



Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

Wilson's Café

by Betty Lou Morris

Wilson's Café is the name of a bar and restaurant that has served the Mount Clemens community for well over 100 years on the same site. Moreover, it has carried the same name for over 65 years. Its longevity may be unique. Situated on Grand Avenue (formerly Leander Street) which runs parallel to the Grand Trunk railroad tracks and north from Cass Avenue in the section of Mount Clemens commonly known as Warsaw, Wilson's is directly across the street from the old Grand Trunk depot, now The Michigan Transit Museum. In the days when railroad travel by residents, visitors and businessmen and employees hauling freight made this a very busy part of the city, it is easy to see the attraction of establishing a place of refreshment in this location. Many travelers, especially the men, who arrived after a long train ride, appreciated a handy place to buy a drink before going about their business. And another stop just before leaving town, as well? Not to mention the railroad workers who would welcome a place to buy a drink as they began or ended work for the day.

Apparently the first business man to act on this idea was August Biewer, preeminent brewer of beer in Mount Clemens in the last part of the 19th century and an active citizen in the community. He had two saloons in Mount Clemens already but in 1885 petitioned the Common Council for permission to "construct a cross walk across Leander Street in front of the new building just erected on the east side of said street by him." Although this was the year Cass Avenue was paved for the first time and the city itself constructed sidewalks (presumably wooden ones) from Walnut Street to the railroad tracks, the city was not cooperative in permitting access to Biewer's new saloon. A newspaper article later that year commiserated with Mr. Biewer because "The city has built a walk ... that will divert travel from the direction of Aug. Biewer's new saloon."

For the next few years the property had several owners and there may have been a saloon on this site but the first evidence of one is in 1890. In that year Robert Grenny applied to the Common Council for a liquor license. He had been a saloon keeper in Fort Gratiot (now Port Huron), Michigan and in 1891 he purchased the Leander Street property. Robert Grenny is listed at 12 Leander Street for many years in city directories, and Sanborn Insurance maps list the building there as a saloon. Grenny may have continued a business there until his death in 1912. Deed records are unclear after that with the Mount Clemens Savings Bank apparently having a controlling interest in the property.

In 1921 – after prohibition began – the Sanborn map labels the building as a "confectionery" which may have been a euphemism for liquor business. In 1922 the city

directory lists Charles U. Glover as resident there and in 1923-24 calls it the Sunset Café with Glover as proprietor. However, Glover died intestate in 1923 and his probate record reveals that he left the Leander Street property in poor condition with a value of only \$4700. Drama was introduced in 1923 when federal booze raids in Mount Clemens made newspaper headlines. Included was the Sunset Inn at 12 Leander Street. "Jacob Ernst, said to be the owner, was placed under arrest after he had dumped a quantity of alleged liquor on the floor in front of the officers." The bar was padlocked and vacated by Ernst and his associate, Henry Clay, who had been operating the business. They were jailed and served time for liquor law violations. The padlock was removed, however, when it became apparent that the property was a part of the Glover estate, then in probate.

In 1924 the Sunset Café is listed in the city directory with no mention of a proprietor. By 1927 the Furton and Tuscany Restaurant is listed at 12 Leander with Edward M. Furton and Fred F. Tuscany, proprietors. This business must have been short-lived because in 1926 Frank Vivoli (a confectioner in the 1927 city directory) purchased the property from the Mount Clemens Savings Bank. Just when he began business there is unclear.

Frank Vivoli and his brother Joseph, both born in Italy, were living in Mount Clemens by 1917 when they first appear in the city directory. Beginning in 1929, and perhaps before that, they operated the Vivoli Bros. Cafe at 12 Leander Street. The 1930 Sanborn map calls it a "store". It must have been more than that because in 1931 newspaper headlines again mentioned this site as federal raiders hit Mount Clemens. Among those named was "Joe Vivoli, 56, 12 Leander street, five cases of home brew beer, two and one half gallons of moonshine whiskey and one and one half quarts of whiskey." Despite this blip in its history the Vivoli, or later Leander, Café became a long-time favorite Mount Clemens bar and restaurant. In the early 1940s the street name and address changed to 201 Grand Avenue, as it is today.

Frank and Joseph Vivoli were generation Americans from Italy who owned and operated the Vivoli/Leander Café as partners for ten or fifteen years. They shared the bar's open hours in shifts. Their wives worked in the kitchen and their Italian food, especially spaghetti, became very popular. They also hired chefs who were Italian immigrants and sometimes lived in the rooms above the bar. At one time the whole café was the one room where the bar is now. Sometime in the 1930s the brothers went to a restaurant supply source in Detroit to select and purchase the bar -- counter, back bar and stools -- that remains in use today. During World War II soldiers coming from and going to Detroit by railroad were frequent customers. On payday Mount Clemens Pottery and Covered Wagon employees flocked in. On occasion radio country and western performers entertained there. Leander's sponsored a fast pitch softball team and was a great rival of the Hubbarth and Schott team. Much to their delight, Leander's won the championship two years in a row. Memories and records are unclear about just when the Vivoli brothers stopped operating the business and then sold it, but it is certain that it had a long and well-remembered life during their ownership.

By about 1945 the bar and restaurant at 201 Grand Avenue had been acquired by Clarence and Ruth Wilson and its name became Wilson's Café. The deed from the Vivoli brothers was not recorded until 1952 but it was listed as Wilson's Café in the city directory well before that. Clarence was the proprietor and for a time he and his wife lived in the apartment upstairs. Later their daughter, Edna Rose "Rosie" Smith, her husband, Bob, and their family lived there for a few years. At some time in the 70s ownership of Wilson's was transferred to Rosie and she shared it with her husband. Together they made a business that thrived despite the closing of the Mount Clemens depot to passenger trains in 1954. Even without railroad passenger traffic, Wilson's became a popular local meeting place. Rosie's fish dinners on Friday nights became legendary. Bob went out on Lake St. Clair constantly to catch the fish, especially perch. This was serious business and one year he and a helper had caught 3000 fish by the 4th of July. He cleaned them himself but later had them cleaned at Samson's. Then Rosie cooked them for the big Friday night crowds that came to eat there or for "take out". She is said to have used a special cracker meal in preparing the fish and Wilson's fish on Fridays is a tradition to this day. Rosie was also famous for her chili and bought her hamburger from Yde's, another Warsaw landmark, because it was ground twice and was especially good. Family members came to the bar on Sunday mornings to clean the place. Weekdays she opened the bar at 7 AM to accommodate Ford employees and other customers who came in for a shot and a beer. At that hour they were either on their way to work or just coming off the night shift. Wilson's was a neighborhood bar and hangout with the same crowd coming in all the time. Some of the regulars were women, especially as part of a couple. Many well-known Mount Clemens people were and remain to this day, regulars at Wilson's.

In 1981 the property was deeded from Edna Wilson Smith to Arthur (Russ?) and Margaret Usendek. At the same time they acquired by transfer the Class C liquor control license from Edna Rose and Robert Smith. The Usendeks – or one of them? --were thought to have been employees at Wilson's but they didn't own and operate the business for very long.

A restaurant review in the Detroit Free Press in 1985 features Wilson's Café with headlines saying, "Little café is on right side of tracks". There is a picture of customers at the bar. The review tells how Helen and Rod Modell had recently become owners of Wilson's and goes on with positive comments about the good food and friendly atmosphere at Wilson's "There is carpeting on the floor, attractive paneling on the walls, and a separate dining room for those who prefer a quiet setting." There is praise for the Friday fish specials and other menu items as well as the inexpensive prices. "Gourmet dining it is not. But Wilson's has built up a loyal and regular clientele by capitalizing on its strengths – good basic food, reasonable prices and a relaxed, friendly atmosphere." In 1989 Wilson's "at Cass and the Railroad Tracks" advertised itself as having "Mount Clemens' Finest Pan-Fried Fish" with a 50 cents off coupon on a Lenten Special – Fresh lake perch or lake pickerel dinners at \$5.50. Other fish offerings were only \$3.95 and Carry-Outs and Homemade Soup were available as well. Another advertisement at perhaps a later time featured domestic bottle beer at \$2.00 and listed daily specials ranging from Sloppy Joes and Kowalski Coneys at only \$1.25 to

Friday's Perch Dinner at \$7.95.

The current chapter in the long history of Wilson's Café began in 1991 when Jim Berezik bought the business from the Modells and except for one year, he has been the proprietor for the past 22 years. He has had partners but he holds the liquor license and has always managed the business. Fred Allesandri is a minority partner at this time. Living space above the bar is rented and provides enough income to pay the property taxes. Wilson's continues to have regular patrons who come in all the time. It still opens at 7 AM to accommodate workers getting off a late shift as many did when the Ford plant was open. Because it is inexpensive, Wilson's has hosted small weddings and other parties from time to time. In 2004 headlines in *The Macomb Daily* that read, "Mt. Clemens man shot in leg during argument in barroom" brought Wilson's "Old Fashioned Café" brief notoriety. Apparently during the afternoon two long-time friends and regular patrons got into an argument and one of them shot the other in the leg. Police were called and there was no further problem. "Police and bar customers said the shooting was an isolated incident for a bar that otherwise is not known for its troublesome clientele." A couple of years later bikers tried to take over and Jim invited them to leave whenever they caused trouble. Jim says that the smoking ban has hurt his business but he has compensated to some extent by adding a patio in the back that is a patron favorite. About fifteen years ago Jim put in a horseshoe pit and it has been a big hit with four leagues playing there.

Wilson's has been in operation for a long time and Jim has been the proprietor for 22 years. Some of its employees have been there a long time as well. Naomi Holland has been a cook for 37 years -- ever since Clarence Wilson was the proprietor. Asked about changes over the years, she couldn't seem to think of any. "Perhaps customers have changed as some die and new ones come", she said. They still feature fish on Fridays and coney dogs on Tuesday. One imagines that if an old customer from a few decades ago were to drop in he wouldn't find it much different -- same bar, same décor, same food and same fellowship. He would still feel at home in this quiet neighborhood bar where families, regulars and good-old-boys continue to gather. Much has changed in Warsaw over the years, but Wilson's Café and its traditions seem to be timeless.

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Sources

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Interviews with Sam Vivoli (son of Joseph), Marge Russ (friend of Rosie Smith), Nancy Dalby Paul (daughter of Rosie Smith), Jim Berezik (owner), and Naomi Holland (cook) at Wilson's Cafe.