

Ever-changing Views of Courthouse Square Tales of Earlier Days By Bob Dewel

Attached are two photos of unknown origin which surfaced on my desk during a recent move. They are interesting in that they show many changes downtown in the short space of 28 years.

In the courthouse picture, for example, the view will never be the same. Trees can come and go, of course, and in this 1983 photo the grounds are fairly clear of trees. This allows an impressive and clear view of the courthouse and grounds.

Note how the Civil War statue stands out, though today it is rather obscured by new tree growth. That memorial was a source of considerable controversy in the late 1870's and 80's. As we wrote in an earlier story, an effort to erect a statue in the 1870's was voted down. By the 1890's, however, the several veterans groups banded together to produce this outstanding statue, dedicated on May 30, 1897.

By far the biggest change in this view today is the massive County West-Square building. It replaced the Brittingham and Hixon Lumber Co, a slight view of which can be seen in a break in the trees in this 1983 picture. The West Square building contrasts, though does not clash, with the architectural decor of the Third and Fourth Avenue structures.

Also replaced was the relatively short-lived Juliar Theatre, operating from Feb. 20, 1939 to Oct. 20, 1959, but it would not have shown in this photo anyway.

The Fourth Avenue photo is significant, for it illustrates the vitality of Downtown Baraboo. Of the 11 businesses shown, nearly all have changed, but each location was quickly occupied by a new business. Missing from the photo is the business building now on the corner to the right in the photo. A Spurgeons Department Store at the time, it now houses several businesses. Already gone from that site for 20 years was the massive old Warren hotel.

As for the other buildings, starting from the right, the Rexall drug was for some time a restaurant, quickly replaced when it became vacant by Pierce's candies and ice cream. Next door in 1983 was the Christian Book Store, now on Third Street. And next to it was Jerry's Hallmark store, now on Oak. The bookstore is now on Third Street, and the Hallmark is now a dance studio and lawyers office.

Going west, Delmo's Pizza held forth, with the Baraboo Laundry and Cleaners next door. Who would have guessed that the popular Delmo's would be a Monks Restaurant, or that the Laundry location would be Just Imagine, full of toys and games.

Next, in the center of the block comes the only business still existing from 1983. The Square Tavern. It has occupied that location since about 1940--before that it was where the Cornerstone Gallery is today--remember, you old timers?

The white pillars on the building next West were new then, a face-lifting of an old structure for the Baraboo Savings and Loan, by then known as the Federal Savings and Loan. In time it became the property of the Friends of the Al, Ringling Theatre, as did the little Gift House between it and the theatre. Plans for the white-pillared storefront are being developed.



In 1983 the Courthouse Square was much more open than today, the difference being
the growth of the trees.

The former Gift House is now a lively place, especially on theatre nights, providing badly needed space for ticket and food sales and an entrance to the place long known as "America's Prettiest Playhouse", and also as "Nothing is too good for Baraboo".

The theatre's new owners, Friends of the Al. Ringling Theatre, were the new kids on the block then. They saved it from exploitation, possible plundering, and eventual demise. Considerable progress has been made in restoring this historic playhouse, now enjoying international publicity as reported recently.

A British writer recently declared that the Ringling, if in Europe, would rank as a Grade One theatre, featuring opera and the glitter of European Society. Now occupying the theatre's three business bays are the Sauk County Art Association, and also Bonsetti Ragg Bones, an attractive specialty shop of hand-made items.

Not visible in the picture are the two bays of the old Wellington Hotel, now owned by the Screnock Law firm. Book-ending the block is the shorter but sturdy Little Village Cafe building, formerly Susies and once an historic site in the national newspaper business--see the plaque on the front of the building.

The point of this recitation of old and new occupants of these fronts is that owners or tenants come and go, but the stores remain occupied. This is a credit to the vitality of Downtown Baraboo, (including the Walnut-Water street area) and the envy of similar sized cities in Wisconsin.

These merchants are a hardy bunch, dedicated and innovative. Baraboo remains an attractive and vibrant Downtown despite the growth of other businesses located on the periphery of the city. Downtown vacancies are few indeed.

