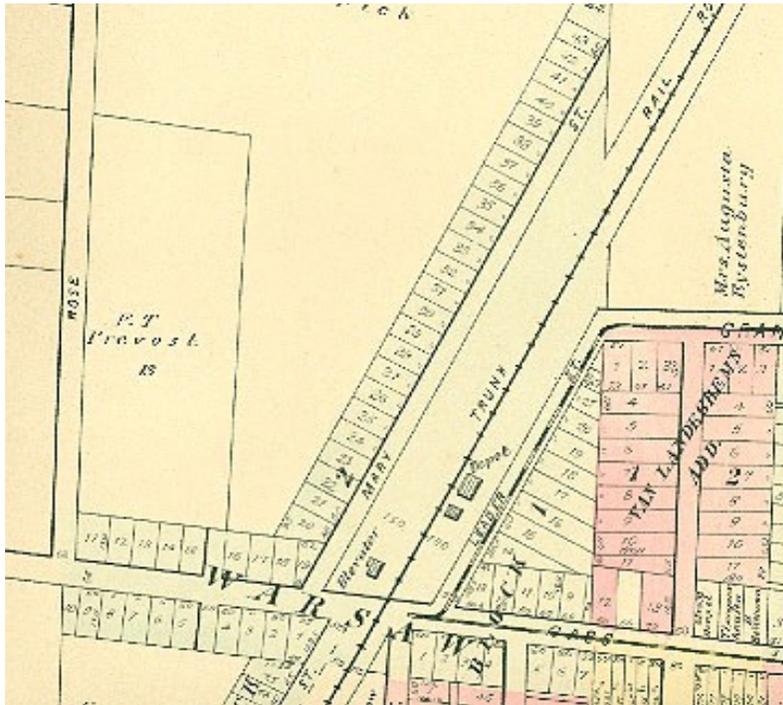


The Railroad Inn: A Tale of Two Sites

by Betty Lou Morris

For generations the bar and neighborhood hangout near the Mount Clemens depot at the corner of Shelby (later Cass Avenue) and Leander (later Grand Avenue) offered hospitality to locals and travelers alike. The cluster of homes and businesses where Shelby crossed the railroad tracks was called Warsaw and the bar on the corner was a popular place where men came to quench their thirst and swap stories with their buddies for well over one-hundred years. For a part of this time the bar was called the Railroad Inn -- with various owners serving its patrons from two different locations. In the beginning both sites that were later occupied by the Railroad Inn belonged to the United States. In 1808, 640 acres were sold to Christian Clemens and James Connor who, in turn, sold to Michael Tremble in 1815. The Tremble farm was quitclaimed in



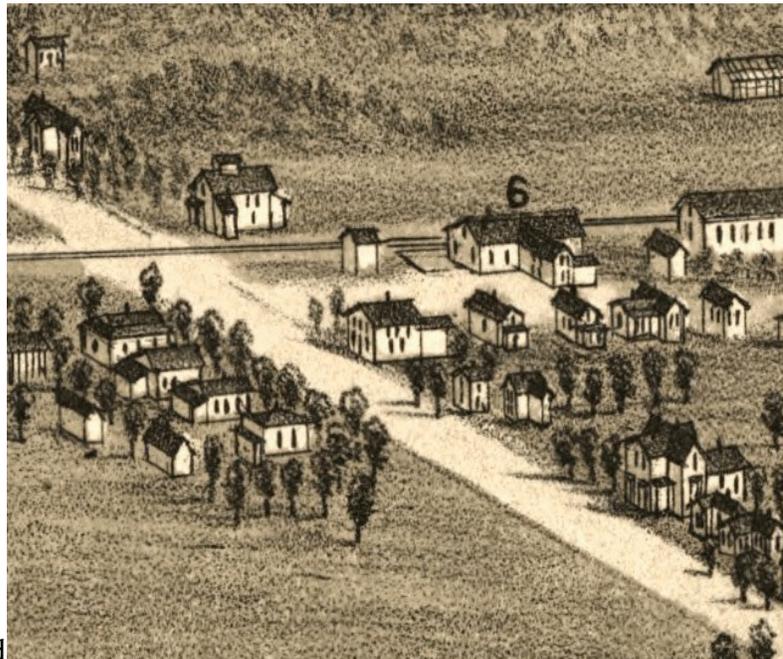
An 1895 plat of Warsaw

1821 to Leander and Mary Trombley. They appear as owners on the 1859 wall map of Macomb County that also shows Shelby Road traversing their property, west out of Mount Clemens. When the railroad came to Macomb County in 1859, it also cut through the Trombley farm and in 1862 the depot was built near the intersection of the railroad tracks and Shelby Road. This part of the Trombley farm thus became prime property and to accommodate its sale, the Trombleys had it platted by Ludwig Wesolowski, a local surveyor and civil engineer. The plat was recorded with the Register of Deeds in 1865 as "The City of Warsaw", named to honor the place of birth of Wesolowski. Streets on either side of the tracks were named "Mary" and "Leander" for the owners. (Leander Street ran parallel to the railroad tracks, north from what is now Cass Avenue to Grand Trunk Avenue. Both streets are now called Grand Avenue.) This community of business buildings and homes was popularly called Warsaw for many years, even after it became a part of the city of Mount Clemens.

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In 1872 the Trombleys sold Lot #13 at the northeast corner of Leander and Shelby Road to Jacob Roessel who proceeded to open a saloon on the site. Roessel was identified in the 1870 census as a “cigar maker” so he probably went into the saloon business a year or two later. The 1875 atlas of Macomb County features a sketch of the building, a two-story frame structure with attached outbuildings behind, titled “Residence and Saloon of Jacob Roessel”. Roessel may have built a new building on that site. However, a charming story, passed along from one old-timer to another, suggests that a bar located at the corner of Shelby Road and Gratiot may have been moved west from its original location to the corner of Shelby and Leander. As the story goes, the two-story building was loaded on a flatbed, horse-drawn wagon for its journey along Shelby Road. The sight of a building being moved along a street is always dramatic and entertaining, but on this occasion it caused quite a sensation. You see, just for the fun of it, the regular customers of the saloon remained inside and because the beer taps were not disconnected, continued to enjoy drinking and socializing as the building made its journey to the new location. Was this Roessel’s saloon? He was a member of the Mount Clemens Village Council when it became a city in 1879. In 1880 the census identified him as a “saloon keeper” and in 1900 when he was living with his son-in-law, Reuben Ullrich, his occupation was given as a “Landlord”.

In 1892 Jacob Roessel sold the property and for the next ten years various persons seem to have owned it. Just who operated the saloon is not clear, although in one transfer by deed the “bar fixtures and furniture contained in the saloon building” are mentioned. In 1902 John Kandt bought the property, and presumably the saloon. The city directories from 1899 to 1906 (or later) show the Kandt Brothers and John Kandt at 304 Cass. There are two excellent photos from this period that show the exterior of the “Warsaw Café” and the alley



A bird's-eye view of Warsaw, looking west, from the 1881 panoramic map of Mount Clemens (Library of Congress)

behind it. It appears to be a busy place with people, horses and wagons in front of the tree-shaded building. This *may* be the time period when the old bar building was moved west to its new site in Warsaw. As the story goes, a man named Schuneman was the owner after it was moved. Perhaps Roessel’s building was torn down to make



The café operated by the Kandt Brothers, ca. 1900.

as Adolph Campau was listed as the proprietor with soft drinks for sale. In 1921 the Kandt heirs sold the property to Peter and Florence A. Benoit and the business operated as the Warsaw Café, still offering soft drinks. Newspapers of the era reported regularly the names of the numerous blind pigs that were raided and closed down in Mount Clemens but 304 Cass was not among them. During prohibition the Benois continued to advertise their business as a restaurant but expanded it to include auto accessories. In 1930 they sold auto accessories, gas, oil, batteries, candy and lunches. After 1933 and the end of prohibition they still offered auto accessories but by the early 1940s the corner of Cass and Leander again became a popular gathering spot advertising beer, wine, food and confections. It was operated as Frederick and Benoit's Warsaw Café for many years but was familiarly called "Pete's Place" and "Pete Benoit's Family Tavern".

In 1945 Henry and Hulda Muckenhirn bought the property from the Benois. They sold candy, pop, and other sundries from the front of the store so it was a place that school children might stop by. The bar business was more toward the back – as well as a barbershop. Muckenhirn built a small addition to the building on a vacant lot to the east. Then he enlarged it and built others along Cass Avenue. Des Arnsby used to write in the newspaper about the bar that they referred to as "The Corner".

Curtis "Curly" Copeland and his wife Ingrid bought the property and the bar in 1951. They operated it as Copeland's Tavern or "Curly's" until 1967 when he retired. It was a popular place for workmen to stop by for a drink on their way home at the end of the day. Ingrid is remembered for frequently scrubbing the old wooden floor, trying to keep it cleaner than anyone would have expected a bar floor to be.

room for the new "old" one – but one wonders why? The city directory for 1911 lists August Schuneman at 304 Cass Avenue. In 1913-14 Albert and August Schuneman, brothers, used it as a sample room for showing their fine line of wines, liquors and cigars. But in 1916 it was called simply, Schuneman Brothers saloon.

By 1920 the strong hand of prohibition became apparent

Curly sold the building and the bar business to Joe Merimee who owned the building until 1986. During this period it came to be called the Railroad Inn, although it remained a bar, not a place for overnight residents. There is an excellent photo of the interior of the Railroad Inn at this time, showing the bar and bar stools and details of items for sale behind the counter. Not to mention sunshine streaming in through the south-facing window. The old building was so picturesque that Kathleen Racine, art teacher at Mount Clemens High School, used to bring her classes there to sketch and paint pictures of it. The sway-backed roof was an interesting feature. Joe Merimee owned the building and the liquor license but he hired Augustine "Augie" Evengelista to run the bar. In 1973 he sold the license and the name "Railroad Inn" to Augie who continued to operate the business there until 1981 when he moved it across the street to 307-309 Cass. Of this, more later.

The building at 304 Cass had been vacant for some time when Joe Merimee sold the property in 1985 to Steve Sharp, owner of The Time Shop, a long-time Mount Clemens business since 1928. Steve razed the old building and had a new, brick one built on the same spot to house his watch, clock and jewelry business that opened there in 1986. The old building was in poor condition with rotting rafters and a water-soaked floor. The beams were old and large and had been drilled and pegged – not nailed. The floor joists were logs. How old was this structure and how long had it been on this site? In razing the old structure workmen found signs that more than one building had had a foundation there. If so, this may or may not have been the structure that was moved so dramatically by wagon from Cass and Gratiot. Or perhaps there was confusion with a brick wall that Joe Merimee had added in more recent years to lend support to the outer walls and to make it look better. There do not seem to be any pictures of the bar at Cass and Leander after 1900 and so it is difficult to compare it with the one that was razed in 1985. However, it is my opinion that the building that was razed in 1985 is the same one that Jacob Roessel built or moved there prior to 1875. Pictures of it in 1875 and 1900 are very similar to memories of its appearance in the 1980s. There was no saloon at Cass and Gratiot that might have been moved there between 1900 and 1911, prior to the Schuneman operation. And why tear down one old building to put an even older one in its place? We may never know the truth of this part of the story. It may be apocryphal, like the story about Thomas Edison eating lunch at the corner saloon when he was in Mount Clemens. Unfortunately, Thomas Edison's association with our town was at least ten years before the Roessel saloon opened! Steve Sharp sold the property in 1989 and the new brick building has been a restaurant, Coney Island or deli ever since.

But what about the Railroad Inn? Let us turn to the other side of the street, to 307 and 309 Cass Avenue for the history of its second site. Sanborn fire maps before 1900 show Lot #1 of the City of Warsaw plat with a frame structure. This lot was on the south side



Interior of the LeFevre Grocery ca. 1905.

of Cass Avenue at the corner of Gutchow Street (later Floral Avenue) and nearest the railroad tracks. But by 1903 there is a large, brick building on that lot. And by 1909 there is a second large building, an addition in effect, of the same size; the double structure is labeled "Grocery". Edward E. LeFevre operated a grocery and meat business at this location (307-309 Cass Avenue) from about 1899 until his death in 1940. There is a photo of the interior in 1905 that shows a long narrow store with counters on both sides and a number of customers and clerks posing for the camera. Another photo dated 1910 shows the exterior in the background as a Memorial Day parade marches by. LeFevre's was a popular source of groceries for the neighborhood for forty years. He had a delivery truck and delivered groceries to his wealthier customers. During this period the city directory often lists the names of persons who rented apartments above the store. Parts of the double building were rented to other businesses, as well. However, when Ed LeFevre died there was no one in his family who was able to take over the management of the grocery store.

Jack Poelstra, a butcher, and his family came to Mount Clemens in 1941. He bought the business (not the building) from the LeFevres and operated it for another 15-20 years – until the competition from chain grocery stores became too much. The Poelstra family made their home in the apartment over the grocery store. They all worked very hard to keep the business going but left town in the late 1950s.

In 1960, by land contract, the Loyal Order of the Moose, Lodge #127, bought the property from the LeFevre heirs and by 1963 the city directory lists the Moose Lodge at 307-309 Cass Avenue. They had a bar and socialized on the first floor and used the upper rooms for meetings. There is a 1966 photo of roadwork on Cass Avenue that shows the Moose Lodge in the background with the same glass-windowed front that served the grocery store. Later pictures show the front bricked over, with two doors but no windows on the lower level. In 1975 the Moose took title to the property but in 1981 they sold it to Jim and Betty Gullett of Jim's Catering.

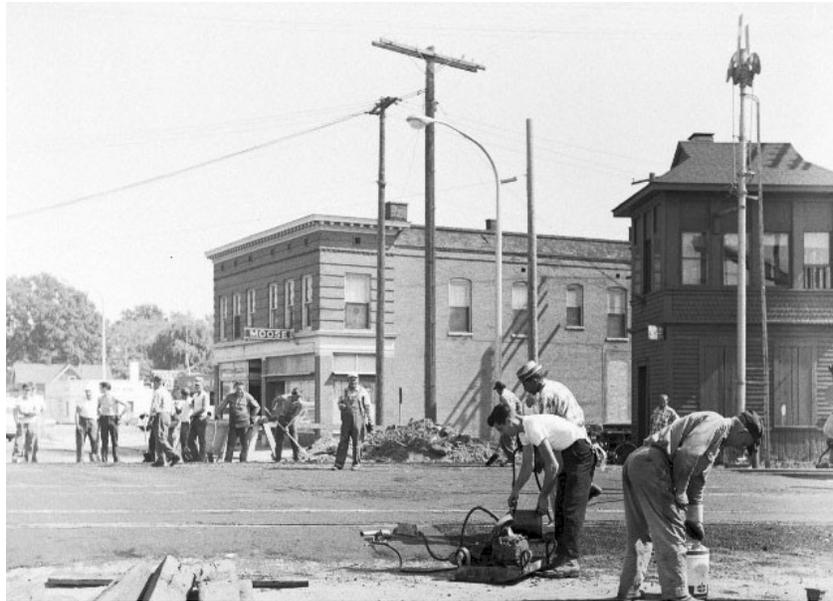
The Gulletts had no interest in operating a bar, so they leased the building to Augie Evengelista, who moved his Railroad Inn – liquor license and name – across the street from #304 to #307-309 where rental expense was cheaper than it had been with Joe Merimee.

Moving was easy

apparently, as Joe's sons and bar patrons helped to carry everything – bar fixtures, equipment,

furniture, supplies, etc. -- with no need for packing or using a moving van or truck!

Augie did a good business there with workmen coming in after work, especially the construction people from the rebuilding of the Hillcrest banquet center after it had burned. Augie added a large, colorful sign on the east side of the building that pictured a locomotive and advertised "Augie's Historic Railroad Inn; the sign is faded now but still visible and attractive. After having run the bar business for 17 years (both for Joe Merimee and for himself), he sold the license and the Railroad Inn name in 1985 to Barbara Erb and Sarah Jackson, both of whom had worked for him as barmaids through the years. Augie moved to Florida but is still remembered by those who knew him in Mount Clemens.



The Moose Lodge is seen in the center background of this 1966 photo (Macomb Daily).

The bar business continued to be successful, although the newspaper reported a small fire there in 1988. Eventually the Gulletts sold to Erb and Jackson so they owned it all -- the building, the license and the name Railroad Inn. When Barbara Erb died in 2002 her obituary said she had owned and operated the Railroad Inn for twenty years. After being vacant for a year or two the property was sold in 2006 to a new owner, John Gusmano, a long-time restaurateur in Mount Clemens. An article in *The Macomb Daily* on July 11th reports plans to renovate the historic Railroad Inn (described as a shot-and-a-beer place) and to reopen it as a casual restaurant serving ribs, chicken and pizza and offering music of the 1940s and 50s. Scheduled to open around Christmas, it will be called the Engine House. If these plans work out, the Railroad Inn – with its history of a variety of different names – and its tradition of serving thirsty patrons where Cass Avenue crosses the railroad tracks for one hundred and thirty-five years, will carry on. May its successors do as well!

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