

The Beginning of the Karlen Block

Since we ended the fourth year of Back in the Day with four columns about the history of the United States House, I thought that it would be appropriate to start the fifth year of the column with three columns about the history of the building that replaced it, the Karlen Block. As was mentioned in the previous columns, Jacob Karlen purchased the hotel after Louis Schuetze's death in 1886 and ran it as a hotel for a few more years. There was talk of him having another building erected on the site, but that didn't happen until after he moved the saloon out by April 1, 1890 and had the old hotel moved to the west part of town in June.

Jacob Karlen was born in Switzerland in 1820 where he was married and had five children. He, his wife and those children came to the United States in 1869. Six more children were born after arriving in America. The family lived in New York for about a year before moving to Rock County for another year. They then moved to various townships in Green county where he made cheese making him a pioneer cheese dealer.

A comical article about the United States House in the Monroe Sentinel on May 14, 1890 said, "When it goes, as go it must, neighbors expect a large succession of healthy rats that have found shelter in the old walls and nooks about the old United States." Nothing was mentioned about rats running wild after the building was moved. Information was not only about the hotel building itself. The Sentinel shared on August 6, "The unsightly red board shanties on the U. S. House block, that have so long been an eye-sore to the people of the vicinity - or the whole town, are being torn down and removed by Mr. Karlen's order. As the old fire-traps go, the new solid brick, iron, and stone blocks take their place. Karlen will begin his new block just as soon as - he gets ready." The



This sketch of the Karlen block shows the proposed building as seen from the southeast. It was done by Art Young, who made it from a photo provided by architect Mansfield of Freeport. The building was to be about 70 feet tall and might be the most ornate, privately-owned building ever in Monroe. If you save each of the columns about the Karlen Block, you'll be able to compare this sketch to the buildings in its later years.

plans had been adopted, brick and stone engaged, and the contract to do the work had also been let.

It was announced less than a month later that Karlen had postponed the building of his two stores for the season. Excavating was already in progress, but the old cellar would be filled up with snow for the winter, so it "won't look so bad." It was announced on September 24 that the contract for the construction of the new Karlen Block had been let to Philip Burns, which was later changed.

It was announced on February 25, 1891 that Sut. Norris was drawing the plan for the new block, which was not to house a hotel. "It will be a great improvement to the northeast corner of the square." Before the end of April, workmen were already busy preparing for the new building.

Before the end of May it was announced that the contract for building both the Court House and the Karlen Block had been awarded to William J. McAlpine, of Dixon, Illinois. The Karlen Block was expected to be "a fine building, if put up according to the plans, and we presume it will be. It is to be three stories, with a basement, and an artistic arrangement of towers and projecting windows, and sky line [sic]."

There is considerable cut-stone and plate glass embellishments.” McAlpine had the lowest bid with \$15,600 . Other bids received were \$18,500 from Phil Burns; \$15,800 from Sut Norris; \$18,000 from J. Steinman Sr.; and \$18,400 from J. Steinman Jr.

Excavation for the Karlen Block was completed and the work of laying the foundation had begun by June 17. It was announced the following week that the First National Bank would be getting a new front made of the the same material as the Karlen Block; it was to be put in at the same time. Another week later, it was mentioned that McAlpine was building the stone walls of both the Court House and the Karlen Block with stone cement mortar. That was to add greatly to the strength and durability of their foundations.

The cut stone had arrived from the Lake Pepin quarries by July 15 allowing McAlpine to renew work on his contracts. The pressed-brick layers were expected to arrive from Chicago soon afterwards. There was also a description of the new building in the newspaper, which was to be about 70 feet tall with the front being of red pressed brick with light-colored stone trimmings and iron cornices. The first floor would contain stores while the second floor would have offices and suites of rooms. The third story, which had already been leased by the Concordia Lodge of the International Order of Odd Fellows, had a society hall with reception and refectory rooms. The entrance to the upper stories was on the east side. The building was to be lighted by electricity and heated by steam. Brick laying was being pushed the following week.

There will be two more columns about the life of the Karlen Block.