

SAVING HISTORIC LANSDALE

TWO LIVES OF DRESHER BUILDING

By **DICK SHEARER**

There's a story to be told about every one of downtown Lansdale's historic buildings - and all are different.

Take the Dresher Arcade. It has had two distinctly different lives since it was built in 1918, yet most of the town's citizenry know of it only in its present state - a series of small shops with a unique indoor walkway through the middle that connects Main Street with the Madison Parking Lot.

But that was not its original use. It was built in 1918 as the home of Dresher Motors, a Buick dealership run by Raymond S. Dresher.

As was the case in those days, selling new cars was an emerging business most often started by someone who previously ran a garage to fix cars or horse-drawn carriages. At first, the auto sale trade played second fiddle the repair business but it didn't take long to figure out that by selling cars dealers were creating follow-up customers for their shop.

The Dresher building was evidence of this trend. It featured showrooms right on busy Main Street where pedestrians could view the new models. The less-glamorous repair shop was relegated to the rear. A passageway in the middle of the structure provided access to the service area.

By the way, gas pumps were conveniently placed on the sidewalk, a practice that would set off all sorts



of bells, whistles and red lights for the federal safety folks today.

We're not certain exactly why but within 10 years Dresher shifted gears and headed in an entirely different direction with his building. At the end of 1927, Jenkintown-based Butler Buick took over the Lansdale dealership and temporarily set up shop in the Lansdale Theatre building while a new showroom was being built near Main and Mitchell Ave.

Did Dresher look at the strong retail growth taking place around him and decide to get in on the action? Could be.

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What we do know is that in January, 1928, plans were announced to transform the garage into a series of stores with modern apartments and offices on the upper floors. To gain more retail space on the first floor, the old passageway to the service shop would be replaced with a promenade lined by shops on both sides.

Architects Conner and Franklin were responsible for the design and Joseph K. "Dobbie" Weaver, of Lansdale High School coaching fame, would be the manager. The 10 apartments upstairs were considered state of the art for the time.

As far as businesses are concerned, close to a hundred were housed in the Dresher Arcade over the years. Among them:

The Arcade Grill, Lansdale Thrift Corp., Endicott

Johnson Shoes, Weaver's Real Estate, Dr. Frank Boston's medical office, Sims Arcade Barber Shop, Mayfair Shop, Shelly's Ice Cream, Milton E. Harlem Public Accountant, Thelma's Beauty Salon, Richard Gardner Public Accountant,

Also, Slater and Sons Typewriters, Gotwals Insurance, Diane's Candy Shop, Penn Valley Hobby Center, Arcade Barber Shop, Arcade Book and Candy Shop, Bishop's Baby and Kiddie Shop, Tony Rossi Bridal Salon, Collins Yarn Shop and Bridal World.

The indoor walkway paid extra dividends starting in the early 1950s when the Madison Parking Lot was built behind the arcade. It became a natural passageway to and from Main Street and a great place to window shop without battling the elements.

And kids loved it, too. What a great place to give out a shout and listen to the echo!