

It's Always been "The Alpine"

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Al Behrman Sr., formerly a Portage native, must have been a pretty gutsy guy back in 1930. Hardly six months had passed since the greatest stock market crash in history had devastated the good times atmosphere of the early Hoover (Republican) Administration. Banks were teetering on foreclosure, former financial wizards were committing suicide, and family farms were in jeopardy.

Merchants in Baraboo scrambled to keep their establishments going, not always successfully. But nothing fazed Al Behrman Sr. Down in the middle of Fourth Street, the once thriving Ketchum Livery stable building had closed in 1923. Despite other more recent uses, it remained a fine building. But a restaurant in a former livery stable—well, people must have wondered about that. But Al forged ahead, opening his "Alpine Ice Cream Parlor" and Lunch room on June 23, 1930.

This was not your ordinary restaurant. Expensive Thirties-style wood booths, de rigueur de jour and still in use today, bordered the large center section, with the kitchen in the rear. Each booth featured its own mirror as well as coat hooks and individual lighting, albeit with unpadded seating, still extant. High above was a handsome pressed metal ceiling. It remains in generally good shape today..

We don't know how Al happened to choose the name Alpine, but it remains in the name today, 82 years later. In the interim, owners have included Robert Bruhns, the Leslie Herriods, Francis Sanchez's, and Ken Stepanske's, followed by the well-remembered Viola Erlandson from 1950 through 1978. Vi is the owner with the longest tenure.

Owners since then include Mikkil Anderson, Tammie Stebbins, the John Bucks, the Jim Jeryks, and, finally, the present owner, Jen Rindflesh. All are carefully recorded by Joe Ward in his anthology of storied Downtown Baraboo. In every case, the word Alpine is in the name of the restaurant. At one time scenic ALPINE wallpaper scenes reached to the very ceiling.

As the accompanying photo shows, the front section of the establishment has undergone major changes. Unlike today, the "soda fountain", which still has the back bar,

was on your right as you entered. Now this area is mostly just seating for individual customers, with three matching booths. On the left there were cases displaying fancy candies, for the front area served as a candy kitchen as well as soda fountain. The pressed metal ceiling shows well here. Part of the partition remains, separating the booth and table dining from the stools..

If the walls could talk, everything from family reunions to modest wedding dinners could be recalled, as well as high school hanger-outers just after mid-afternoon and, under some owners, midnight feasts. They might also talk of long-gone competitors. A 1972 News-Republic features advertisements for four local eateries now gone, such as Three Lions, Garrison's, The Red Wagon, and Bakers.

There are others gone also, more elegant eateries such as the Warren Hotel, Devi Bara, and Boyd's Ritz. The Old Baraboo Inn, under several different names, is another long time Baraboo cafe. That eatery once seated a President of the United States, (Hayes) while his train waited in the station.

Jen's Alpine Café ad Soup Kitchen opens at 6 A.M. and closes up at 2 P.M. except on Friday, when they doll up the booths and do a Fish Fry. In the past some owners chose to open later and remain in business until 1 A.M. Restaurants are a poplar and necessary requirement of any small city. They provide a place for special occasions, for breakfast and lunch, or just for a friendly cup of coffee. They are also a day off for a homemaker to escape from the kitchen. Venerable hostelries like the Alpine have seen it all.



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