

Subscribe | E-Editions | Free E-editions | River News 75¢ | Super Shopper - FREE | About Us | Contact Us | FREE Classified - Items Under \$50



News Community Public Records Obituaries Opinions Education Sports Outdoors

Flanders Realty Group advertisement with contact information: 2 North Brown St, Rhinelanders, WI 54501, www.flandersrealtygroup.com, (715) 420-1100.

Advanced Search search... search button

search sponsored by Nicolet National Bank advertisement showing a smartphone with the TAP logo.

home : community : community news

Facebook

More

April 23, 2021

8/28/2020 7:29:00 AM

Rhinelanders Revisited: The ever-changing culture of our community

Stephanie Kuski River News Features Reporter

The last installment of Rhinelanders Revisited explored the shifting landscape of the downtown district, alluding to the fact that day-to-day life back then differed greatly from what we know today.

For as long as I can remember, I've heard my parents and grandparents tell stories about going down to Brown Street for a night on the town, a scene not readily recognizable to a local millennial like myself with faint recollections of a bustling downtown district.

But at one time, Brown Street was the place to be on a Friday night. Many locals made the initial trip downtown to cash their week's paycheck, but since stores stayed open until 9 p.m., it was also common to spend the evening window shopping, people watching and chatting with others gallivanting the street.

"Friday night was the big shopping night downtown, when the two blocks of Brown Street were still the business center of the community," Rhinelanders Historical Society President Bill Vancos recalled. "I can remember being downtown with my friends walking and my parents would be parked there, and people would just stop and talk... It was just being social on Friday night."

"Everyone went down to the bars on Friday nights in my era," my great-aunt Gloria Smith echoed. "You sat in your car and watched people come by. Everyone would walk the main street and you'd watch them come buy, beep your horn and wave to them so they'd come over to talk to you in the car."

"People would come downtown just to meet," Mitch Mode, owner of Mel's Trading Post, said. "They'd cruise up and down the street in their cars, other times they would walk up and go to different stores... You bought enough to make it worthwhile, but a lot of it was a social setting. Downtown Rhinelanders was pretty active then in a way you can't imagine today on a Friday night."

This golden era of the downtown district went on at least through the '60s, but started deteriorating by the '70s as downtown businesses flocked to the Lincoln Street corridor, a move motivated by the creation of Sunrise Plaza (now called East Point Centre) and big box stores like K-Mart later on.



The Belles of St. Mary's Drum and Bugle Corps was well-established in the fabric of the Rhinelanders community from 1956-77. The corps was especially well known for marching annually in the parade downtown prior to their Drums in the Night competition, and later on, for their extensive travel in a series of annual East Coast tours.

Welcome, Stephanie Kuski! logout

MANAGE YOUR ACCOUNT

Order photo reprints

Classifieds Advertising Information

Community Connections Submit to Newspaper...

Ced Vig's books for sale Kris Gilbertson's 'I Recall...'



Milwaukee, WI

55°

11:11 am CDT

Mostly sunny

This decade marked a subtle - albeit decisive - shift in the culture of our community, one prompted by a significant transformation in the values and expectations of society at large.

The cultural shift was palpable not only in Rhinelanders, but across the country. During World War II, an incredible effort to facilitate mass production of airplanes, engines and other military supplies put Americans - many of them women - back to work following unprecedented unemployment rates during the Great Depression. By the summer of 1945, Americans had been living under wartime rationing policies for over three years, with limits on essentials like coffee, butter, milk, soap and sugar, so after the war, consumers were eager to buy.

At the same time, U.S. factories were making the shift from manufacturing tanks and planes to household appliances, automobiles, furniture, clothing, shoes and everything in between. But when consumers flocked to the stores, their spending was not perceived as a means to satisfy an indulgent material desire - in fact, the American consumer was praised as a patriotic citizen in the '50s, since they were actively contributing to the ultimate success of the American way of life.

But at that time, much of this spending was pragmatic: Americans invested in items that revolved around home and family life, like televisions, washing machines, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners. These values associated with domestic spending gave way to another rigid stereotype, that of the 1950s housewife during the age of domesticity, when it was common for women to marry soon after high school, divorce rates were low and birth rates doubled in the era of the "happy homemaker."

As a result, between 1946-64, the largest generation of Americans - known as the "baby boomers" - was born, a demographic trend which reinforced women's identities as wives and mothers and men's identities as the primary breadwinner.

At the end of World War II, only 10% of married women with children under the age of six held a job. But as one major war ended, another soon took its place. Embedded in the propaganda of the Cold War era was the idea that the stability of a "nuclear family" was what made Americans superior to their Communist counterparts. (An ironic reference, to say the least, considering both sides lived in constant fear of nuclear warfare for much of the '50s and '60s.)

Politically-fueled images of Russian women working in drab factories while their children were left in anonymous daycare facilities were contrasted with those of American wives in delicate dresses tending to the hearth and home as they enjoyed the boundless rewards of democracy, capitalism and freedom.

These societal pressures had a profound effect on the expectation that women would stay home to take care of their children, and because of this, bright-minded mothers had the time, energy and motivation to participate in community activities that often centered around their children. For this reason, our community and others like it boasted a vibrant social calendar during this time - from Friday nights spent on Brown Street to annual social outings and municipal sports teams, Rhinelanders enjoyed many activities that have since fizzled out as these family dynamics shifted in turn.

One example of an important enterprise in Rhinelanders' history which illustrates this cultural shift was the Belles of St. Mary's, an all-girls drum and bugle corp organized by Rev. Robert Schipper in the fall of 1956. Al DiGiacomo directed the corps for much of the Belles' history, which was initially exclusive to Catholic girls attending St. Mary's school, but was non-denominational by the end of its 20+ year reign. The group progressed from a parade corps of 36 members to a highly competitive corps of 95 who gained national prominence in a series of annual East Coast tours. In Rhinelanders and the surrounding area, the Belles were well known for marching in the annual parades, and locals may recall the drum and bugle corps practicing around town during the summers.

Former Belles Tracey Barnes and Jean Mathews said they practiced day and night and traveled extensively throughout the summer to compete. They were proud to part of the Belles, they said.

"It was a great experience, I wouldn't have given it up for anything," Matthews commented. "It was something Rhinelanders could be proud of. Whenever you went out on that field for competition... you get the chills, the way the crowd responded to you. It was just wonderful."

"You were proud to be one," Barnes echoed, referring to the Belles' identity. "You were so busy - we traveled so much, we slept on floors... You didn't think about not doing it because you had the honor of being a Belle."

While this took considerable time from the Belles themselves, tremendous support from the community was another important factor that made this effort possible in the first place. Not only did the Belles' parents chaperone their trips, make them bagged lunches and pick them up in the middle of the night following their away competitions, but their uniforms were sewn by one of Belles' mothers, the community supported them by rallying at their performances and local businesses would buy ads to help purchase equipment.

But when DiGiacomo retired from the Belles in 1973, interest began to wane. They tried opening the corps to include both boys and girls during its last years, but the effort flopped. 1977 marked the final year for the Belles at a time when America's cultural and family dynamic once again shifted as the values and roles of the next generation deviated from those prior.

The '70s marked a shift in the traditional family dynamic which led to a transformation of sorts in other aspects of day-to-day life. By that time, it was becoming more socially acceptable for a woman to hold a full-time career alongside her husband, to get a divorce, or to never marry at all - arrangements that would have been all but unheard of just a century before.

DELTA CONNECTION
is now booking flights into and out of Rhinelanders...
FLY Rhinelanders
Operated by **SkyWest**
[CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFORMATION](#)

WALDMANN Construction, Inc.
Design / Build General Contractor
715-479-3132
St. Germain, WI 54558
Your Home is Built on Our Reputation

Domino's
LARGE 3 TOPPING PIZZA MON-THURS \$7.99
Carry Out Only
Click here. [DOMINOS.COM](#)
Rhinelanders 715-362-2525

715-369-5270
4690 South Shore Drive Rhinelanders
East Side Automotive
Complete Automotive Repair
Rust Proofing
Master Certified Auto Repair
Quality Used Auto Sales
[Click here for more information](#)

Click HERE for current Metal Prices!
715.362.9445 ext. 1
OAK LEAF SALVAGE
4208 Oak Leaf Road Rhinelanders
Buyers of Junk Cars and Recyclable Metals
Dealers in Used Automobile & Truck Parts
NEW - Drive-On Scale - **WE Pick Up Cars!**

D&J GET READY FOR WINTER DRIVING
[CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS](#)
Auto, Truck & Equipment Repair, Inc.
Stevens Street • Rhinelanders • 715-365-7400

TAKE NOTICE WISCONSIN!
Search State of Wisconsin public notices.

With advances in contraception and women's rights, women began having fewer children and oftentimes delaying parenthood until later in life, many after attending university, at a time when more women began earning advanced degrees. While these milestones were positive to the feminist movement that witnessed a second wave take off in the late '60s, this also prompted a significant shift in the traditional family dynamic, one in which women in particular had less time for the extracurricular activities that made our community so vibrant.

"When I grew up, moms didn't work and because of that they had more time," Mode explained. "So you had all these bright women who had a lot of energy and time to put into the community... Maybe I'm simplifying things, but as you get more families with two careers, it changes available time and recreation time."

In this way, local organizations like the Belles were driven by volunteers, many of them mothers, who had the time and energy to contribute to community activities that usually involved their children. As a result, this period reflected an active social life in Rhinelanders which differs from what we see today. Compared to my grandparents' generation, families today often rely on a dual income and thus have less time to dedicate to community activities and organizations, which has ultimately changed the culture of our community in profound ways.

However, it's important to mention here that recognizing these differences doesn't necessarily equate to a value statement suggesting that then was better than it is now; put simply, it was just different.

"There's no right or wrong in these things - it's just changed," Mode echoed succinctly, "and it will continue to."

Today, we still stand witness to countless organizations which work diligently to make our community a wonderful place to live and recreate. Although the current landscape looks quite different in comparison to decades past, it's also a reflection of the values of the time, which, as Mode said, will continue to shift as the ideas and expectations of the next generation replace those of the past.

Stay tuned for the next installment in this continuing series and visit www.rivernewsonline.com to read previous installments.

Article Comment Submission Form

Please feel free to submit your comments.

Article comments are not posted immediately to the Web site. Each submission must be approved by the Web site editor, and meet the comment guidelines (see "Comment Guidelines" at right). There may be a delay of 24-48 hours for any submission while the web site editor reviews and approves it.

Note: All information on this form is required. Your telephone number and email address is for our use only, and will not be attached to your comment.

Submit an Article Comment

First Name:

Required

Last Name:

Required

Telephone:

Required

Email:

Required

Comment:

Required

Passcode:

Required

[Click here to see a new mix of characters.](#)

This is an anti-SPAM device. It is not case sensitive.