

Douglas Michigan Root Beer Barrel

The Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society took on the challenge of "Saving the Root Beer Barrel" on Center Street. The barrel was taken down, refurbished, moved, and reassembled. The memories below are a part of gathering the history of this important local icon.



Wednesday, May 25, 2016

The Continuation of the Barrel Saga - Thanks to Tim Dykema

The story of ownership after Al Enos until its transfer to the Historical Society Tim Writes: "Re: 382 Center Street "I am not certain of the complete line of ownership after Al Enos...but I do know that Barker Brokerage (I believe Dave Barker the developer who also had been involved with the former Mi-Ro golf course property, etc) owned it at some point. In 1997 it was transferred to a Marion Moore. I am not certain if she then sold it or if through death or family transaction or what? but in 2002 the Anderson's became listed as the owners. My understanding was they had been tinkering around with the rundown home on the back corner of the property with the intention of living in it.

"I (as Wiseacre, LLC) purchased the property from the Anderson's in 2005. Many of the staves had rotted to a point that they had released from the lower retaining band and things were progressively getting worse. There was also the

run down remains of the structure which was attached to the barrel serving as a home to a number of animals...as well as the single family home in a non-habitable condition on the opposite back corner of the lot.

"I originally had thought about rehabbing the barrel myself and perhaps putting it to commercial use but given the extensive deterioration decided against it.

"In 2011 I had a cottage in Saugatuck but was living half way across the country, only spending summers in Michigan. In an effort to clean up the property and reduce liability created by the crumbling structures and frequent trespassing, I made plans to have all the structures removed.

"In 2011, a day or so before that work was to commence, Dottie Lyon contacted me and asked if I would hold off on the demolition to see if a plan could be made to save the barrel. I said as long as the SDHS or some other group was willing to take on the project I was all for it. After some paperwork to deal with liability, ownership of the barrel and the responsibility for it's dis-assembly and removal from the site was transferred.

"That is pretty much all I can add to your history of the barrel.

"There were a small number of papers and evidence of the former hot dog business, mini golf, etc. which were left for the SDHS, but I believe they already had much better versions of everything including pictures, etc. While I owned it people also told me about how movies used to be shown...I think projected onto a sheet or something?? can't really remember, but you guys may have that info.

"I have followed the progress of the barrel and look forward to seeing it on the corner of Center and Ferry. I think the steel base pieces being created by the school are fantastic! That was definitely a weak point of the old design. Will they also be using steel framing for the 2nd floor/midpoint anchor or will that be traditionally framed with wood. No biggy if you don't have the answers, I'm sure I'll see it all soon enough. Good luck with the finishing touches."

Thanks so much for sharing this Tim!

Saturday, October 6, 2012

Doug Plasman Remembers the Barrel

Having grown up in Holland, MI in the 1950-60 the Saugatuck Mt Baldie was a every summer event. My family and two other families from Holland would have a picnic every summer at the picnic table area at the foot of Mt Baldie. A classic hamburger fry using the Coleman stoves made for a delicious meal. The kids would all climb Mt. Baldie and view beautiful Lake Michigan. No matter how much we had for supper it was never complete unless we stopped at the famous root beer barrel for the ice cold root beer that was served in frosted mugs. If I am not mistaken I believe car hops would serve us. It was some of the best root beer I would have ever taste. I have lived in Grand Rapids most of my adult life and my wife and I would often take rides in in the summer to Saugatuck. I would often mention the famous root beer barrel to my wife and tell her the stories but so wished I could find out what ever happened to the famous barrel. In 2010 we were coming back from a sunset at the Oval Beach and we talked about the barrel again. I took a few side roads and there we spotted the old barrel probably 50 yards off the road. We got out of the car and walked by it. Unbelievable! We had found it!!!

Wednesday, July 18, 2012

My First Root Beer Float

Back in 1957, I had my very first root beer float here while visiting my Grandmother at her cottage (WIT'S END) on Campbell street backed up against the 7th T of the now gone golf course.

I was just there last weekend and went "in search of". It was bitter sweet as many of the old places are gone. The Redwood Inn, The Blue Heron, among a few. But most of all I would love to see the Root Beer Barrel back.

I took my wife up Mt Baldy after visiting the museum. The memories of those times visiting Nana and Grace (her friend that lived down at the end of Campbell) will be with me forever.

Thanks for holding on to the memory for me.

BILL NORMAN

Downers Grove, IL

Tuesday, October 25, 2011

Mary Olendorf- Barrel Memories

We came from Highland Park, Illinois. My husband Bill was working for Leo Burnett Advertizing Agency in Chicago and he had the territory over here. We were in our 20s and just ended up in Saugatuck for the night. I said "Wouldn't it be fun to rent a cottage over here?" It was just reckless conversations, but we rented this cottage for two summers and then we bought it, and we've had it 60 years now. My son lives there now, about 12 mail boxes north of M-89. We used to call the "What-Not Inn" the "Country Club of Pier Cove".

We came in about the time when the McVoy's bought the Barrel. We had just bought our cottage on the lake shore and we have so many memories. Picking up Bill Friday night at the train from Chicago in Fennville and always going to the Barrel for a foot-long and root beer. And then when Bill was a student at Ox-Bow he'd always call and say he was going to stop and get a hot dog and he'd say "Don't wait dinner". And then there would be the cast parties the Gallas'es would have out there after the show.

Then there was the time I met Burt Tillstrom out there, of course we were good friends of Burt's anyway, and I asked him if he was buying a foot-long for Kukla.

I knew the Crowders (or the Clarks as they were know) and when they rented the cottage I was very good friends of theirs.

Towards the end of the Barrel's operational life, there were other places coming in and the Barrel kind of faded away.

The "other barrel"

There was another Barrel out near the Red Barn on Blue star Highway. I don't think it was my imagination, but out there where the Shell station is today was a barrel. When we moved here I thought that's where the barrel had come from and that they'd moved it, but after hearing the history of the barrel I know now that it did not. We went by it every day going to the Red Barn. Now going back, this was when John Upjohn owned the Red Barn and Jimmy Dias ran it, there was a house there, and it was a boarding house, and I know for a number of years they used the house behind the Barrel as a boarding house for all the actors that came to the Red Barn. And I don't know if the other barrel belonged to that house or who it belonged to or what happened to it, but one day it disappeared. It was the same size as the Barrel. Maybe someone else who was here before the 50's remembers it. It came into our view when Jimmy Webster bought the big barn, and I'm sure that other barrel was gone when John Upjohn bought the Red Barn. Right behind the Shell station I think I can still see the little hill where the house had been.

Monday, August 15, 2011

We Lived in the Barrel Cottage - by Robin Crowder Perry

We knew the Gallases somehow and I believe that's how we came to live in the rental cottage at the rear of the Barrel. We were there the end of the 60s to like 72-73 when the Wilson's quit running the Barrel. When the Gallas'es operated it I was pretty little and I don't really have many memories of it from that time, except for George and Joann Gallas were dancers and Nicki worked there and they would do a dance move and lift her up and twirl her around and stuff like that. But when the Wilson's ran it there Susie Wilson and I and my sister Stacey would go into the Barrel and she would let us be helpers, "let us be helpers" like in quotes and we ended up helping her get the orders ready and taking orders and hanging out there, probably really, really, bugging her but she was really nice and we were helpers there for one whole summer that I remember and it was really fun. I remember eating foot-long hot dogs and drinking root beer and people would come up and that was my first experience like with a job and she taught us everything about running a Barrel. My sister Stacey thinks we have our initials carved in there, but I don't remember that. She remembers us carving our initials next to the soda fountain, where you would get the pop and stuff like that.

My name is Crowder and my sister's name in Crowder, so I'm Robin Crowder and my sister is Stacey Crowder, and my other sister is Kelley Crowder. My Mom and Dad were Bob and Sue Crowder, but we were also known as the Clark family because my Dad was an announcer in Chicago, and went by the name of "Del Clark". He was friends with a lot of people up here in Saugatuck and so we would come up every summer, stay at the cottage and that's how

we came to know the Root Beer Barrel. So some people know us as the Clarks. We are known to the Gallases and the Wilsons as the Clark family. We're from Evanston and that's where the Wilsons are from.

We were there probably 6-7 years. We'd come up from Chicago as soon as school was out, stay at the cottage and go back in time for the start of school. And my Dad would come up and join us on the weekends. He worked for CBS, WBBM, a sports announcer for NASCAR and Indianapolis. Both radio and television, and the racing circuit.... the late 60s all through the 70s. This was our summer home. When I began High School we actually moved here in 1976 and my family is still out here and my Dad still goes back and forth to Chicago.

I have great memories of the Barrel because it was coming up to Saugatuck and it was just fun to hang out there and it was my first job, it wasn't paid and I'm sure that Susie thought "This is really cool I have these two girls doing stuff free", but for us it was awesome being inside the Root Beer Barrel helping her out. I remember mostly Susie Wilson and the Gallases. Who can forget them they are really nice people. I remember thinking she's cool because I'm 10 and she's like 18. Loving foot-long hot dogs, loving the root beer.



Wednesday, July 20, 2011

Woody Wilson Planted The Birch Tree

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.

Wednesday, June 22, 2011

ROOT BEER BARREL MEMORIES



Bonnie McVoy, Car Hop, circa 1955

We are still collecting memories of the Douglas root beer barrel!! Ten former employees or owning families now have their memories on the "Barrel blog".

These include young Miss Bonnie McVoy (Now Bonnie Verwys) whose family may have operated it for the longest period (c1954-c1961). If you have memories or pictures to add, send them along to Chris Yoder at cyoder@tds.net or call 269-857-4327

THE ROOT BEER BARREL, CENTER STREET, DOUGLAS



Barrel ca 1952

The Barrel was recently saved from demolition by a group of preservationists ("Friends of the Barrel") of the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society. The Society obtained the structure and the Friends have a plan in place to move it (deconstruct) and eventually restore it to its original glory - hopefully to a place in Douglas where it can remain the 'icon' it was during the mid-century day's when the fast-food 'drive-in' culture and fast-food "highway architecture" was at its height. In addition to the Historical Society, the Friends received support from the Douglas City Council. No funds are being solicited or accepted at this time. The group is looking for a workspace.

BACKGROUND

The Barrel was built in the early 1950s by Joe Decker and Harold Kelly. They built it in Joe's back yard in Flint, disassembled it and brought it to Douglas on a flatbed for reconstruction. They operated it for several years before selling it to the Earl McVoy. The McVoys operated it into the 1960s when George and JoAnn Gallas bought it and operated it for several years, then selling it to Woodrow Wilson.

During the McVoy ownership, a miniature golf course was added to the west side. The Barrel became a favorite for root beer, burgers, and foot-long hot dogs (forty cents), and root beer floats (twenty cents). It closed sometime around 1977. Originally without the exterior iron bands (see photo above), the barrel was of varnished wood planks ("stays"), with a number of exterior lights on stem-like poles that cast the light downward onto the structure. Read the memories of those who worked there at the Barrel Blog.

TELL US YOUR BARREL STORY!

The "Barrel Story" is still being written. Send your reminiscences/Barrel Stories to Chris Yoder at cyoder@tds.net.

PHOTOGRAPHS of the Barrel are very rare. If you have photos to share, email or call Chris Yoder at cyoder@tds.net, phone 269-857-4327

Thursday, April 21, 2011
Gerald Bekken Remembers

"I worked there one summer after I got out of the Army, making root beer floats, hot dogs and serving up ice cream," said Gerald Bekken, now 86. "We would get double lines of cars parked all around the Barrel to buy mugs of root beer and hot dogs. There was a carhop outside who took the orders, and I worked inside to fill them. There wasn't a lot of room in the Barrel, just enough for one or two people to work."

Friday, March 4, 2011
The Olney and Westport, Illinois Barrels

by Glenn Decker, nephew of Joe and Carl

Joe Decker, Chuck's father, was an engineer and a graduate of the University of Illinois, and he designed the barrel. He built one of them in Saugatuck, and then my uncle Carl Decker built two. One was in Olney as kind-of a drive-in restaurant selling root beer and hot dogs. The other was put in Westport which is across from Vincennes, Indiana and it did the same thing selling root beer and foot long hot dogs and some French fries and things like that.

They built three of them as far as I know. Now Chuck thought there was one in Robinson too, but I don't think there was one at Robinson, maybe they considered but never built one. My father, his name was Glenn Decker, and he and Carl and a crew built the two in Illinois. I was a little kid when they built those.

The one in Saugatuck I think was built in 1952 or someplace around there. I would say the others were built in 1952-55. I was born in 44, and when I was growing up I worked at the one in Olney. The one in Olney still exists. A guy bought that and moved it out to the east side of Olney, it's about 300 yards off the road back in the woods.

The one over by Vincennes was actually on the Illinois side of the river in a little town called Westport. People from Vincennes would drive across the river and get hot dogs and root beer there. There is a restaurant in the northern part of Vincennes which has a picture on the wall of the Westport barrel. Next time I get up there I'll see if I can you a copy.

Friday, February 25, 2011

I Own The Barrel in Olney, Illinois



The Olney, Ill Barrel Today

The brother of Joe Decker, the man who built our Saugatuck Barrel, built two matching ones in Olney and Westport, Illinois and operated them for a number of years. The one in Olney, still exists, and has been moved to the property of Mike Doll. Mr. Doll Tells his story below:

Glenn Decker and C. D. (Carl) Decker built the root beer barrel in Olney, Illinois in 1948. And then their father was still alive when they built it. Mr. Decker started out with the barrel and then he built a restaurant in the same lot-- it was a drive-in type restaurant. When he closed that down he turned it into a trailer park and after a number of years he contacted my father, Leo Doll, about demolishing it. And my father went and looked at it and decided he could move it. So he jacked it up and he put it on a low boy and at 5:30- 6 o'clock in the morning he drove it right down Main Street. We live on the east side of town and the barrel was on the west side of town so he had to come right down Main Street, but he did it early in the morning before there was any traffic. My father owned some acreage with a cabin on it that an old MD named Dr King had bought back in the 40s. Dr. King used to wake up in the middle of the night and be lonely and get the operator onto the phone to talk to him. No one lived in the cabin when my dad moved the barrel there, and he made kind of a park out of the property and moved the barrel up there.

We've tried to maintain it over the years. My father passed away when he was 67, so he didn't get to enjoy it too long, but I've tried to keep it going. It's just kind of a private picnic area, and we use it for storage.

I know a little about the building of it, I was told the two brothers and their father built it and they did this particular barrel all by hand. They used the type of planes you see in antique shops that make a tongue and groove board. They bought tongue and grooved boards, but then they took those hand planes and tapered the boards to where they were narrower on each end. I think it's roughly 12 to 14 feet tall. They built it then like a barrel and they put some stainless steel bands around it, and it's still standing.

There was another one that they built a little later over on the Illinois side of the Wabash River near Vincennes, Indiana and they used a router when they built that one. Machined to make the tongue and groove narrow and they didn't do that one by hand. I've not been by that one recently, but they built a building up around that one where it didn't stand out as much because of the building. I'm not sure if it's still standing or not. It about 30 miles away from the original one, I feel like the one I have was the original one. With mine I had to rebuild the inside with wood because the bottom of it had deteriorated and then it kept leaning and I had a lot of electrical lines come and go into it and I wanted to maintain it, I put a post up behind it, an "I" beam post, and pulled it over and put a cable around the top and anchored it to the post, and it's setting more or less behind it so you don't notice it. Then the roof was getting in terrible shape. It drained in the middle, they made the roof slope to the middle and mine is in a woods area so the drain was always plugging up and finally the wood totally deteriorated so I think 6 or so years ago, I just removed the roof and put a flat roof that drained all the way to the back. It originally drained in the middle and had a pipe that came down and went over the side and went out of the thing, and I made it more like a conventional roof and made it drain out the back.

I'm going to say it was probably in the late 50s or early 60s when we moved it and I think it was built either in the late 40s to early 50s. A friend of mine who is 5 to 6 years older than I am talked about going out there and buying a root beer and talking to the curb hops, the girls that served it back when he was in high school. I graduated from high school in 55, and I think he graduated from high school in 1950 so that's what makes me think it was built in the late 40s. The same fellow that I know that I said went there in high school, he was a good friend of the original owner and he opened a bar here and they wanted to have draft beer and they ended up getting the glass mugs from the barrel and they used them in their bar to serve beer. I didn't get any of the mugs, or also the metal trays that you roll up the window and set on the door. I wish I had thought to get some at the time.

The two they had down here they called them Wally's Root Beer Barrel, because Carl Decker's wife was named Wally. When my father moved it, it was no longer being used and it was sitting in the corner of a trailer park. My father had moved some small buildings and homes and small houses, so he just jacked it up and slid it on a low boy and moved it out. At the time I didn't live here, but I built a new home here in 73-74, so today I live basically across the driveway from the barrel. We are back off the highway about 5-600 feet and there's still the little white cabin that Dr. King used in the 40s.

Thursday, February 24, 2011

Chocoholic Mystery Writer JoAnna Carl "Remembers"

Eve K. Sandstrom, writing under the pen name JoAnna Carl, is the author of a wonderful series of "Chocoholic Mysteries" many of which use the Saugatuck-Douglas area for inspiration. Two of these books mention the Root Beer Barrel. Former owner Bonnie Verwys went through "The Chocolate Frog" and marked almost 40 pages where the Barrel is mentioned. Her works may be found at: <http://www.joannacarl.com/>

Here are her "memories" of the barrel.

Dear Chris,

I wish I could be more helpful! Frankly, my first visit to southwestern Michigan was in 1960, and I have no recollection at all of the Root Beer Barrel as a working establishment. One of the blogs says it was in operation until the mid-1970s, so this amazes me. My only excuse is that the Sandstrom cottage is at Pier Cove, and our usual route to Douglas didn't pass the barrel. Plus we had young children. Our visits in those days were never more than for a week or ten days, and activities centered on the beach. A trip to Saugatuck meant shopping for groceries or washing clothes.

Now that my husband and I are retired -- sort of -- we have explored Saugatuck and Douglas more extensively. So I had seen the Root Beer Barrel many times in recent years. When I created Warner Pier and began to write about my imaginary resort town, I thought of it. I remembered a similar Root Beer Barrel from my childhood, and I regarded it as a universal landmark of small town America.

Now the odd thing is that I can't track down where I saw this landmark as a child. It's a real mystery!

Trying to remember, I e-mailed Mary Jo, my childhood best friend, and she says she remembers drinking lots of root beer at the A&W Root Beer stand in Ardmore, Oklahoma, where we went to elementary school, but she can't remember that it had a structure in the shape of a barrel.

My family moved a lot. Did I see one in Oklahoma City? In Tulsa? In Wichita Falls, Texas? In Great Bend, Kansas? In Norman, Oklahoma, where I went to college? In some other town I merely drove through? I'm stumped.

All I know is that when I first saw the Saugatuck-Douglas Root Beer Barrel, even though it wasn't in operation, I immediately knew what it was. And when I needed a readily identifiable landmark for Lee and Joe to use in *The Chocolate Cat Caper*, it popped to mind. I do regret having a windstorm blow it into a pile of boards in *The Chocolate Frog Frame-Up*. Although that disaster fit my plot (Joe is accused of wantonly destroying a historic landmark) I miss the fictional barrel, and I wish it were still part of the setting of the Chocoholic books.

Thanks so much for contacting me. And I'm awed by someone who went through *Frog Frame-Up* and marked every reference to the Root Beer Barrel! What dedication!

All the best,
Eve K. Sandstrom/JoAnna Carl

Wednesday, February 16, 2011
Melinda (McVoy) Tempe - 1954 to about 1961



Earle and Mary McVoy, c 1953

I'm sure that my sister Bonnie mentioned that my father knew he was seriously ill and decided that he needed a way to help the family get along after he was gone. So that's how my parents ended up buying the root beer barrel. I worked there both as a car hop and inside drawing root beers, washing dishes, etc. but usually not making the hot dogs- that was someone "higher up", often my brother Michael. I remember it as a terrific place for me to work during the summer even though the wages were not that great, especially when working inside. The girls always wanted to be outside because they had a chance of getting good tips. The hours were flexible and the social aspect was terrific because we were on the main street to the Oval.

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.

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. Mason's was delicious; I think I've had it recently, so they must still be in business. (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 don't recall where they shipped the syrup from. My mother was the boss and she had a lot of responsibility- ordering supplies, setting work schedules, keeping records, etc. I do remember we got the hot dogs from Herrud's. It was a meat packing business in Grand Rapids, which may have been taken over by Swift, possibly? 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.)

I think we must have employed quite a few local girls there. It seemed to be THE summer job.

Also we served Barbeque sandwiches, and they came from Allegan-the Johnson Sandwich Co. They were very good, steamed in their own little oven, and you'd pop them in, 35 cents. 10 cents for the root beer which had to be in a frosted mug. I'm sure my sister told you about the two freezers. I got mug washing duty quite often, making sure they were clean and disinfected so we met the health department standards, and then they went in the freezers. Space was very tight inside; you couldn't have any more than three people or you'd be stumbling over each other. Usually there would be one person making the hot dogs & sandwiches (that was often my brother), then there was a cashier getting the order set up, often my mother or I. And then the third person would take in the dirty trays, do the washing and stack the mugs in the freezers and also draw the root beer for new orders. The root beer had to settle because of the foam in that particular root beer. So you'd draw the root beer and do something else and then go back and top it off a bit. Oh, yeah, I'm almost ready to go back to work- it sounds like fun again!

The root beer floats were 20 cents I think, foot longs 35 cents, like the barbeque sandwiches. We did sell bags of potato chips. There was a salesman, and I believe his name was Pat Berensten (sp?) from South Haven who delivered supplies like coffee, napkins, paper to wrap the dogs, etc.

I remember that my brother had to put some supports around those staves because with the humidity they were starting to warp. My mother sold the barrel to Mr. Race in about 1961 or 62, and, in fact, I managed for him. I was doing both inside and outside duty for a summer.

I remember being in Germany, years and years ago, and I recall coming upon a barrel, very similar to this one, only a little smaller, but that was the first one that I had ever seen like our Barrel. It made quite an impact, and I suspect that this one is quite unique.

Monday, February 7, 2011

The Ernest Race Family Owns The Barrel -1961 and 1962

From Pamela Race Schweitzer



Robert-8 yrs. old, Ernest-10 yrs. old, and Pamela (me)-5 yrs. old, with Kenneth- 5 months.

My Dad, Ernest Race, owned the Barrel when I was 5-6 years old. This would have been about 1961 and 1962. I was very young and don't know who owned it before or after he did. My Aunt, who lives in Holland, must have been about 15 or 16 at that time, and then that summer, 1962, she lived with us and worked at the barrel. Her name is Sharon Plooster, and she was both a car hop and worked in the kitchen. She remembers getting the frosted glasses out of the freezer for the root beer.

I remember there was a miniature golf course right next door to us, when we lived there it wasn't open any more but it had a miniature lighthouse there that you could actually go inside. That lighthouse stood there for years and years. Then they started building up all the boat storage buildings. I used to play in the field behind there, there was nothing there when we lived there.

It was a time in my life when I didn't have any cares in the world. I'd go into the kitchen and my mom and dad would lift me up on the freezer and hand me a frozen foot long hot dog and I'd munch along on that. And the smells, the business, things would go in phases when there would be a lot of cars there and then they'd all take off. They just go in waves you know. It was definitely a hot spot in the summer. My parents had tables set up outside too, with the umbrellas and the chairs around, out on the lawn too so people could sit outside of the car if they wanted to.

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.

As much as I wanted to always help, I usually ended up on a stool inside with a root beer float or a foot long hotdog. I recall sweeping, or putting umbrellas down at the close of the day. The barrel wasn't air-conditioned. I can picture my mom exhausted from working in the heat, with only a couple fans going all day. My Aunt Sharon recalls having to keep the freezer stocked with the glass mugs so they would be frosty for the floats.

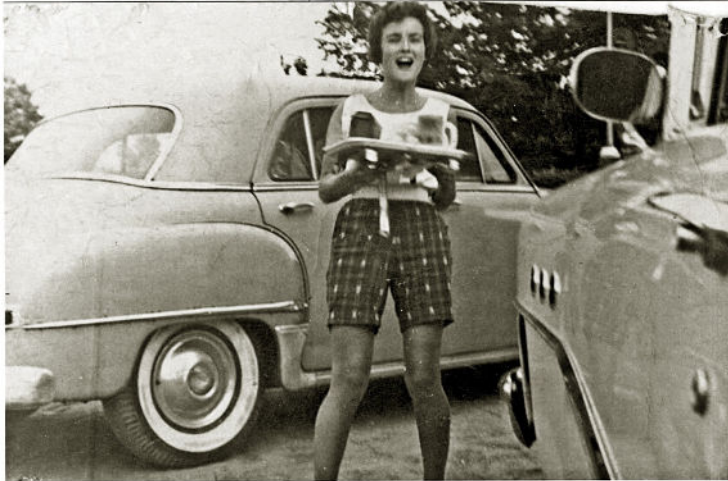
I remembered the Barrel was broken into and robbed one night. Police were there, and I recall discussion of some vandalizing, but it appeared they were looking for money because the cash box was taken.

I think my parents did add on the kitchen area at the back of the barrel. I can ask my aunt Sharon about that, but I think they did so.

From there we moved to Holland.

Thursday, January 27, 2011

Bonnie (McVoy) Verwys Barrel Memories- 1954 to 1961



Bonnie McVoy

I am the eldest of the three children of Earle and Mary McVoy- Mike, Melinda, and myself. We came originally from Lansing, and then to Grand Rapids where my grandparents lived, then my father moved us to Douglas in 1947 I think. There he bought what was known as Bonnie Meadows from Miss Graham and Miss Butterfield and we were the second owners. My mother lived on the property for 54 years.

My grandmother and grandfather were in the insurance business in Grand Rapids, it was called Vandebosch and McVoy. My father liked this area and when he saw the house and the barn and 11 acres in Douglas on Union Street, he bought it.

His father died at about 45, I think, and our father died at 39 in 1955. Before that he was sick with hypertension and he knew that he was not going to be with us forever, and he bought the root beer barrel in 1954 so my mother would have a livelihood. We had it about a year when he died.

Our claim to fame was the steamed buns, the foot-long hot dogs, the frosted mugs and root beer floats. A little later they added those steamed sandwiches, I think my brother said there was a little steamer thing and the sandwiches came from a company in Allegan, and all you had to do was steam them.

I have a picture of myself at the barrel serving customers. 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.

My mother remarried about 1957.

She sold the root beer barrel, I think at that point to Ernie Race, who was a disabled veteran. I don't know if it was difficult for them to run it or not, but he's the one who put that little run-way to that little cottage. Ernie is gone now but has a daughter Pam in Grand Rapids.

Then Joan and George Gallas bought it after that.

It's stood empty for many years and it is in pretty bad repair, we did go down and take a peek.

My grandparents owned what is now Tranquility Lane on the Lakeshore in Douglas and it was called Sunset Orchard. They owned it together with Mr. Vandebosch who they were in the insurance business with. You know

what's ironic, my grandfather and father died young and about 6 or 7 years ago I was in Grand Rapids at an Antique Mall and I found the brass plaque from my grandfather's insurance agency, now that has to be some kind of miracle.

When we lived in Douglas I won the "Fix-up, Clean-up, Paint-up" poster contest. I was sent for a week to Ox-Bow. I was in about 7-8th grade and around 1946.

Friday, January 21, 2011

I Managed The Barrel - 1966 and 1967- Marcia A. Tucker

I worked at the barrel for two summers, 1966 and 1967. I managed the barrel for George and Joanne, and I got the job because I knew them for previous years. My brothers worked for George at the driving range, Nicki and I used to play together as youngsters, I took dance schools. When I was in college, I worked there the summers of 66 and 67 for college money. We had young girls, 14 year olds, as car hops.

I don't think we opened up until 11 o'clock in the morning. The grill was in the back where we cooked hamburgers. As the manager I had to get the condiments ready for the hot dogs and the hamburgers. We had a big chest freezer that had the mugs in it for the root beer. Opening up was like at any restaurant, getting things ready so that when the customers got there you were ready to go. I'm trying to think if we made our own hamburger patties or how they came. I know that George and I would go into Holland and pick up the bread products from a bread company in Holland. The root beer was delivered, but I don't know the company name. We must have had some kind of a steamer to cook the foot longs. There was a grill for hamburgers and we had a French fryer for the French fries. That basically was it, it was hot dogs, regular-sized, foot-long, hamburgers, French fries, root beer was the main beverage, but I think there was another one or two. That was all that we served.

The mugs were kept in a chest freezer, I think we only had one, that held the mugs, and when we served them we had a dish washing area where we had to then wash them and put them back in the freezer. The root beer in the frosted mugs and the foot-long were the main attractions.

I'm glad that someone is thinking of doing something with the barrel. I've always thought that the historical society or someone should do something with it.

Marcia A. Tucker

Monday, January 17, 2011

The Wilsons Own The Barrel- 68 to 74



Woodrow and Kathryn Wilson

First let me say that I am thrilled you are saving "The Barrel". It has been very sad for me to watch it deteriorate year after year, and to see the huge boat garages encroaching, just about swallowing the poor Barrel up. I was wondering how long before it would either fall down or be torn down to make way for one more boat garage.

My parents, Kathryne and Woodrow “Woody” Wilson were the last owners that actually ran “The Barrel” as a hot dog, root beer stand. My parents bought the business in late 1967 or early in 1968.

I know my family first operated The Barrel the summer of 1968. We bought it from Jo Ann and George Gallas. Their daughter Nicki wrote a beautiful piece about her memories of The Barrel. My parents and the Gallas’s became lifelong friends.

Starting in 1968 my parents ran The Barrel every summer through 1974. 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. That little house looks as bad as The Barrel today. 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.

I loved the food. The “foot long” hot dogs were great, as were the steamed buns, hot fries, and cold root beer. Both the root beer and the hot dogs were made in Holland, local quality that is hard to duplicate today. We had some of the old lead glass mugs, but we served all the drinks in paper cups.

There was a barrel that sat on the counter, and was 3 feet high or so. The tap for the root beer was on it. I remember the tap moved side to side, not out toward you. It was beautiful shellacked wood and had a name on it. I can’t remember the name. Perhaps it was the root beer distributor from Holland. I’ve always wondered what happened to it. Anybody know?

My 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, you remember, or maybe you don’t. I know 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.

The Barrel operated in 1973, but health issues were beginning to limit the amount of time and energy my 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.

Due to health issues, The Barrel didn’t open in 1975.

By the way, if I sound upset by the boat garages that have sprung up around The Barrel, I shouldn’t be. My father, “Woody”, sold the corner lot just to the West of The Barrel for the first garage to be built. Incidentally, that corner garage was built on top of what remained of The Barrel’s Putt-Putt golf course, and a cement block structure I used to call “The Tower”, Remember?



Taken about 1974

I believe my parents sold what was left of The Barrel property in 1977 to a man named 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. I am glad The Barrel will live again. Just writing this has brought back great memories for me.

Suzan Wilson Capillo Jan. 15, 2011

Saturday, January 15, 2011

A Car Hop Remembers-- 1967

Working at the barrel was my first job and I was 13, which probably wasn't legal. I don't know what the working age was. My dad had the drug store and I worked there even before I started working for him. I was a car hop. I remember the frosted mugs and the foot long hot dogs. The cars would pull in and I'd take the trays out and put them on the window and I remember working with Marcia Tucker. George and Joanne Gallases owned it when I worked there.

I remember it was all gravel and I was glad I didn't have to do it on roller skates because balancing was not my strong point. People would stop on the way back from the beach and the competition was the Redwood...I believe it was already open (now the Waypoint). It was owned by Cathy and Joe Hanacek. If I remember correctly, the big difference (at least to me) between the Redwood Drive Inn and Barrel was that the Redwood had hamburgers, (really good, by the way), but we had those famous foot long hot dogs.

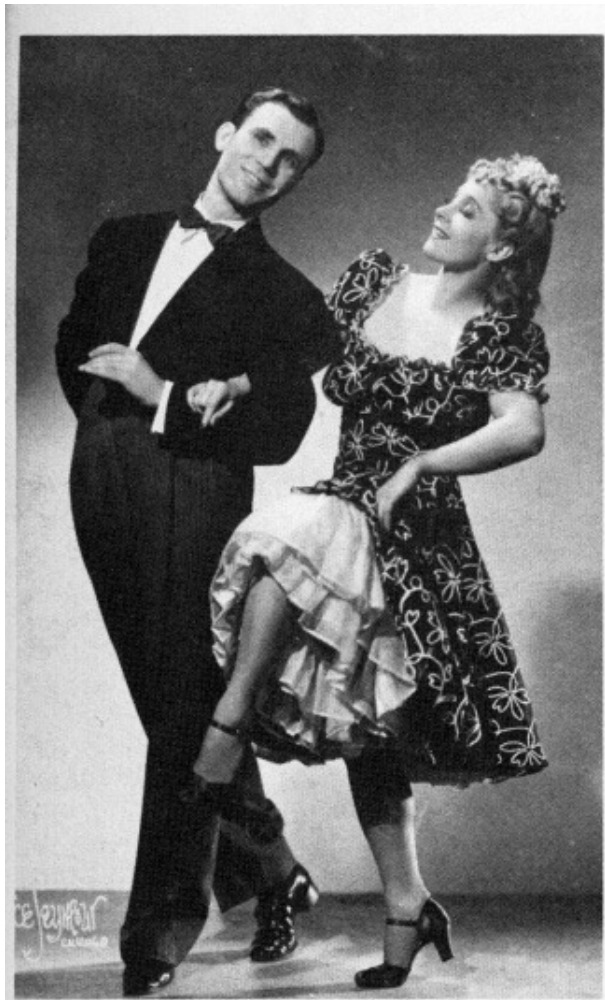
I think the year I was there was 1967, since I know I was 13 in the summer but my birthday is late in the year. I'm so happy that you are doing this, whenever I go by it brings back such good memories for me.

I read that the historical society was going to try to restore the Barrel, which is totally awesome. I would love to be part of that restoration and re/opening should that ever happen.

Thanks for keeping the memories alive.-
Leslie (Christenson) Such, Jan 15, 2011

Thursday, January 13, 2011

Nick Gallas Remembers -Early 60s to 67



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

I am so excited that they are going to save the barrel. I am so happy.

When the Center for the Arts was opening, Peggy Boyce suggested they use it for the box office and nobody would hear of it. That would have been really neat, but nobody was interested. They thought that was tacky.

I think they had the dates wrong. I know that my parents, George and Jo Ann Gallas, had it into the 60s, like 64, 65, 66. The article in the Commercial Record had it that it was built in 1946. I think it was later than that. My parents had a golf driving range on the corner across from West Shore in that big field there, right next to where the barrel is. I can remember as a little tiny girl we watched the barrel be built from our driving range. They came and they put the bands around it and then they bent the wood over these bands and I can remember watching it be built, but it had to be after 1946, I don't think it was that early. 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.

And my parents had it a couple years, I was trying to think... I know that in 65 they had it. The Commercial Record article said it was operated into the 50s, and I'm thinking it was into the mid to late 60s. I know after my parents Woody Wilson bought it. So they had it a few years after that. Their daughter Suzie Capillo has a cottage on Park street, she lives somewhere in Illinois. Her parents bought it after my parents had it. Before my parents the McVoys had it.

I remember as a little child stopping for foot long and it was the biggest treat. I don't know if my parents bought it from the McVoys. My parents didn't have it too many years, I think it was in 1965 that I was a car hop. Dick Snyder,

a pharmacist at the drug store with Jim Christensen, his foster daughter Margie Lenheer, she was also a car hop while I was there.

Marcia Tucker, she lives on the lake shore, she was like the manager. I think she worked there the entire time my parents had it. And I think that she got to be like an assistant manager. She was at the barrel a lot. She would know the dates that she worked there.

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

I remember that before my parents owned it, stopping at the barrel was the biggest treat in the world as a child. Oh my goodness, to get a foot long was like the best thing and it was just such a tragedy when it closed. I see it sitting there ready to fall down and, oh my goodness, it just breaks my heart.

We used to come from Kentucky to Saugatuck every summer, and I got a Christmas card from a girl who lived across the street from me there. She said "What about the barrel, is it still there, I remember so much helping out there." They, I guess, came to visit us in Saugatuck, she was a few years younger than me and I guess she came and was a car hop too. She mentioned the barrel this year, out of the blue, so I know it's just beloved by everybody.

Nicki Gallas, Jan 2011

Thursday, January 13, 2011

My Dad Joe Decker built the Root Beer Barrel.

My Dad Joe Decker built the root beer barrel.

My Dad and a friend of his Harold Kelly, I think Kelly worked for him, they 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, and they built that barrel over in Flint. As you probably well know it was built just like a barrel, it was all tongue and grooved and they made the staves and all that stuff. They actually did all the work on those staves themselves, got the wood, they turned it, made it to the shape to form the staves, tongue and grooved it, steamed it and did all that stuff. They assembled that thing in Flint, in our back yard. They erected that whole thing right in the back yard and then took it down, put it on a flat bed truck and had it transported over to Douglas. They took it over there and erected it. This was by 1950, when I was about 6 years old. My sister would have been 4. (We have photos which were developed in September of that year showing the Barrel in operation.)

Now 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, they would go over there on the weekends to run it. At that point in time my Dad was the Director of Purchasing for AC Spark Plug, which was part of General Motors. He and Harold Kelly would go over on weekends and 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 building there which was like a one room cottage, one big room and a bathroom, so she'd have a place to stay. It was back begin the barrel.

As I recall, being a little kid, there wasn't much around there at that point in time. Way down the way, they had some storage barns for the boats.

How my Dad got this idea was that my uncle Carl Decker also built one of these. Actually he built two, down in Olney, Illinois, and the other in Westport, Illinois, about 15 miles away. Olney is about 100 miles south of Champaign, and probably about 15 miles from the border. So there ended up being three of those barrels that I know of.

I know that my Dad and Harold Kelly ran the barrel for 3 or 4 years, probably closer to 3 before they realized that because of the distance, this was not a good idea. My uncle Carl ran his two for quite a few years. He had a restaurant business like an old fashion drive in with the counter and the stools and that kind of stuff, and on that

property he built the barrel and did the same thing, he was selling foot long hot dogs and root beer, and the same way with the one over in Robinson. He ran the one in Olney and my aunt went over and ran the one in Robinson.

The Douglas barrel did operate for a few more years after my Dad sold it. Somebody said that some bikers took it over, the bikers had it for a while. When we moved over here to the Grand Rapids area about 1990 we went over there and saw it and were out taking pictures. At that time, there was nothing there. The second time we went over, there was a guy that had it and he called it "The Rain Barrel" or "pickle barrel", I think "the Rain Barrel", set up as a little museum. We stopped in and introduced ourselves to the guy, told him my dad built it, and so forth. Then we were over a few years ago and it looked pretty dilapidated.

Chuck Decker

Al Pshea, Memories of the Barrel

I was 91 last November. I graduated from Saugatuck in 1938. I can remember back to when the interurban used to run into Saugatuck, it would go in front of the big pavilion, down to where the Butler is now. There was a lumber yard down there, it would turn around at the lumber yard and went back.

I used to work at the root beer barrel. Originally it was owned by people named Kelley from over by the Saginaw area. And they started that barrel, and I worked there at nights and mostly on weekends. I worked there as a cook. I'd stand there at the window and made hot dogs, they had foot long hot dogs and ice cold root beer. That was the big feature. And I worked with Kelly's until they sold it to the McVoys there in Douglas. I worked then for the McVoys there a number of years. I don't remember the years. It was after the war. I would say 1950, in that area.

There used to be a miniature golf course to the west of the barrel and there was that big long big building that was built, it was supposed to have had the longest bar in this part of Michigan, and that's been gone for years.

I remember the Kellys. They were very very nice people.

I remember one weekend, on a Sunday, right around the 4th of July, I put out over 100 pounds of foot long hot dogs. And we'd go through 3 or 4 freezers of frozen mugs. We used to take the mugs and put them in a freezer so that they had ice cold root beer. We had two great big freezers in the barrel.

Dr. Corkill was the local doctor and head of the community hospital (now the Kirby House). He used to stop in, and we could see him coming. When he stopped in, regardless of what orders there were, he immediately got waited on. I mean, he was a doctor, and that was the way we ran things.

Tuesday, January 11, 2011

Working at the Root Beer Barrel - Frank Lovejoy



Frank Lovejoy at The Oval
About Barrel Age

The Barrel was my first real full time job, leaving Marg Brown and Evelyn Brockway, the lawn service in those days. I worked inside w/Mike who managed the business for his Mother, Mary McVoy. My job? Was everything, I even did some car hopping a couple of nights when the cars were literally 3 and 4 deep 360 degrees around the barrel, yes, they were called "car hops" yes, the trays hung on the car window, I can remember the girls taking two trays full of our famous "Foot Long" hot dogs and two trays of "frosted mugs" root beer to many of the cars, we were

know for the frosted mugs and real foot long hot dogs. Actually most of the hot dogs were over 12". How do I know? We weren't always busy during the day so Mike and I decided to measure several. All exceeded the 12" Not today.

The mugs were kept in two very large and very deep freezers. There was just enough room in the barrel for Mike and I to work, so anything that had to be done was done by the two of us. There were two windows, a serving window on Mike's side and the tray drop off window on my side where the girls would bring the trays of emptied mugs. Starting on the most important side, Mike took in and prepped the orders for the HD's (hot dogs not Harley Davidson) told me the number of root beers for the order, I would draw the beer and put them on the HD tray or separate trays depending on the order then the order was taken to the car by none other than..... the "car hop"

Let me describe to the best of my old memory the interior of the barrel. Because of the size, there was just enough room for two people to work and move around and perform the assigned duties. There were two very large, very deep freezers that were used to keep the mugs (really) ice cold (Frosted) a large root beer dispenser, two hot box to warm HD buns and two containers keeping the HD's (hot) Next to that were the containers for the condiments. Stacks of trays strategically placed for easy access to the serving window. Storage, this building was very well thought out. I might add that the two freezers were located in the middle of the barrel. Next to the drop off window (inside) were two deep sinks for washing and sanitizing the mugs. As the freezers emptied the wet mugs went into the empty one. Tadaa! frosted mugs. Overhead, and within easy reach were all the supplies, napkins, extra mugs, jars of condiments, etc. The root beer dispenser was located to the front of the barrel between the two windows.

How did this all function? Mike McVoy was the manager/cook, I was the prep person, chopping onions was the worst part, the mug washer, the freezer stocker, the bun go getter, the root beer drawer the keeping Mike supplied with everything he needed and when necessary help the girls outside by picking up trays from cars that were ready to leave guy.



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

Usually everything ran like clock work! We had great girls as car hops, Linda, two Judies, a Jerry I don't remember them all and we all worked well together.

I believe it was the 2nd season for the Barrel and hot sandwiches were added to the menu. The sandwiches were purchased pre made in individual air tight (paper) package. These were served hot. To achieve this there was a steamer unit that had six steamer needles pointing vertically. The sandwich, in the bag was pressed onto the steamer needles piercing the bag and going into the meat part of the sandwich, the steamer was activated and in two seconds you had a hot sandwich.. The HD's were still the most popular. Of course this added to our overall work load and storage situation, all overcome in a short period of time.

I believe it was the 2nd year that Dave Tomlinson, married to Bonnie McVoy, Mike's sister, put in a nine hole miniature golf course. Miniature being the operative word here. Guess who was appointed grounds keeper?

The demise of the Barrel came when the business was sold. To whom? I have no idea. It operated for several years after that. A storage building added to the back took away the character and the cottage built behind and in back

didn't add to the overall ambiance. The miniature golf course was short lived and soon the barrel became in disrepair. How sad, many times while living in Saugatuck I would drive by the barrel on the way home and think of the old days, visualize the cars around the barrel, the girls busily going from car to car and the furor going on inside to keep everyone outside happy. Better days in a time long gone in my life.

I hope this narrative helps Jim, I miss Saugatuck, I miss the Historical Society, I miss the people, I miss all there is about Saugatuck where I grew up from the 5th grade.

Sincerely,
Frank Lovejoy