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Rhinelanders Revisited: The shifting scenery of the downtown district

Stephanie Kuski River News Features Reporter

Prior to the high-speed technology of planes, trains and automobiles that have defined the 21st century, rural communities such as our own had to be self-sufficient.

Rhinelanders Historical Society President Bill Vancos explained that with unreliable transportation and poor road conditions back in the day, milk and other foods were quick to spoil in transport, which is why there were many dairies and grocers in the area.



Rhinelanders' historic Brown Street district has seen many storefronts come and go throughout the years, such as the Majestic Theatre, Campbell's Clothing Store, the Fenlon Hotel, JCPenny, Woolworth's and many more.

Additionally, numerous family-owned grocery stores, restaurants, taverns, pharmacies, jewelers, banks, hotels and more dotted the downtown district, marking it as the central business hub of the city.

"We had multiple pharmacies, a couple independent shoe stores," commented Mitch Mode, owner of Mel's Trading Post. "Danner's is still there but we [also] had Schauder's and Edward's shoe stores. We had jewelry stores up and around the corner. DeByle's Clothing Store, Campbell's Clothing Store, Gary's... So there were a lot of businesses, and they were a vibrant part of the community."

"On Mason Street from the viaduct to Monico Street, there were seven or eight grocery stores," local Ralph Larson added.

"There probably wasn't more than a couple blocks between each grocery store," Vancos echoed.

Indeed, a telephone directory from 1952 lists 36 grocery stores, many of which were smaller, family-owned neighborhood markets in addition to a few national chain stores.

Just a small sampling of those family-owned markets include Cirilli's Grocery, Bruckner's Grocery, Reeves Supermarket, Tillman's Grocery, Rueckert's Butcher Shoppe, Stefanik Food Market and Vanney's Food Shop. Many of these neighborhood markets were actually located in the residential areas of town so patrons didn't need to travel far for essential groceries.

It was also common for many of these neighborhood grocers to charge patrons' bills to a tab that was paid off every month, rather than paying for each transaction.

"Those neighborhood stores did a lot of charging," Vancos explained, "but it wasn't to strangers, it was to

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neighbors in their neighborhood."

"You can still see where a lot of these neighborhood grocery stores were," Vancos added. "If you drive around, you're going to see things that just don't look like your traditional house. They have this big, flat front to them. Chances are, those were either a grocery store or beer depot."

In addition to these neighborhood grocers, two national chains were located on Brown Street at one time: both Red Owl and A&P boasted bigger buildings with more selection compared to these family-owned markets.

Vancos worked at Red Owl as a stock boy and bagger during his high school years and recalls seeing two packs of blank checkbooks at the checkout - one for Merchants State Bank and the other for First National Bank - so that if patrons forgot their own checkbook, they could use those checks.

The downtown district also featured a variety of other storefronts through the years, including large clothing store chains like JCPenny and Montgomery Wards, and five-and-dimes such as Woolworth's and Newberry's.

"Montgomery Wards was so cool," Vancos recalled. "The clerks on the main floor didn't process the money; everything was done up in the balcony, which was the business office... They had wires that came down to the clerk's counter... Each wire had a small container with a roller, then the clerk would simply put the paperwork and payment in this little container, and it must've had a little weight to it, because they just gave it a shot and it rolled up the wire."

At one time, there were also three family-owned sporting good shops in town: Larson's father Arthur (and later, Ralph himself) owned Larson's Service and Sporting Goods on Eagle Street, Leo's Sport Shop was located on Davenport Street and The Trading Post had two other locations on Brown Street before finding its current home at the corner of King and Brown. Today, that business is known as Mel's Trading Post after Mode's late father Mel, who got into the business with Del Stengl in the '40s and acquired full ownership in the '60s.

Vancos recalls purchasing his first motorcycle, a Honda Sport 50, for \$199 in 1967 at Mel's. He also remembers seeing a "brag box" of sorts outside of both Mel's and Leo's, in which fishermen could display their catch on ice to patrons walking by.

The tantalizing aroma of freshly popped popcorn wafting down Brown Street is another fond memory for Vancos, since Mel's featured a roll-out popcorn maker manned by his children outside the store.

"My family and all the neighbors and associated friends, that was our first work experience, selling popcorn," Mode said. "I remember it when I was in seventh grade, that was my first real paying job: 75 cents an hour selling popcorn. I thought I was the richest kid in the world."

There were also several family-owned pharmacies in the Brown Street district, including Taege's Pharmacy, Webben's Drug Store and Reardon's Rexall Drugs. The latter two also featured a soda jerk, or an attendant who served soda drinks and ice cream sodas.

"They called them a soda jerk because they had handles like beer taps that they were using to put the fizz - the carbonation - into the drinks, so they would jerk the handle," Vancos explained, "and that's how they got the nickname 'soda jerk.'"

The downtown district was also dotted with several hotels, especially in Rhinelanders' early days. The Wonder Hotel was located at the corner of Anderson and Pelham, but was lost to fire in 1979. The Oneida Hotel started off as such in the '30s, but by the '50s its name changed to the Fenlon Hotel. The Northwestern Hotel & Lounge has been in the same location since it was first established in the '30s.

Hunters who stayed in the hotels downtown during deer season often hung their trophy bucks from the hotel's marquee, Vancos recalled, another sort of makeshift brag box as patrons meandered down Brown Street.

Of course, there were countless mom-and-pop restaurants and taverns downtown too. Pat's Tavern is one of the oldest continually family-run businesses downtown, and remains in its original location (although most locals refer to the tavern as Patty Deau's, after its first owner). The Cue Club was located right next door (but was fronted on Anderson Street) and was the place for teens to hang out, Vancos said, since it also featured a pinball machine and pool tables.

The Rhinelanders Cafe & Pub is another business which has remained in its original location since it was established in 1911, but in the early '70s the building next door was purchased for the Pub to expand. Other family-owned food establishments downtown included The Midget Cafe, Bernie's Waffle Shop, The Tasty Bakery and Onson's Inn.

The Hungry Hollow also boasted a slew of saloons: at least half a dozen bars lined the street from the train tracks on Thayer Street to the nearby City Cleaners' location today, including the Tremont Bar, Ace High, Soo House, LeDuke's Tavern, Matt's Bar and Grill's Tap. Vancos said The Hollow was where lumberjacks were permitted to "let loose" in Rhinelanders' early days, since they were officially prohibited from the Brown Street district, and as a result, many fights also took place there.

Downtown patrons also enjoyed different entertainment enterprises. Herman Zander first opened the Majestic Theatre in the early 1900s. It was later acquired by the Rouman family. During its nearly 70-year reign, the Majestic saw the movie industry shift from black-and-white silent films to color wide-screen movies with surround sound. The Majestic closed in 1980 and was replaced by Book World, where a false floor was installed to level the sloped theatre stage (which is why the floor there felt spongy to walk on).



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The State Theatre was established by Pete Rouman in 1921 in partnership with his brother George, who opened Rouman's Sweet Shoppe right next door later on. Although the Sweet Shoppe closed in the '50s, in 1952, the Roumans opened a drive-in theatre located near where Marshfield Clinic's Dental Center sits today. It ran through the '80s and remnants of the screen can still be found at that location.

George Rouman - the great-nephew of those pioneers who first established Rouman Amusement Company - came full circle in upholding his family's legacy of sweet treats and entertaining movies, as he owns The Fun Factory on Brown Street and established the Rouman Cinema, in collaboration with his parents and sister, on Lincoln Street in 2000.

Many other family-owned businesses were prompted to make that move to the east side of town as big box stores like K-Mart and Wal-Mart established themselves in the Lincoln Street corridor. But eventually, these bigger chains began outcompeting many of these mom-and-pop shops, forcing many to close through the years.

"As commercial [real estate] started to spread out from the downtown... downtown became diluted at best, and at a certain point gutted in some places," Mode explained. "You see that here, you see that in Wausau, you see it across the country. It's not unique to Rhinelanders."

"I don't think it's the fault of anybody; it's just a changing society, a changing culture, where values are a bit different and expectations are a lot different," Mode continued. "You don't lose it all at once, you lose it in bits."

The homogenization of our shopping experience, coupled with the demand to buy more for less, has shifted industry away from local, self-sufficient commerce to a more globalized society.

While there are pros and cons to both models, COVID-19 has shifted our awareness to buy local. As many family-owned businesses struggle to stay open through the pandemic, it becomes clear that supporting these businesses is vital not only to preserving Rhinelanders' history, but to support those families who have served our community for generations.

Stay tuned for the next installment in this continuing series. Visit [www.rivernewsonline.com](http://www.rivernewsonline.com) to read previous installments.

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