

Popcorn Wagons a Tradition

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It is hard for old timers to explain that popcorn once cost only 5 cents a sack—maybe a little more if you wanted butter. Salt was free, and we all used too much. The snack was everywhere, but the most popular source was the downtown popcorn stand or wagon!

The attached photo will bring many a memory to Baraboo folks. It is the once familiar popcorn stand, operated last by Lester Kent. As can be seen in the photo, it was a pretty elegant setup, a self-contained cooker with room for two in its small but efficient interior.

The photo is among those donated to the Sauk County Historical Society recently by Lou Rich, widow of photographer Ron Rich. Ron's picture is not only very clear, but it depicts the wagon in its usual place on the Courthouse Square. It is believed that the wagon did business in that spot until the early 1960's, perhaps 1964.

It was a drive-up wagon, handy for families taking an evening drive. In those days before air conditioning, the evening ride could supply a cooling breeze to help the kids cool down before returning to the oven-like house. Heat was oppressive in those days too, with no cooling air conditioners except at the Al. Ringling Theatre.

It is known that H.R. Platt operated a stand at this location in 1936 and 1937 according to historian Bill Schuette, followed by the B & Z Popcorn Wagon in the 1940's. Lester Kent began his 13 year ownership in 1951. Often the wagon was moved to the County Fair, with an added product—taffy. Does any reader know what happened to it?

Ward believes there were popcorn stands at this location as early as in the 1890's. A sack was often only 5 cents, perhaps a little more with butter, but the salt was free. It was not a Baraboo phenomenon, as small towns all over the country had them and manufacturing the stands was a going and competitive business. Indeed, Beaver Dam recently obtained a restored wagon, but we suspect the price today is more like \$1.00 or more per sack.

The early popcorn dispensers came in many forms, and appear to have Mr. Charles Cretors of Decatur, Illinois, as their creator and supplier. He introduced popcorn as we know it today in the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. The first invention was steam powered, and was multi-purpose, roasting peanuts, chestnuts, and coffee, as well as popcorn.

Soon the dangerous and difficult steam cooking process was replaced by electricity, safer and quieter, and cooler for the operator. One of the first popcorn wagons was produced by Cretors at this time, horse-drawn and with 1890's ornate styling.. It came in three models, and was an instant national success. It is likely that Baraboo had one of the early elegant models.

With the advent of motion pictures as a popular diversion, Creater's company created indoor models, with instant success. Not all theaters allowed for eating while in the theatre however, including the Al. Ringling, which it is said did not even allow gum chewing while it was still in Ringling hands.

This changed in 1953, when Henry Ringling II sold the theater to Milwaukee interests a year or so before his death. A modern ticket and confection counter was immediately installed in that same year, making a stark contrast to the beauty of the outer lobby. Only two years ago was it possible to remove that monstrosity when the building next door was incorporated into the Theater's facilities.

On display at the theater is the 1953 model popcorn machine which dominated the lobby for almost forty years. For years the late Joe Vodak and others had to invent parts to keep it operating. It has now been replaced by a modern machine, but kept on display as a memento from the middle years of Baraboo's historical theater.

It will be interesting to see if the Beaver Dam restoration of a popcorn wagon will be a successful venture. Popcorn sales are good in Baraboo on Thursday Band Concert nights, on the square as well as at the theater..

