

Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

Knuth’s Brewpub & Event Center building has rich history

The commercial district of Ripon is concentrated around the 100 to the 300 blocks of Watson Street. Throughout the past several years, many changes have occurred to this area and recently Knuth’s Brewpub & Event Center expanded to 230 Watson St., which is at the corner of Watson and Blossom streets.

Knuth’s first opened across the street in 2015 at 221 Watson St.

This corner originally was home to the Pedrick Opera Hall, built in 1869. This building had retail shops on the first floor, and the second and third floors contained an entertainment venue.

The auditorium seated 600 people with a stage at one end with seating on the floor and in a balcony area. This building burned in 1904.

After the fire, Paul Neer (1859-1933) purchased the corner lot and built a new building. An article in the Oct. 14, 1904 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reported that “The building is built of St. Louis pressed brick with Bedford stone trimmings. Jorgenson & Pillsbury of Fond du Lac were the architects.”

Neer then rented the southern two stories of the building to Edward Strauss (1872-1948) for his retail space. The Straus Brothers Store was started by Edward’s father, Ferdinand Strauss (1842-1912). Ferdinand came to Ripon in 1866 and established the business, which sold a variety of goods. When he retired in 1892, he turned over his business to his two sons, Edward and Irvin (1870-1948) and the name was changed to Strauss Brothers.

About four years later, Irvin left the family business, leaving his brother Edward to run the business started by his father.

The Strauss Brothers Store at 230 Watson St. opened on Oct. 8, 1904 and the property became known as “The Big Daylight Store” as well as “The Big Daylight Corner.” This is because large glass windows on the south and east sides of the building enabled natural light to enter the store. The store also was lighted by electricity, and at that time, it also was the only store in Ripon to have an electric sign on the exterior. In addition, the store also had display cases which were lit by electric lights.

The *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reported that “The store is equipped with the most modern



AFTER 230 WATSON St. was constructed in 1904, the Strauss Brothers Store occupied the entire building. At some time shortly after that, the building was split in half to house two commercial businesses. This undated early 1900s photograph shows the Strauss Brothers Store located on the corner of Blossom Street with the F.W. Lutke store occupying the northern half of the building.

submitted photo

display fixtures and the latest cash, and bundle carriers connect the different sections with the south balcony where all the wrapping is done and the cashier’s desk is located.”

The article also explained that in the north balcony area there was a room “Equipped with tables, a writing desk and chairs for the convenience of ladies, who are invited to rest here, meet their friends, write letters or use the telephone as they desire.”

The new business location at 230 Watson St. employed 18 people. Besides having merchandise, a tailor shop and restrooms, the second floor also had offices for rent.

Strauss Brothers sold a variety of items, including clothing, furnishings, shoes, dry goods, carpets and millinery.

A 1906 *Ripon Weekly Press* reported that “The object of the store has always been to carry, in addition to the goods usually to be found in a first-class store in a small city, an assortment of the latest high-priced clothing, cloaks, millinery, etc., to be found in the most exclusive stores of the large cities; along with introducing all the latest city ideas and features, such as ‘openings’ four times a year, with decorations and music; annual rummage and clearance sales, thus keeping the stock always new and up-to-date; and always providing the best service possible, thus making it ‘the store for all people.’”

The first floor of the northern half of the store was rented to Fred W. Lutke Jr. (1857-1929) for his clothing store. An article in a 1910 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* also reported that “Waller’s restaurant” occupied the northern part of the building along with Lutke. Lutke left Ripon in 1911 and moved to Beloit.

The second story of the north half of the building was rented to Ada Kelly (1866-1932) for her dress-making business. An apartment also was on the second story of this half of the building.

Neer moved to Idaho and sold the building in 1910. Ripon city directories show that throughout the years many stores occupied the two storefronts found in the building.

From 1938 until 1966, the

south corner side of the building housed Chipman’s Federated Store. In 1950, the Schultz Brothers Variety Store occupied the north side of the building until it took over the entire storefront around 1966. Schultz Brothers closed in approximately 1984.

In 1991, the building was renovated into a senior living facility called “The American House.” The 20,000-square-foot building housed about 40 independent and assisted-living units. The exterior of the building was restored to look like it did in 1904. This restoration won a state award for the best adaptive reuse project for a downtown area.

The American House closed and moved locations when Boca Grande Capital Group purchased the building in 2007. Boca

Grande planned to develop the building into a boutique hotel in conjunction with the Mapes Hotel, which was located just south across Blossom Street. However, this project never happened and the building sat empty. Eventually, the city of Ripon took over ownership of the building.

The building deteriorated until purchased in 2021 by Greystone Ventures (comprised of Tom and T.J. Rogers, Cory Pollesch and Mike Albright). Greystone Ventures planned to turn the building into condominiums and started to prepare the building for the conversion to housing units. Instead, in 2023, the building was sold to David Knuth who completed the renovation of the building and opened his brewery, restaurant and event space in early 2024.

The building at 230 Watson St. is located in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District.

However, it is a non-contributing building to the district and is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The district was added onto the National Register in 1987 and if at that point 50% of a building was not original or historic in appearance it was determined not to be contributing to the district.

At the time the district was established, the top half of the building had been refaced with a metal-type siding which covered the second-story windows. After the recent renovation it is possible that the building would be considered for addition into the district.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.



THIS CIRCA 1989 photograph shows 230 Watson Street after it was vacated by the Schultz Brothers Variety Store. In 1991 the building was renovated into the American House senior living facility.

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