

The Western Hotel, Once Baraboo's Finest Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

In the two previous articles about downtown fires, we have commented on the Western Hotel and its importance. In the 1872 article, great efforts succeeded in saving the building. Six years later it too succumbed to fire.

Until recently, although we had a picture, we had only scraps of information about this early and important structure. Now, thanks to Joe Ward and his two volume history of Downtown Baraboo, we have extensive and accurate information about the Western Hotel and another structure which graces the SE corner of Oak and Fourth Streets.

Previous histories, such as the Baraboo Intensive Survey, failed to recognize that the Adams and Western hotels were one and the same, not separate structures, with names that varied during certain periods. Ward reports that the first parts of the hotel, on the NE corner of Oak and Fourth St, were built by Col. Edward Sumner in 1847.

The First Hotel

This alone is remarkable, for it was only in 1846 that an ad hoc committee had selected, and the legislature approved, the present site of downtown Baraboo as the location for the County Seat. Surveying, probably by Canfield, must have been done rapidly. With no need for building permits or environmental studies, Sumner's hotel, the Adams, was quickly erected, it being a small one story frame building.

It did not look at first like the attached picture, for the covered sidewalk, porch above, and additional rooms were added later, including a third story (1854). Eventually it occupied 66 by 77 feet of frontage. The final architectural style is decidedly Western, and one can easily imagine a cowboy emerge on the second floor, jump down on to his horse (landing directly in the saddle of course) and go galloping away in a cloud of dust.

Successful Operations

Like Eben Peck, Count Haraszthy, and many others, Sumner went to California in search of gold in 1849, returning in 1852 to find his hotel renamed the Western. He promptly renamed it the Adams House. Sometimes it was called the Sumner House. This should be distinguished from the Sumner House of 1878 built by Edward Sumner's nephew Charles. That became the more magnificent Warren Hotel, itself to burn in 1964.

In many ways the early hotel functioned as a civic center, plus housing Dr. Mills (1850), and later a cigar store and barber shop. A saloon occupied the basement. Prisoners were even lodged there, a story in itself as we have reported previously. The most auspicious guest, however, was Mrs. Abraham Lincoln in 1872. It is said that she was not impressed. A series of owners are chronicled in Ward's book about Downtown Baraboo.

By 1874 the manager was W.B. Pearl, experienced hotelier at the Cliff House at Devils Lake. Declining business and competition from other hotels forced him to recommend closing the Western Hotel, the closing date being November 1, 1878.

This brings us to the great fire of November 6, 1878, five days later, as recounted in the previous article about fires. The structure was destroyed along with all neighboring buildings except one on the corner of Third Street and Oak. This was the day that an auction had been planned for the Western Hotel.

Some said that the fire started in the old hotel, but others blamed the Sumner Meat Market, two doors south, now the Corner Drug Store location. The men of the bucket brigade had their hands full, for the cupola of the courthouse caught fire, but fortunately was extinguished. The old horse-drawn prewar fire wagon was so bereft of fire fighting equipment that the Republic suggested it should have been allowed to burn also.

A new Building

Ownership of the Western Hotel had varied over the preceding years, and the current owner was Mrs. Elizabeth Wright of Prairie du Sac. Though the structure was not insured, she immediately had a new building constructed. It is extant, and is currently occupied on ground level by Oak Street Antiques and the Amber Moon, with shops above.

Even Ms. Wrights building has not been immune to fire over the years, with a fire on Jan 24 1923 causing major damage. We are obliged to Joe Wad for much of the material in this article, as taken from his new volumes on downtown Baraboo. He now has published a similar book on North Freedom, his boyhood home, with equal skill and accuracy.

As for fires, enough for now. Sometime in the future we may consider major fires outside of the business district. There were many.

