

Washburn Community Affairs

1940-48 — Reconstruction

CJ 3/1/12

The return of prosperity to Washburn in the 1940s resulted in a reconstruction of the private and public components of Washburn's dilapidated material base after years of neglect. Almost every year from 1940 through the post-war years the Times published reports about improvements to private homes, businesses, and the city's infrastructure. Although new houses were occasionally constructed—four were being built in August 1940—most of Washburn's stock of houses dated from before 1920, with some remaining from the early days of the settlement. Many of the houses that had already been improved one or more times now underwent another round of repair, remodeling, and restoration: new roofs, painting, rooms and porches added, modern kitchens installed, new heating plants, redecoration, basements constructed, and other home improvements.

While there were a few improvements in business buildings during the war, after the war there was a boom of construction and improvements along the Bayfield Street business district, apparently with the expectation that the prosperity of the war years would continue. Most of the new construction took place around the intersection of Bayfield Street and First Avenue West: a law office, in January 1947, and a barber shop, in March 1952, on the southwest corner; the Wisconsin State Bank, in March 1955, on the northeast corner; the Redwood Motel, in February 1967, on the southeast corner; and the Masonic Temple, replacing the old Rait building, in February 1969, on the northwest corner.

The building boom along Bayfield Street was accompanied by the opening of several new businesses. Small business remodeling and rebuilding projects included the Yates Building, for a restaurant; the Olson Building, for a tavern; and the Arcade Block, on the southwest corner of Bayfield Street and Central Avenue, for another restaurant. Other new



Lars Larson
Guest Columnist

businesses included a dry cleaning plant in the former Ungrodt Hardware Building, a cafe in the Yates Building, a Sears' "shopping office" in the Union Block, a furniture and appliance store in the Kinney Block (on the southeast corner of Bayfield Street and Washington Avenue), a "beauty studio" in an unknown location, a cab service, tourist cabins (on the southwest corner of Bayfield Street and Eighth Avenue West), and an apparel shop, restaurant, theater, and apartments in the renovated Hanson Building. Other established businesses continued to flourish, including the Ungrodt Shopping Center, Harold's Food Market, the Washburn Motor Company, the Chequamegon Co-Operative Creamery, among others.

History was repeated as Washburn set about "securing industries" to strengthen its economic base. In a meeting in March 1946, the city council discussed ways to attract industry, authorizing an advertisement, describing the advantages of Washburn, to be placed in the Mississippi Lumberman. The issue of how to encourage new industries to locate in Washburn was taken up again at a public "mass meeting," at the court house in April 1948. Possibly in response to these efforts, a firm from Minneapolis established the Washburn Wood Products

Company in the Garfield School, while a former resident returned to the city to erect the Washburn Foundry Company in the Lemke Building. There were the "usual prospects" for new businesses and industries, none of which became reality: in 1940 a hotel, in 1944 a toy factory, in 1945 a post office building, in 1950 a factory for manufacturing Christmas wreaths, and a factory for making cement blocks.

Due more to the force of circumstances than choice two new school buildings were also constructed. In 1940, Washburn's children were attending school in three old buildings: the Lincoln School, northwest corner of Fourth Street West and Fifth Avenue, built in 1891; the Walker High School, northwest corner of Ninth Street (not opened) and Washington Avenue, built 1894; and the Garfield School, north side of Bayfield Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenue West, built in 1900. A 1940 state survey found these buildings to be, not only completely inadequate for educational purposes, but a menace to the health and safety of pupils and teachers. Compelled to act by the state report, the city constructed a new elementary school, on the northwest corner of Fourth Street and Third Avenue West, the site of the old Washburn Brewery. Named the DuPont School in recognition of the financial contribution of the Du Pont Company, it was dedicated on March 1942, and all elementary level children were moved there from the old schools. An attempt was made to rescue the Walker High School by renovating and updating the building to meet state standards, but fate took a hand when on Wednesday, February 5, 1947, it was destroyed by fire. Students were moved to the Du Pont club building where classes were conducted under wholly inadequate learning conditions. A new high school was constructed adjacent to the elementary school and classes began there in May 1950.