THE ONEIDA COUNTY REST ROOM FOR WOMEN
1920 - 1988

The Oneida County Rest Room for Women opened in 1920 due to two factors—state legislation making municipal rest rooms or comfort stations mandatory, and the drive of the Civic Committee of the Rhinelander Woman's Club. During this time in history, a trip to town for those outside the city was an all day affair, usually involving a train ride. Roads were not in good shape and plowing was not yet done in the winter. The aim of the Rest Room was to provide "a pleasant place for women, both visitors and local, where they could rest, write, sew, eat their lunches, leave their babies while they shop, meet their friends and wait for trains." The county and the city shared the expenses of maintaining the Rest Room.

After inspecting several properties, the Committee chose a vacant home on North Brown Street, known as the "old Marquardt house". Martin Marquardt, his wife, Mathilda, and son, Hugo, were the longest occupants of the home, built in 1887 by Brown Brothers. (Its first occupant was Mrs. Moulton and her millinery goods). When the Marquardts rented the building around the turn of the century, they also manufactured cigars out of their home. In later years, the house had become vacant. The Civic Committee's choice of a former residence rather than a business to house the Rest Room, provided an atmosphere that was home-like and very relaxing.

A matron was to be continually available at the Rest Room, living in a room upstairs and receiving income from the small lunches she provided. During the first 57 years of the Rest Room's existence, only three matrons were in charge. Mrs. Charles (Matilda) Olson was the first. Originally from Sweden, she had been a widow for three years. Her salary was to be $50/month, but she also received the income from the lunches she provided and rent on the extra room upstairs. Upon her death in 1931, Mrs. Ellen Lofquist, also a widow originally from Sweden, was selected from 21 applicants to be the next matron. Her wages now included a two week vacation. She was also the unfortunate one to bear the brunt of the Depression when, for one year, she received no wages at all. (Through Mrs. Lofquist and her grandson, Dick, the museum received the original clock from the Rest Room and one of their first children's rockers). Mrs. Mabel Spears succeeded Mrs. Lofquist in 1958. She also remained with the Rest Room for a long time, retiring in 1977.

Many of the original furnishings for the Rest Room were donated by Committee members. They made sure that the interior was painted and wallpapered, took care of the lawn, furnished wood for heat (later coal and then oil), planted flowers and contracted for general repairs. They also made small investments and held fund-raising events to help with the expenses of the Rest Room. In 1922, when the Rest Room was purchased by the county, they made a generous donation of $1000 towards the purchase price. Their efforts were rewarded by the fact that the number of visitors grew from 3000 in the first four months to 13,000 in 1968, including guests from every state and some foreign countries. State inspectors referred to the Oneida County Rest Room for Women as a model for others. Throughout its entire existence, the Woman's Club Rest Room committee continued to supervise its management. In the 1930's they were joined by representatives from other members of the Oneida County Federation of Women's Clubs, who had been making (and continued to make) small yearly donations.

In the fall of 1960, rumors circulated that the city and county were considering selling the Rest Room property. Two members of the Rest Room Committee met with the county board. It was agreed that Estabrook's Insurance, who wanted to erect a large office building, would provide, at the rear of their building, free space for the lounge, which also included a large closet or storage room, and a bathroom, along with heat and light. With this agreement, the Rest Room house was sold and, in February of 1961, was moved east of the city, where it is still standing. Most of the furnishings were also sold, and the Rest Room Committee made plans for the opening of their new lounge, which finally occurred in late spring of 1962.

As hard as the committee tried to make their new space comfortable, the Rest Room was never quite the same. The previous building had a large billboard sign advertising the facility. With the new building, however, the city would

allow only a small sign, which newcomers to the city often missed The government also began to intrude on the management of the facilities as it first became necessary to withhold taxes from the matron's wages, then pay Social Security, and Worker's Compensation. Since there was no longer a place for the matron to stay and no income from lunches (these had to be stopped in 1948 due to "lack of restaurant facilities"), her living expenses became larger. Wages for the matron had to be increased from $50/month to $75/month.

But the Oneida County Rest Room for Women did not slowly disappear from Rhinelander's history. It left with a crash and a bang after dividing the population of the city and the surrounding area as to the meaning of its existence.

In 1984, when the minimum wage law was established, the yearly salary of the matron went from $900.00 to an estimated $4400.00. The county did not want to help with this rise in cost to the Rest Room, which caused much debate among the citizens of Rhinelander. The media may also have unknowingly contributed to the debate by the simple omission of capitalization in their reports. The "Rest Room for Women" became "women's restroom" which turned the discussion of whether or not to fund a public lounge, in which women could rest while shopping, into a debate about toilet facilities. At one point, a county board member was quoted as saying, " "I still do not see on Main Street any horse-hitching posts. I certainly do not need someone to hold my purse while I go into the rest room." Eventually, it was decided to fund a paid matron for two days, with the remaining days staffed by volunteers. This solution may have backfired, however, as the hours when the Rest Room could be open became erratic, depending on the availability of volunteers.

Discrimination also became an issue. During the early years of its existence, there was never a question of whether or not the Rest Room should also have facilities for men. But the 1984 debate struggled with why there should be a public lounge for women when there was no such lounge for men. Changes in the bathroom also became necessary so as not to discriminate against the handicapped.

In 1988, the County Board, still very much divided on the matter, finally sold the Rest Room space to Estabrook's. On August 12, 1988, the Oneida County Rest Room for Women closed its doors for good.

At the head of those struggling to keep the Women's Rest Room alive, was Dr. Frances Cline. Dr. Cline wrote letters, spoke to organizations, researched the history of the lounge and contacted other communities with similar facilities (although none had quite as extensive or as accommodating facilities as Rhinelander). It was through her efforts that the Rhinelander Historical Museum now has the original minutes of the Rest Room Committee meetings and a scrapbook of her fight to save the Oneida County Rest Room for Women.