung sash windows on the front façade.

The house was built in the 1920's by an unknown builder. In the 1930's E. J. and Alice Knight lived there. E.J. was superintendent of Littleton Schools. In the 1950's Dr. Wilbur Wood, who founded the Littleton Clinic, and his wife Helen, lived in the house.

The Knight-Wood House is in the Littleton Heights neighborhood, which housed the social elite of the Littleton community in the earlier part of the 20th century. The house is also a local landmark.

The National Register of Historic Places is the federal government's official list of historic properties worthy of preservation. In Colorado more than 1200 buildings, sites and districts are listed.

Owner Steve Creamer operates his business Centennial Gas Liquids in the house.



## Two New Members Added to Historic Littleton Inc. Board

Charlie Carroll and Dr. Jack Ballard joined the Historic Littleton Inc. Board of Directors in October.

HLI Officers for the next year include: Rebecca Kast, President; Barb Eaton, Vice President; Sonya Ellingboe, Secretary and Ron Richards, Treasurer.

Other board members are Karen Arras, Lorena Donohue, Doris Hulse, Mike Massey, Bernard Small, and Bruce Wolf.

The HLI Annual Meeting was held Aug. 25 at Geneva Village, along with a bus tour of Eugene Sternberg's architecture and an ice cream social. Thanks to the Geneva Village residents for their help with the ice cream social and for allowing us to tour their homes!

## Preservation News

- ♦ Colorado Preservation Inc. will hold its annual conference February 2-4, 2005 at the El Jebel Shrine, 1770 Sherman St. in Denver. The theme is "Bringing Preservation Home." Those interested in attending should call 303-893-4260 or visit the CPI website at [www.coloradopreservation.org](http://www.coloradopreservation.org).
- ♦ A holiday open house at the Field Officer's House at Fort Logan will be Dec. 12 from 2-4 p.m. Refreshments will be served and the 1st Colorado Regiment Brass Sextet will play.
- ♦ A modernist building at 4301 S. Broadway in Englewood designed by William Muchow (now Commercial Federal Savings Bank) has been threatened with demolition. Contact Diane Wray at 303-761-8979 for more information.

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Happy Holidays From the  
Historic Littleton Board!