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7/10/2020 7:28:00 AM Rhinelanders Revisited: The tunnel tales, debunked

Stephanie Kuski River News Features Reporter

Growing up in Rhinelanders, I've become accustomed to the storytelling culture of the Northwoods. I love listening to my relatives tell tall tales exaggerating larger-than-life feats, my gullible self believing every ounce of it.

But in digging up the remnants of Rhinelanders's past, I've found myself questioning some of the folklore I grew up so earnestly believing.

Our last installment touched on Wisconsin's brewing culture during Prohibition, which merely scratched the surface of historical anecdotes related to bootlegging in the Northwoods. Along those lines, there are many stories circulating around town about different tunnels that were used to illicitly transport alcohol.

But how much truth do these stories hold?

To this day, there's a long-standing rumor about a tunnel that went from the Rhinelanders Brewing Co. on Ocala Street to the impressive Hilgermann residence at 919 Arbutus, just across the street. According to local legend, a tunnel was constructed between the brewery and Hilgermann's home so that he could have tap beer on demand.

Local resident Bill Brunell, who grew up in the Hilgermann residence and has some of his personal collection of Rhinelanders Brewing Co. and Shorty memorabilia on loan at the Taproom downtown, disputes the story.

Brunell has said he's never seen any evidence of a tunnel between the house and brewery.

"I lived across the brewery for an awful long time," he said. "I used to play around that brewery an awful lot... So I got to know the old brewery pretty good."

"There was never anything down in our basement that indicated there was actually a tunnel," he continued. "The only thing there could've possibly maybe have been... back in the early days, the brewery was heated by steam, so they might've had a steam pipe back there."

Many years ago, the sewer under the street connecting the former Hilgermann residence to the brewery needed to be replaced, so excavators dug up the entire street all the way down to Pioneer Park, Brunell explained.



The former Hilgermann residence, pictured above, was located just across the street from the Rhinelanders Brewing Co., then located on Ocala Street where the Eye Clinic of Wisconsin is today. The residence was the childhood home of local resident Bill Brunell, who has debunked the myth that there was a tunnel in place between the brewery and the Hilgermann residence to provide tap beer on demand. Photo by Stephanie Kuski/River News.

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Since the sewer was 30 feet down, excavators had to dig that deep and still didn't find any trace of a tunnel.

So then, what about locals who swear up and down they were actually in this tunnel that connected the Hilgermann residence to the brewery?

After Rhinelanders Brewing Co. closed down in the late '60s, the von Stiehl Winery set up shop on the west side of the building and offered tours to busloads of visitors. To get feet through the door, the folks at the von Stiehl Winery boasted the fantastical tunnel tale of its original owner.

"So the winery figured they were going to have something to talk about here," Brunell laughed. "So they made up the story, they said this is where they had a tunnel going to the other house across the street."

"They had a phenomenal amount of people going through there touring that winery everyday," Brunell continued. "So they had all these people and they wanted something to talk about. So the von Stiehl's made up that story and it just sunk in around town."

"You can see how something like that grows legs and keeps going," Rhinelanders Historical Society President Bill Vancos commented. "It's a very cool story, but it just didn't actually happen."

But with our colorful chapter of bootlegging in Northwoods history, it's no surprise this is not the only rumor of tunnels in town used for this purpose.

For as long as I can remember, I've heard stories of Prohibition-era tunnels that were constructed downtown for illicitly transporting alcohol to the various saloons there.

Although there is some truth to this narrative, that's not exactly how the story goes, as Vancos explained.

"They used to have these big openings in the sidewalk," he said, "two metal plates that would open up and you could move items up and down like an elevator to the basement."

"It made perfect sense," Vancos continued. "If they had these doorways between the buildings and if somebody needed a new boiler or something, they could put it in over on Rives Street, go down and just wheel it through the basement."

"It was the merchants working together," he said. "Think of it like two doors between hotel rooms, where if the people on both sides wanted to unlock it, they could open it up to let traffic go through."

"If you can envision those (doorways) between half a dozen buildings, you could open those up and move stuff through it, then lock it back up again," Vancos continued. "So it wasn't like a tunnel that had a roof and sides to it, but it was an opening where you could move products down the street, but underground."

Because it was common knowledge that these openings allowed entry to the street below, I can see how the bootlegging narrative was woven into this tall tale.

But since these openings were sealed with metal plates and padlocked so no hooligans could get in, oftentimes people walked over the top of them without even realizing it allowed access to the street below. Vancos said he remembers seeing these around town years ago.

"I recall there were quite a few of them downtown, next to the State Theater (on the Rives Street side) and the First National Bank (on the Stevens Street side)," he said. "I would guess that some were probably used to receive delivery of coal in the early days, as well as access to the basements. In the '50s and '60s when I recall them, they were secure enough that people walked and road bikes over them."

"House of Spirits used to have a trap door in the sidewalk on Rives Street, located near where Tilly's side door now is," Vancos continued. "There was an opening covered by two hinged steel plates that would open to provide access to the basement."

"After the Rhinelanders Brewery closed and Rhinelanders beer was made by Huber Brewing in Monroe, the semi loads of beer that the House of Spirits received each week were cases of Rhinelanders beer in 12-oz returnable bottles," he recalled.

Those bottles were stored in the basement of House of Spirits and every week the empty bottles would get sent off with the next truckload of full bottles that replaced them.

Vancos said Mark Wittcock, the former owner of House of Spirits, took him downstairs in what is now Tilly's to find an old doorway in the rock foundation that would have led into the next building to the south (where Lattitudes is located today).

But because the buildings that house Lattitudes and the Job Service Center next door were built in the '60s, there's no way to determine nowadays how far that tunnel went down Brown Street.

"It definitely went from Tilly's, but how many more buildings after that, I was not able to verify," Vancos said. "We don't have those old buildings in that section (of downtown) to verify."

Vancos added that he spoke to an individual at the Rhinelanders Cafe & Pub who went into the basement there and found no patching or differences in the rock foundation, such that it would suggest a tunnel was once located there.



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In the end, we'll never know for certain how far down Brown Street this opening allowed access to, but the long-rumored tale associated with its use has finally been put to rest.

It's worth mentioning, however, that the remnants of a tunnel downtown were found in the summer of 2016 during the streetscape project involving Brown, Davenport and Stevens streets. But this tunnel wasn't used for bootlegging either. It connected the former Associated Bank building to the drive-up bank across the street, and was probably used to send documents between the two buildings.

While these fantastic tunnel tales have been debunked, at least there was some truth to the latter narratives.

As Vancos alluded to earlier, it becomes more clear (and a bit amusing) to see how folklore told through the years can grow its own legs and take off on a life of its own.

Stay tuned for the next installment of this continuing series and visit rivernews online.com to read previous installments.

To connect in candid conversation about the history of Rhinelanders, contact Stephanie Kuski at stephanie@rivernews online.com.

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The Northwoods River News | Walker Communications, LLC
232 S. Courtney Street, Rhinelanders, WI 54501 | Office (715) 365-6397 | Fax (715) 365-6361

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