

Karlen Block - More Information

This is a continuation of the previous column, about the Karlen Block being built in 1891 on the east end of the north side of the square.

The editor shared on September 2, “Jac Karlen, it is said, has made enough money out of his cheese business the past two years to build his two elegant blocks, on the northeast corner of the square. In a few more years Jac can own the whole city of Monroe.”

By mid-September, the iron men were at work on the roof and cornice of the Karlen Block. It was announced on October 7 that the Monroe Planing Mill would be doing the glazing for this block. In the same paper, it said, “Twenty carpenters, and joiners, and other house mechanics arrived Monday to finish the Karlen Block. On Tuesday morning bedlam was let loose on the corner.”

The new counters and other fixtures for Mrs. Zweifel’s new grocery store in this block were being made by the Monroe Planing Mill in November. As one would expect in that era, when there were so many craftsmen, “they are to be elegant.” The new block was dedicated on November 23 with the proprietors of the saloon being the first tenants to be settled in the corner of the building, which was said to be the “finest room in the building.”



This photo, copied from the collection of Ron Disch, was taken sometime between 1907 and 1912 after Ross & Keegan took over the grocery store in the Karlen Block from G. A. Karlen.

Mrs. Zweifel moved into her “elegant new store-room” by mid-December where she had a new stock of groceries, crockery, and more. “Everything is as slick as a ribbon.”

One sentence in the December 3 Sentinel stated, “Jack Karlen’s new block is nearly completed - all ready for the plaster.” That may have referred to the upper two stories of the new building still needing to be finished.

Evidently, the report that the Odd Fellows had rented the third floor was incorrect, or that deal fell through, as it was reported on December 30 that the “Monroe City Guards,” Company H, had leased the

hall and adjoining rooms for the armory. The entire third floor was to be used: a suite of parlors, refectory, banquet hall, and drill room. It was expected to be the “most elegant armory in the state, except perhaps, the armory of the Light House Squadron of Milwaukee.”

The building of the Karlen Block made the editor aware that Monroe had some tall buildings including the oldest high school [shown on the cover of the Monroe Area Pictorial History] and the bank building next door to this new block. He wanted residents to think about what would happen if a fire broke out while there was a crowd in them and the smoke or blaze would cut off egress via the stairway. He asked, “What are you going to do about it? Where is the law that requires fires escapes, and the officers to enforce it?”

The Sentinel announced five years later on February 19, 1896, “Mr. Karlen has decided to light his high-up hall (armory) with the gasoline-gas apparatus for which S. B. Mack is the local agent. It is a fine light for stores and halls.” The entire Karlen Block was completely lighted with this “new patent gas apparatus” before the end of March. The editor noted that it made “a brilliant light.”

“A fire caused by the explosion of an oil lamp and subsequent, as supposed, the explosion of gasoline near the elevator shaft, in Buri & Karlen’s store, quickly spread through the basement and store, in smoke and flames” on September 9, 1897. The promptness and efficiency of the fire department, who had subdued the flames within 20 minutes, “undoubtedly saved Monroe from a disastrous conflagration.” Several streams of water were sprayed onto the fire, which resulted in “goods and fixtures, walls and ceilings throughout” being badly smoked and damaged by water. “The several tenements on the upper floors were in a panic, and their furniture and other effects were torn up and hastily bunched for removal. All occupants of the building suffered some loss. Luckily, no serious damage was done. Buri & Karlen were the heaviest losers; insured for \$3,000; the building is also insured for \$14,000.” Buri & Karlen was a grocery store operated by F. S. Buri and G. A. Karlen.

There was also a burning chimney in the Karlen Block later that year, on Sunday evening, December 19, which “caused a lively alarm of fire.” The editor added, “It was an ideal time for a chimney to burn out.”

We’ll learn next week who more of the tenants of the block were and for how many more years the Karlen Block stood on the north side of the square before it was razed for the new First National Bank.