



On New Year's Day 1915, the community of Grinnell, Iowa, was basking in relative affluence. The town of six thousand featured Grinnell College, which had just turned out a group of graduates who would go on to shape President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. It was home to the Spaulding Carriage & Automotive Works, which just a few years earlier had been producing ten thousand buggies annually. Now Spaulding was turning out fine automobiles, one of which would defeat a "fast mail train" to win a cross-state race later that year. Grinnell also boasted a thriving central business district, many new homes, and an overall belief that things would get even better.

For architect Louis H. Sullivan, New Year's Day 1915 must have felt like a return to the glory days of his early career.

Called the "father of the American skyscraper," Sullivan helped forge a uniquely American architectural style and, in doing so, became the spiritual leader of the Prairie School. He had designed some of the most significant buildings in America and had already influenced a generation of architects. But, for Sullivan, the previous decade had been disastrous. Work had slowed to a trickle, and he was so deeply in debt that, in late 1909, he had been forced to auction off almost all his personal belongings. His physical health was beginning to decline, and he was increasingly frustrated by the lack of work. Sullivan's prospects, however, were improving.

On New Year's Day 1915, grand openings were scheduled for two of Sullivan's small-town midwestern banks: the tiny Purdue State Bank in West Lafayette, Indiana, and the Merchants National Bank in Grinnell. The Van Allen Department Store in Clinton, Iowa, and a third bank, the Home Building Association in Newark, Ohio, would open later that year.

Sullivan would design other great buildings, but he would never again see a year like 1915.