Walter Percy Chrysler (1875-1949), who was born in Wamego, Kansas, was the son of a locomotive engineer for the Union Pacific Railroad. After finishing high school, Chrysler apprenticed as a machinist at the Union Pacific shops, and by the time he was thirty-two years old he was the Master Mechanic for the entire Chicago Great Western Railroad.

It was 1907 when Chrysler moved to the Buick Motor Company where they were still making wooden carriage-like automobile bodies at the Fisher Body Company. Chrysler slashed costs by converting from the wooden carriage “Body by Fisher,” to all steel. By 1920, Chrysler had become Vice President and General Manager of General Motors, earning a salary of around a million dollars a year. He was forty-five years old and wanted to move on and build an automobile that he had dreamed of.

After moving to New York City to take over the Willys-Overland Motor Company, he set about planning his dream car, a sleek, streamlined machine that would be fun to drive and looked as if it were going fast even when parked. It was the Roaring Twenties, jobs were plentiful, and auto sales were skyrocketing. Chrysler’s dream machine went on display in January 1924, at an auto show in the lobby of New York’s Ambassador Hotel. It was far different from the cars of the day, which tended to be box-like contraptions with running boards on the sides, a spare tire hanging from the back, and one small tail light. An article in Fortune Magazine said that Chrysler had made the perfect car of the twenties, a period when desire transplanted needs.

New York Headquarters

Chrysler harbored yet another idea. He wanted to have his headquarters in New York and decided it would be the tallest and grandest building in the world, surpassing the 625-foot Woolworth Building, which had held the title since 1913. Early in 1928, Chrysler found an ideal building site on Lexington Avenue between Forty-Second and Forty-Third Streets, just two blocks from Grand Central Station. The lot was owned by William H. Reynolds, a New York senator turned real estate developer. Reynolds had also planned to build the tallest building, and his architect, William Van Alen, had half-completed plans. But Reynolds had fallen on financial difficulties and accepted Chrysler’s offer of two million dollars for the land, the partially finished plans, and his architect.

Chrysler explained to Van Alen that he wanted to have the tallest building in the world even if it meant surpassing the Eiffel Tower. In March, 1929, Chrysler notified the press that he planned to build a skyscraper that would be 808 feet tall, surpassing the Woolworth Building by 133 feet.

Construction began in December 1928, and the steel skeleton was soon rising at the rate of four stories a week. By May 17, 1929, seven stories had gone up. In July, however, there was a surprising notice in the papers. George Orhstrom, president of the Bank of Manhattan, announced that he would be erecting a building at 40 Wall Street that would top out at 840 feet, 32 feet taller than Chrysler’s goal.

Then on August 30, 1929, there was another shocker. A building to be known as The Empire State Building would be 80 stories high, exactly 1000 feet. It was being backed by General Motors. A great skyscraper race had begun, with three contestants.

Final Construction

Van Alen then announced his plans to build to 842 feet, which was a scant 24 inches higher than that announced for the 40 Wall Street building. Thereupon, Orhstrom said his building would reach 927 feet. Construction on Forty-Second Street had appar-
ently come to a standstill, so that shortly after reaching 927 feet, Ohrstrom announced that they had completed the world’s tallest building. The event was celebrated with a lavish party on the first floor of their building.

But something was happening on Forty-Second Street. On a frosty November morning at ten o’clock, Van Alen was stationed on a corner two blocks from the Chrysler Building, where he could get a clear view of its top, which was covered with scaffolding. A smile rose on his face when he saw a shining needle of steel rising up from the scaffolding. It was followed by a latticed iron structure that would become the skeleton of the spire and dome of the building. It emerged slowly and steadily for a period of ninety minutes, increasing the height of the building by 185 feet. A miracle had happened on Forty-Second Street. The building was now more than 100 feet taller than the 40 Wall Street building. At 1048 feet it was even taller than the 1024-foot Eiffel Tower. Van Alen had played the greatest trick in architectural history!

The steel skeleton was in view for only a short time, if anyone had chanced to look up, since workmen promptly erected scaffolding in preparation for the cladding of the entire skeleton with Nirosta stainless steel panels. Two sheet metal workshops had been set up in the upper stories. Equipped with shears and other metal-working tools, workmen cut and fit in place some 4500 panels. The total weight of the Nirosta panels was around twenty-seven tons.

The building had an area of one million square feet, and had thirty-two elevators. When fully occupied, it would house 10,000 tenants and employees, not to mention thousands of visitors. The custodial staff would number 350, and the building would be cleaned daily with a modern central vacuum cleaning system. The building cost $14,000,000. There were no fatalities during construction.

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