

Saloons to Soda Parlors

By Kay Krans

During the current pandemic, we have all felt some restrictions when considering where to go for a social drink. During Prohibition, residents and visitors alike faced the same challenge when many of the local saloons converted their equipment to soda fountains and ice cream parlors.

This trend originated with the breweries converting their brewing process to soda production and creating creameries to produce cheese and ice cream. Examples of Wisconsin breweries that survived by producing such products were Schlitz and Miller.

Prohibition set off a cultural trend of people socializing while consuming legitimate soda parlor fare. Between 1916 and 1925, ice cream consumption increased by 55%. In 1920, the I-Scream-Bar was invented and later became known as the Eskimo Pie. By 1923, Americans could treat themselves to the Good Humor Bar. By 1928, the Drumstick was added to the selection.

While some saloons became legitimate soda parlors, others were simply fronts for a place to buy bootleg gin and whiskey. For example, the nearby community of Hurley, WI had as many as 200 drinking establishments that were called "soda parlors" during Prohibition.

As the '20s concluded, one such soda parlor in our community gained a measure of fame. Oscar Hanke operated the soda parlor at Rest Lake Dam. As he was leaving his establishment around 11 p.m. on July 27, 1930, two men came out of the darkness, opened fire and shot him three times. He was unable to recognize the men who fled by car. Hanke managed to walk to the Matt Plunkett home up the road from Rest Lake Dam and was taken to the hospital in Ironwood, MI, and he fully recovered.

The motive for the shooting was uncertain to the authorities, and questions remain today. Was it a robbery or was someone settling a score with Hanke? Was this an actual soda parlor or was it a front for bootleg alcohol?

If anyone remembers Oscar Hanke or his business, please contact the Manitowish Waters Historical Society.