

A peek inside Seattle's Smith Tower, which retains its historic charms

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Greg Highsmith waits for a passenger coming to the bank of seven manually operated Otis elevators in Smith Tower built in 1914. (These are the original Otis cars.) Smith Tower, in Pioneer Square, was completed in 1914. It's 42 stories tall and was the first skyscraper west of the Mississippi River. (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times)

View all of the photos [here](#).

Our photographer explores Seattle's historic Smith Tower, which at 522 feet was the tallest building on the West Coast when it was completed.

By Alan Berner

Seattle Times staff photographer

Lyman Cornelius Smith made his money in typewriters and firearms.

His typewriters later became known as Smith Corona.

His firearms were shotguns, the L.C. Smith, or “Sweet Elsie,” considered one of the best ever made.

In 1909, during a visit to Seattle, the New Yorker announced he would construct an 18-story building.

His son, Burns Lyman Smith, persuaded his dad to build a much taller skyscraper.

He thought that would help generate publicity and boost sales of their typewriters.

When the 42-story building opened on July 4, 1914, it was the fourth-tallest building in the world, at 522 feet.

Lyman Cornelius Smith did not live to see it completed, but his initials are referenced throughout the structure in brass, including on the elevators.

Smith Tower contains almost 8 million pounds of steel and seven manually operated elevators. The exterior is mainly terra cotta.

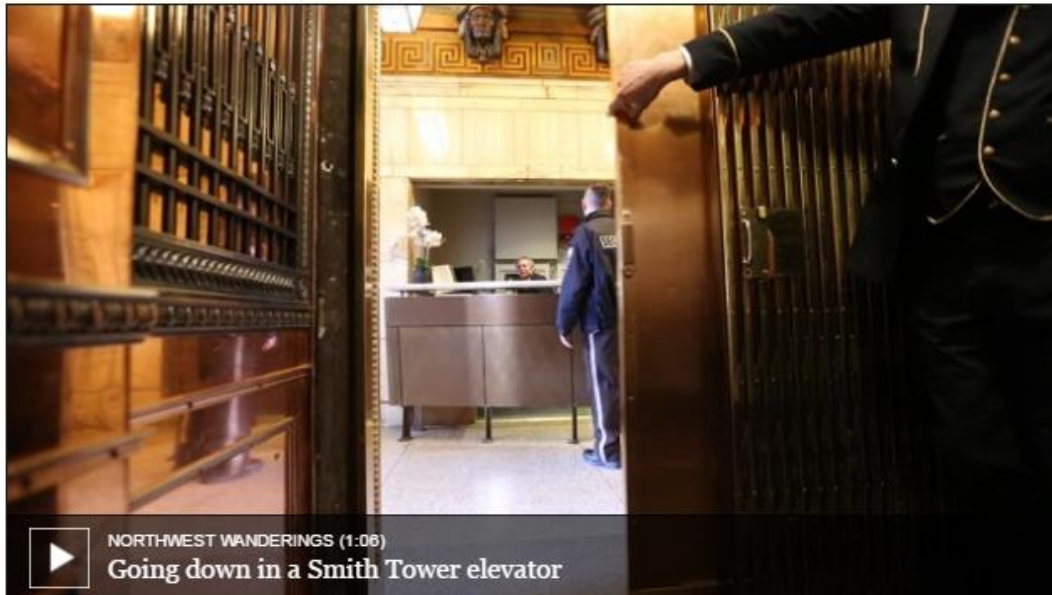
Only elevator No. 7 takes visitors to the observation deck on the 35th floor.

The operators wear suits mimicking those originally worn more than a century ago.

They close the double doors to the car, including the scissors-like gate.

A turn of the original crank gets the mechanism engaged, but modern panels with push buttons are then used with the number of the destination.

As the Otis elevator car rises, passengers can briefly see each floor and the bright lights of offices spilling in.



Smith Tower was the first skyscraper west of the Mississippi River. Take a ride in one of its seven manually-operated Otis elevators. (Alan Berner & Katie G. Cotterill / The Seattle Times)

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Larry Kreisman, program director of Historic Seattle, says, “There is no question that the slender Smith Tower offered (and still does provide) remarkable vistas of mountains and water and the growing city.

“One can only imagine the thrill of residents and tourists in 1914 emerging from the tower elevator into the Chinese Room and onto the observation deck — the highest they had ever been — and observing the city from an unimaginable perspective.”

The tower became the city’s symbol and remained so until the taller Space Needle, at 605 feet, debuted in 1962.

Of course, there now are at least a dozen taller buildings downtown. Kreisman says, “The taller structures of late are simply ‘tall.’”