

The Story of The Barrel



Hello, I'm Chris Yoder, a member of the Barrel Committee, and I'm going to take a few minutes to tell you the history of our barrel and to show you some pictures.

History of the Barrel

Barrel History

1950-54	The Barrel Is Built by Joe Decker and Harold Kelly
1954-61	Earle McVoy Buys the Barrel
1961-63	Ernie Race
1964-67	George and Jo Ann Gallas Buy the Barrel
1967-77	Woody and Kathryne Wilson Buy the Barrel
1977-?	Al Enos
?-?	Richard Anderson

When this project started, the historical society surprisingly only had a couple photos of the Barrel during it's hey day, and what had been written about it was both very limited and in some cases inaccurate.

I'd like to thank the many people who have been interviewed over the past six months for helping to put together this Barrel story, particularly the members of the owning families---the Deckers, the McVoys, the Races, the Gallases and the Wilsons.

Thanks to them we've been able to construct this rough chronology of ownership of the Barrel.

Decker-Kelly Years

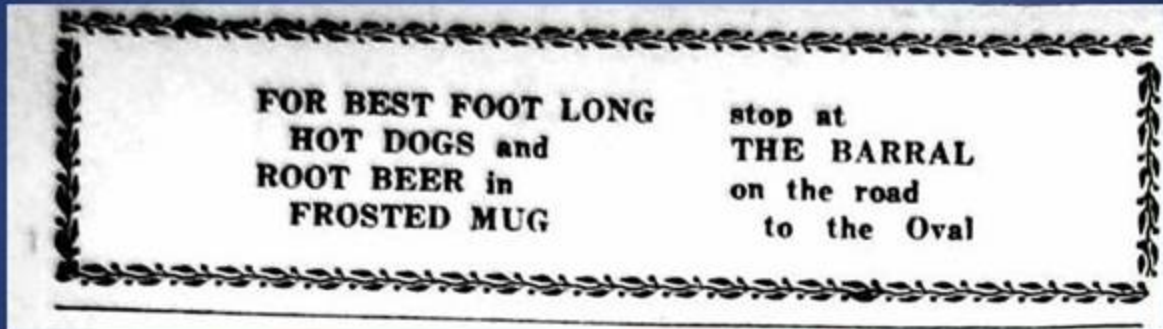


The father of the barrel was a man named Joe Decker.

He was the Director of Purchasing for AC Spark Plug, which was part of General Motors. He and a friend of his named Harold Kelly, who worked for him, got this idea that they would make their fortunes selling foot log hot dogs and sacks of popcorn and root beer to people going out to Oval Beach.

So they built the barrel. They got the wood, they turned it, made it to the shape to form the staves, tongue and grooved it, steamed and bent to boards. They assembled it in the Decker's back yard in Flint, MI. Then they took it down, put it on a flat bed truck and had it transported over to Douglas, where they erected it in its present location in 1950.

Decker-Kelly Years



July 28, 1950 Commercial Record

The first ad for an operational Barrel (spelled BARRAL) appeared in the Commercial Record July of 1950.

Strange that we have not found articles about it ---- I have not been able to find any articles which speak of it being built or of a "Grand Opening"



The Deckers have several photos which have a development date of September 1950 marked on the back. These photos are the earliest known pictures of our Barrel.

You'll notice the original barrel was not painted, but varnished, and that there were no metal bands around it.

Decker-Kelly Years



Here's a second of these first photos.

The original barrel had a canvas roof on it which acted like a gigantic funnel so when it rained, the water came right down through the center of that barrel and exited somewhere outside or underneath it. The first year they put it up, the Deckers and Kellys would come over the weekends to run it.

That got to be pretty old very fast. So they hired a manager and that didn't work out because they weren't there. So then Harold Kelly and his wife Paula, they put her over there to run it. The second year they actually built a one room cottage, one big room and a bathroom, so she'd have a place to stay. It was back begin the barrel.



This seems to also be a first year photo of the Barrel, as there is no one room cottage visible. You can also see the roadside sign of a frosted glass mug filled with a nice cold foamed top root beer.

Carl Decker Barrels in Olney and Westport, Illinois



Joe Decker got this idea from his brother Carl Decker who had actually built two of these barrels following the same pattern. One was Olney, Illinois, and the other in Westport, Illinois, about 15 miles away on the Indiana border.

Years ago, the one in Olney was about to be torn down and Mike Doll, the contractor hired to do the work, decided to instead move it out of town to his property. Here are some recent photos of that barrel today.

A restaurant was built around the Barrel in Westport, and it may still exist, but we have not been able to get a picture of the site today.

The McVoy Years



The Deckers and Kellys ran the Barrel for several years before selling it to Earle and Mary McVoy, pictured here. They and their children Mike, Melinda, and Bonnie came to Douglas in 1947 and purchased the Graham home known as "Bonnie Meadows" on Union Street with 11 acres.

Earle McVoy's father had died young at about 45 years of age.

He himself was sick with hypertension and he knew that he was seriously ill.

He bought the Barrel in 1954 so his wife and children would have a livelihood after he was gone.

The McVoy Years



The family had been running the barrel about a year when he died, in 1955, at 39 years of age.

Here's a photo of the eldest of the McVoy children, Bonnie, doing duty as a car hop. Bonnie reports:

"Al Pshea was the man who managed it when my mother wasn't right on deck, and then Ev Bekken worked there. I was married and busy at home, but did work there in the summers. My brother Mike worked there the most. He added the stays, the steel stays, to keep the barrel together. He got Stew's welding to put three stays, one near the top, one near the middle and one near the bottom. It was always varnished when we had it.

"My first husband, Dave Tomlinson, borrowed my little playhouse which my Dad had built, and we made a miniature golf course which tied in to the barrel property."

Barrel Staff circa 1954



Here are some of the barrel staff from these early days--

Frank Lovejoy at the Oval-

Four "Barrel Girls" from about 1954: L-R Jerry Monique, Judy Schultz (deceased) Linda Hutchins Kirchoff, and Judy Christy Davison. All graduated from the 8th grade, Douglas, Mi. (Yep! the old school house).

Al Pshea- mentioned previously---now in his 90s.

Melinda McVoy Tempe writes:

"Everything depended on the weather. If the weather was good, then the traffic to and from the Oval would be good, and then business would be good. It was kind of like being on the highway- you always knew who was going to the beach, when they went, and when they came home. That was kind of fun for a teenager."

McVoy Years



Melinda goes on

"We had a good quality root beer. It had to be Mason's Root Beer. Inside we had a small barrel with a spigot on it, and that's where the Mason Root Beer syrup was mixed for the carbonation -- we had two big carbonation tanks-one in use & the other for replacement. "

(Note from Wikipedia: "Mason's Root Beer was first manufactured in 1947 by Mason & Mason, Inc. of Chicago, Illinois. During its early years, Mason's Root Beer and flavors line were widely distributed in the Midwest as well as some Southern states." It's not currently (2011) produced.)

"I do remember we got the hot dogs from Herrud's. It was a meat packing business in Grand Rapids---- The foot long hot dogs were always top quality- they had to be Herrud's."

(Note: The former Herrud later became Thorn Apple's Grand Rapids Division, which manufactured smoked sausages, hot dogs, and luncheon meats.)



Here's an aerial photo taken in the 1950s.

There are several clues which might help us date it.

The McVoy Years



Trailer and building--

Note side building quite a ways back the WWII aircraft spotting tower- Howard Schultz and Gertrude Hershaw both were part of the watch crew during the war years

Harding Hotel- longest bar in the state of Michigan.

Miniature golf? Is that the course to the west of the barrel?

Ernie Race Years



Mary McVoy sold the Barrel to Ernie Race in about 1961 or 62. He was a disabled veteran.

Here is a picture of the four Race children and the barrel- Robert-8 yrs. old, Ernest-10 yrs. old, and Pamela -5 yrs. old, with Kenneth- 5 months.

Mr. Race built the little two bedroom house to the rear and they lived in it.

The first year Melinda McVoy managed it for him. She did so doing both inside and outside duty for a summer.

Pamela Race Schweitzer reports:

"I remember my mother planting flowers between the sidewalk and barrel, and they bloomed all summer. I also remember a string of clear lights draped from the barrel to a pole, separating areas for cars from tables with umbrellas. There were also speakers outside, and "WLS in Chicago" playing the top hits all day which made it a popular place for people traveling to or from the Oval Beach. "

The George and JoAnn Gallas Years



George and Jo Ann Gallas were ballroom dancers on the hotel and theatre circuit for many years.



George and Jo Ann Gallas who were Ballroom dancers on the hotel and theater circuit, purchased their Saugatuck summer cottage in 1940. When the Barrel was first built, they had a golf driving range on the corner across from West Shore , daughter Nicki reports

"My mother and I sat there and watched them and we were so amazed at the way they bent the wood, they had put like a frame and then they bent the wood up. And at that time it was varnished it wasn't painted like it is now. It looked like a real barrel. We always felt a special kinship for the barrel because we watched it be born."

Later in the 1960's they came to own the barrel, buying it from the Race's.

One funny story from Nicki Gallas "--. my mother was 5 feet tall, and they used a freezer, kind of like a coffin, to put the mugs in so that they would be frosted. One night there was just one mug left and my mother reached to the bottom to get it out and in she fell. She screamed and my father looked over to see her legs sticking out of the freezer and her head down in and she couldn't get out. So that was a funny story we always laughed about."

Marcia Tucker, who still lives on the lake shore, managed the barrel for George and Joanne the summers of 66 and 67 for college money.

Woody and Kathryne Wilson Years



Woody and Kathryne Wilson bought the barrel from the Gallaes in late 1967 or early in 1968. They first operated The Barrel the summer of 1968 and ran it every summer through 1974.

Daughter Sue writes: "In 1972 my best friend from Evanston Township High School (IL), Ellen Sturm, and I came up and ran The Barrel all summer. We stayed in the little house that was behind The Barrel.

"Anyway, Ellen met a guy up in Saugatuck and ended up marrying him. That guy was Joe Clark, my bff Ellen Clark became the Saugatuck City Clerk for like 20 years. The Barrel has definitely contributed to the history of Saugatuck."

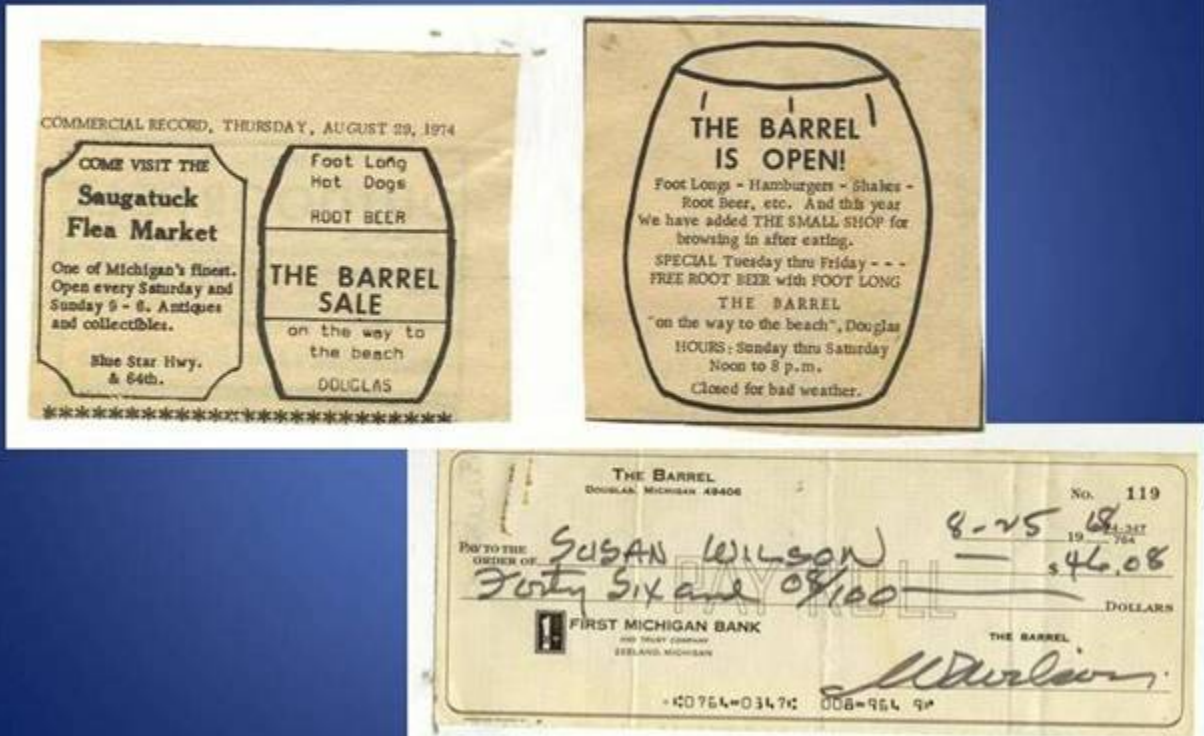
Woody and Kathryne Wilson Years



Daughter Susie Wilson Capillo recalls that it was her father who planted the birch tree which appears in front of the Barrel cottage in this mid 1970s vintage photo, and tells that her mom operated a business for a few years out of the little annex attached to The Barrel. She called it "The Small Shop". The merchandise was a real slice of the time. Candles, incense, incense holders, posters, beads, --- she loved going to the International Gift Show in Chicago and walking around looking at all the stuff, as well as buying her knick-knacks."

During both the Gallas and Wilson years Bob and Sue Crowder rented the Barrel cottage with their girls Robin, Stacey, and Kelley- they were also known as the Clark family because Bob was an announcer in Chicago, and went by the name of "Del Clark". Ten year old Robin recalls being allowed to "help" at the Barrel when Susie was in attendance.

Woody and Kathryne Wilson Years



Here are some of the ads which appeared in the paper during the Wilson years.

And a paycheck from Susan Wilson for a grand total of \$46.08.

The mugs on loan from Susan Wilson, now Susan Capillo-,

The Barrel for Sale- 1974

The image shows a scan of a newspaper advertisement for a property called 'The Barrel'. The ad is dated 1974 and is from the Holland Evening Sentinel. The text of the ad includes: 'Lake Michigan. Fully carpeted. range, refrigerator. Financing available. Also other lots available. Call owner. Saugatuck 857-4205. 273-275'. Below this, it says 'FOR SALE — Good 2 family investment. 70 W. 121st. \$16,000. Phone 392-3433. 269-274'. The realtor is listed as 'COLLUM REALTY, Gladys M. Collum, Broker, 222 Butler St., Saugatuck, Mich. Phone 857-5911'. There is also a partial ad for a 'Root Beer Barrel Drive-In plus a year round home. Pass it going or coming from public beach. Drive-in equipped. Cash or land contract.' A digital interface is overlaid on the right side of the image, titled 'Newspaper Tools'. It contains fields for: Title (Holland Evening Sentinel, The), Date (1974-05-23), Page (7), Country (United States Of America), State/Province (Michigan), and City (Holland).

Susan Wilson reports on the end of the Barrel--

The Barrel operated in 1973, but health issues were beginning to limit the amount of time and energy the Wilsons parents could put into the business. In 1974 The Barrel was open a few holiday weekends at most.

Other dynamics, besides health, were in place that made business difficult. First, the "short cut" opened past St Peters parking lot. People stopped driving by The Barrel on their way to Oval Beach. Then, the health and restaurant operating codes changed. The Barrel would require thousands of \$ in improvements. As long as the business kept operating, The Barrel was grandfathered in to the earlier code, but once it didn't open, it would have to be upgraded before it could re-open.

I believe my parents sold what was left of The Barrel property in 1977 to a young man named Enos (Al Enos). He planned to bring The Barrel up to code and run it as a business again, but it never opened.

Then it was sold to a Mr. Anderson. At one time he mowed the property, put up some flags and operated a "cooking trailer" on the site, but The Barrel itself was never open again.

c1990s



Over the intervening years it slowly decayed. Here's a Photo taken by the Deckers during a stop through town in the 1990s.



The "Friends of the Barrel" has a facebook page, currently with about 80 fans.

We can thank Ken Kraye for submitting this circa 1990 photo through the FACEBOOK Page.

We are still collecting photos and memories to build the history of the barrel. If you have any to add, please contact me.

Finally, let's come forward 20 years to see what the barrel looks like today--

The Barrel Today



You can see that it is badly in need of some tender loving care, and thanks to the Historical Society and the "Friends of the Barrel" it is about to receive that care.