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## Standing Tall

*Even at 100, the Smith Tower adds distinction to Seattle's skyline*

by Haley Shapley

In a society that celebrates youth and innovation, it's tempting to see 100 as passé. But with age comes wisdom and perspective, a lesson perfectly encapsulated in the Smith Tower, which opened in Pioneer Square on July 4, 1914, as the tallest building this side of the Mississippi.

It was a compliment to have such a skyscraper all the way out here in the Wild West. For New Yorker L.C. Smith to choose Seattle, a place to which the typewriter and shotgun magnate had no particular ties, was a huge vote of confidence for our fair city, then just beginning to garner interest from the outside world due to the Klondike Gold Rush and 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exhibition.

The completed Smith Tower, with its pyramid-shaped, Gothic-style cap, was a thing of marvel—so much so that its attributes were often exaggerated. It *is* true that the gleaming tower is clad in white terra-cotta so hardy that it didn't need a washing with detergent until the building was in its 60s (rainwater mostly did the trick before then). But while the plaque out front proclaims the building is 42 stories, there are really only 30-something inhabitable floors in around 460 feet (33 rentable above-ground floors, an observation-deck level, plus a two-story penthouse in the pyramid). It was often cited as the tallest building outside New York, the fourth-tallest in the world, and the city's first skyscraper. None of those tall tales

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(pun intended) are true. Just a block to the north, the 203-foot-tall Alaska Building, completed in 1904, is the city's true first skyscraper.

The ambitious structure on the corner of 2nd Avenue and Yesler Way never did pull the core business district south the way it was intended, and it's unclear whether the Smiths made money off their investment. "They over-reached a little in terms of what the available market was," says Leonard Garfield, executive director of the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI). "It never became the center around which subsequent development happened."

With the Space Needle's debut in 1962, the Smith Tower's star faded a little more. In other words, the tower's had its share of ups and downs.

Despite all that, it's remained grand and glorious in the face of a changing world. When I walk along 2nd Avenue and the light's hitting it just right, it is the most beautiful building around, appearing to glow. And when I want to show guests my city, that's where I take them—it's high enough above the landscape to provide a stunning overview of the city, but close enough that you feel more a part of it somehow. Plus, you can't beat those brass elevators, among the last (if not the only) on the West Coast still manned by elevator operators.

"Even with the feats of contemporary skyscrapers, it still stands out because it's so distinctive," Garfield says. "There's not a brighter, whiter, more sculptural building on Seattle's skyline."

I once took a visitor to the tower's 35th-floor Chinese Room and Observation Deck (pictured above) to see the sights. I sat in the Wishing Chair there, which reportedly portends marriage within a year for single women who grace its ornamental seat, flanked by a dragon and a phoenix. I commented that it would never work. "I think it still counts if you start dating the person you later marry within a year," my guest told me. He asked me out the next day.

I did not get a diamond ring out of the deal. Like I said, the Smith Tower is prone to myths and a complicated history.

No matter. The Space Needle may be more attention-grabbing, the Columbia Tower taller and sleeker, but nothing can quite take the place of Seattle's original iconic building—a lovely reminder that life includes both setbacks and successes, and aging gracefully is always possible.

*Smith Tower will celebrate its centennial on July 4, when admission will be 25 cents, just as it was in 1914. Visit [facebook.com/thesmithtower](https://www.facebook.com/thesmithtower) for anniversary details.*

