

# Tours

**Self-guided tours are available during weekday bank hours.** An additional printed tour guide is located just inside the West entrance. It offers more information about the history, architecture and current functions of the bank. *Bank hours are Monday-Friday 8:30am-5pm, Saturday 8am-Noon. Saturdays, lobby and viewing balcony only, are open.*

# Location

**Located at 101 North Cedar Avenue,** the northeast corner of Broadway Street and Cedar Avenue in Owatonna, the National Farmers' Bank now operates as Wells Fargo Bank.

# NATIONAL

Louis H. Sullivan's

# FARMERS'

Jewel Box of the Prairie

# BANK

# JEWEL BOX OF THE PRAIRIE



In 1981, both the bank building and Louis Sullivan were commemorated on a US postage stamp.

## A Masterpiece

Architectural historian Tom Martinson calls it one of the **greatest buildings in American history**, because it is unlike anything else before or since.

Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism | 800-423-6466  
Wells Fargo Bank Owatonna | 507-451-5670

Call the Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism for Owatonna Tours or go to [www.visitowatonna.org](http://www.visitowatonna.org) for more local attraction listings.



WORLD-RENOWNED

## Prairie School Architecture



Owatonna, in southeastern Minnesota, is home to an **exceptional architectural treasure.**

The old National Farmers' Bank Building has been called **"the most beautiful bank in the world."**

It is also referred to as a **"masterpiece."** The bank was designed in 1908 by the legendary Chicago Architect, Louis Sullivan. It's one of eight small Midwestern banks that Sullivan designed at end of his career.

**THE OWATONNA BANK IS SULLIVAN'S BIGGEST AND MOST ELABORATE.**



# A Symphony of Color

## OWATONNA NATIONAL FARMERS' BANK BUILDING

**T**he story of two men: Bank President Carl Bennett, and Architect Louis Sullivan. Together they created "a jewel box of the prairie."

The bank commands the corner of Broadway and Cedar, across from Owatonna's Central Park. Some visitors make a pilgrimage to see it, coming from Paris and Buenos Aires, from Tokyo and Rome, and well as from across town.

With decorative elements by George Elmslie, the building is clad in red brick with green terra cotta bands, and features two large arches. Internal elements include two stained glass windows designed by Louis J. Millet, a mural by Oskar Gross, and four immense cast iron electroliers (chandeliers) weighing 2.25 tons apiece designed by George Elmslie and cast by Winslow Brothers Company, and a large "B" cartouche in the uppermost corner of each wall - Sullivan's tribute to the Bennett family. A unique viewing balcony offers another perspective on all aspects of the Main Banking Hall.

In 1906 the local banker, Carl Bennett, needed a bigger bank - not just any bank. Carl Bennett was an accomplished musician at Harvard,

who had a passion for music and a desire to become a musician. But to fulfill his father's wishes, he reluctantly gave up the idea of becoming a conductor or concert pianist and came back to Owatonna to help run the bank. Later as bank president, when it was time to build a new bank, Bennett let his artistic nature flourish. He followed his dream to build—what he called—"a true and lasting working of art."

In 1906, Louis Sullivan's architectural career was washed up. But Louis Sullivan had once been a great architect. He is considered to be the father of the first true American skyscraper. Sullivan designed the 10-story Wainwright building in St. Louis in 1891—the first building that looked like a skyscraper, and was built like one, with an all steel skeletal frame. Frank Lloyd Wright had once worked for Sullivan and learned from him. Wright called Sullivan his "master" and "mentor."

It was Louis Sullivan who coined the famous phrase, "form follows function", that buildings should grow organically to fulfill their functions, almost like trees. Sullivan talked about the poetry of a building...a symphony of nature, an extension of life itself. He was also one of the first architects to link art and technology.

And he sought to create a new American architecture, combining the rational and the emotional—the natural and the industrial—the practical and the spiritual.

It is said that "a great architect does his best work for a great client," and Louis Sullivan was lucky that Carl Bennett asked him to design a new bank for downtown Owatonna. Bennett took a risk on Sullivan...possibly because he knew he would not get a conventional bank. He wanted a fresh statement of what a bank could be and knew architecture and Sullivan's celebrated background. Bennett came up with \$125,000 to build the bank—an extravagant sum for a small-town bank at the time, the equivalent of about \$25 million today.

Visitors who go inside the bank compare it to a religious experience, like walking into a cathedral bathed in light. As the bank was being built, Sullivan wrote to Bennett saying "I want a 'Color Symphony' and I am pretty sure I am going to get it." A symphony of color it is. Shades of green and amber and brown.

In 1926, Carl Bennett, lost his beloved bank when the farm economy collapsed. The Owatonna

National Farmers' Bank became insolvent and was closed. The bank was remodeled in 1940, and many of the interior architectural elements were destroyed. Subsequent work in 1958 and from 1976 to 1997 restored it to its original grandeur. On January 7, 1976 it was recognized as a National Historic Landmark for its architectural significance.

Few banks today can be said to lift the spirit; or can be described as awe inspiring and breathtaking as Louis Sullivan's Owatonna bank built by the musician-turned-banker Carl Bennett. Together they made good on their individual dreams, creating a work of art, a jewel, with a symphony of color.

## A Jewel Box of the Prairie

*Louis Sullivan's other banks in addition to the one in Owatonna, Minnesota can be found in Columbus, Wisconsin; Cedar Rapids, Grinnell and Algona, Iowa; West Lafayette, Indiana; and Sidney and Newark, Ohio.*

*Source: Minnesota Public Radio*