

CATO

Recollection by George Reitmeyer

Native Americans once occupied what is now Manitowoc County, in which the village of Cato is nestled. The French laid claim to this land but passed it on to the British in 1763 as a result of the Seven Years' War.

Cato was initially called "Nettle Hill" because a weed called nettle grew plentifully in the area. A man by the name of Hickok later renamed the village "Cato" because it so resembled Cato, New York from where he hailed.

Some of the early residents of Cato were: John Kirch, Michael Fitzgerald, Albert Yohanek, George Abb, Anne Boehm, Henry Garski, Joseph Kohlbeck, Emma Cooper, Dave Morgan, Joseph Rappel, John, Walter and Sherman Killen, Herman Klann, Pat Scanlon, Clarence Sittman, Pete Gosz, Clarence Carbon, Dan, Jim and Kate Cooney, Lovell Brennan, Doctor John Kelley and the Williams's.

In 1863, construction of the railroad was halted at Branch because materials used to build the road were needed for the Civil War effort. Following the war, in about 1870, the road, which originated in Manitowoc, was completed through Cato. The railroad agents were Hank Erdman and Tom Kodelka, along with a few substitutes. At times there were as many as eight trains that passed through Cato each day. They usually consisted of two passenger trains, two rail units, two trains carrying freight and two special trains. The trains operated between Manitowoc and Forest Junction. Railroads carried the vast majority of freight in those days.

In 1883, a businessman by the name of John Killen arrived in Cato. In a short time, he owned and operated the general store/post office, the elevator, the lumber mill and the box factory. His sons, Sherman and Walter, later ran the business. In 1919, Al Hunter bought the general store/post office from the Killens.

The chief patrons of these businesses were local farmers from within a 6-mile radius of Cato, at least until the arrival of the automobile. The number of farmers was greater than because the size of each farm was smaller compared to today, ranging in size back then from 40 to 80 acres.

Also about 1883, the first Manitowoc County Fair was held. The fair was located two miles south of Cato, across the road from the Elton Morgan farm. This location, which has a readily recognizable row of maples for a landmark, is the geographic center of Manitowoc County.

At the western edge of Cato, north of Highway 10, stood the William's House, which was a community center. The center provided meals, lodging and social activities.

Cato had two taverns that, at the time, were called "saloons". That term was used during prohibition years (1919-1933). In 1904, my father, Joseph Reitmeyer, bought one of the taverns, naming it Reitmeyer's Tavern. The tavern was located "on top of the hill", at the village's main intersection of Highway 10 and CTH J. previous owners of this tavern included Henry Mayerl, Daniel Cooney Mathew

Savage and Joseph Kohlbeck. A hotel was added above the tavern, and meals were served daily. Customers included travelers on both road and rail, in addition to local patrons.

The other tavern in the village was located "below the hill", about a quarter mile west of Reitmeyer's Tavern on the north side of Highway 10. It was originally built as a community center by the Order of Foresters. During the early 20's, it was turned into a tavern and operated by Ed Driscoll. From about the middle of the 1920's to 1930, John Scheer operated this tavern. Subsequent owners included Leonard Hooks (1930-1935) and Joe Vogel (1935-1946). Over the next 45 years or so, ownership included Charles Meissner, Jack Licht, Sonny Kohlbeck, Lillian Meissner and Marvin Braun.

Walter Killen and Joseph Reitmeyer established the Framers State Bank. Its president was Joseph Zahorik. Directors were Joseph Reitmeyer, John Gerl, Ted Pritzl and Al Huinker. Ed Kirch was the cashier. The bank closed in 1938, allegedly due to embezzlement. The building was later sold to Ed Zahorik who converted it into a hatchery.

The village had two auto repair garages, one operated by Ted Meyer and the other by Lester Zipperer. Ted Meyer's garage was located in the building west of the tavern below the hill. Lester Zipperer's garage was in a facility that had once been the flour and feed building, just east of my sign shop on Highway 10. Ed Thompson later bought this garage.

Three different doctors served the village over a period of time. Around 1916, Doctors Brett and Gerend practiced medicine. Doctor Brett's office was located south of the Ed Meyer residence while Doctor Gerend's was above Reitmeyer's Tavern. From about 1920 to 1949, Doctor Kelley practiced medicine from his office located north of the Ed Remiker residence.

Two dentists served the village of Cato and nearby area. In the early 20's, Doctor Kodnick was located in an office above Reitmeyer's Tavern. Doctor Stangel, who practiced dentistry in the 30's and 40's, had his office in the Killen Building. He later moved to an office above Reitmeyer's Tavern.

The barbers in Cato during this period of time were Rich Denk, Kink Palansky, Ed Dressal, Ed Youngchild and Ray Schwarzer. Rich Denk and Kink Plansky operated shops behind the bar room in Reitmeyer's Tavern. Ed Dressal, Ed Youngchild and Ray Schwarzer were located in the same building as the tavern below the hill. All five barbers operated over a period of approximately 30 years.

Postmasters, in chronological order, were Walter Killen, Al Huinker, Honor Dvorak and Diane Seefeldt. The mail carriers were Joseph Bursek, Pete Gosz, Ed Zahorik and Tom O'Connor.

One important event that occurred in Cato was the box factory fire in 1917. The factory then owned by the Killen's, manufactured cheese boxes for the cheese factories in the area. The plant employed 8 people, and was located south of the elevator.

On February 22, 1922, a major sleet storm hit the area. Electrical wires were down for about two weeks. The problem was not as serious as such a storm would be today because few homes or establishments were wired for electricity at the time.

In about 1925, the Killens left Cato. Kurt Hebner took over the elevator and lumberyard, which later went bankrupt due to, according to some, poor management. Joseph Reitmeyer decided to recapture some of the lost business. He constructed a building east of Reitmeyer's Tavern and sold flour, feed, twine and salt.

It was not until 1928 that a concrete road (Highway 10) was constructed, running through the Village. The constructor was an individual named Kapan. Charlie Patachek was the foreman. Most of the workers were local folks, and much of the work was manual.

The mill was reopened in about 1933 by Tom Hayden. In 1936, the mill was sold to Ed Reinemann. Ernie and Ed Zahorik, Harry Zipperer and Merlin Luedtke were some of the subsequent generations who operated the mill until it closed in 1987.

In the 1930's, during the Depression, fox furs and sugar beets became sources of income for the area surrounding Cato. There were three fox ranches in Cato, which were owned by Al Huinker, John Dvorak and John Kirch. Sugar beets were grown by many of the farmers. Migrant workers from Mexico did most of the fieldwork. The workers were housed in empty buildings in the area. Al Huinker, who was a field manager, furnished food and supplies to the workers. The sugar beets were harvested in the fall and loaded onto railroad cars for shipment to Menominee, Michigan.

In the 1930's, the price of milk ranged from 60-90 cents per 100 pounds.

The Cato Heights School operated from the early 1900's into the 1930's. The school was located south of Highway 10 on the John Sheahan property in the Village of Cato. Teachers were Harriet Meissner, Luellis Mullins, Evelyn Dvorak, Dorothy Fetzer and Ruth Rolland. Mr. Rappel was the superintendent of schools. A teacher's salary at that time was about \$75.00 per month.

A Presbyterian Church was located south of the school, and included an adjoining cemetery. The church remained open until the 30's, and was razed in the 60's. The cemetery is maintained to this day by the Village of Cato.

The main entertainment attractions during the 1930's were baseball, basketball, roller-skating and attending medicine shows. Dancing was also very popular during this time. Cato, like many small communities in the area, had a dance hall that was located above the tavern below the hill. The price of tickets for the dances was 25 cents.

Cato had a baseball team called the Cato Red Sox. The players were: Roy Lamach, Ed Kirch, Charles and John Kelley, Bob and John Gosz, Clarence Carbon, Spot, Sparkey and Kenney Brennan, Don and Billy Fetzer, Pat Malone and Ray Huinker. George Abb was the mascot. The baseball field was located west of Scanlon's Grocery Store for a time, and later was located west of Brennan's Electric and Refrigeration on Highway 10. In later years, the field was located west of the Ray Huinker residence. During the games, contributions were sought for the players by "passing the hat". After the games, the team would meet at the tavern below the hill. A pony of beer (1/8th keg) was purchased, costing at that time \$1.25. the team and their following would sing, dance and enjoy themselves for the rest of the day.

The basketball team included many of those who played on the baseball team. In the 930's, the team had the honor of playing against the Harlem Globetrotters.

Members of the famous Al Capone bunch caused quite a stir here in 1931. It seems their group was traveling through the area and was involved in an automobile accident with a vehicle driven by Victor Blahnik. It occurred at the intersection of Highway 10 and CTH J. according to local "legend", the Capone vehicle was coming from their "still" that was located on a vacant farm north of Reedsville. They were traveling south on Highway 32. The Blahnik vehicle, traveling north on CTH J, went through the stop sign, and collided with the Capone vehicle at the intersection. The Blahnik vehicle crashed into the west side of Reitmeyer's Tavern, smashing some windows. Vic Blahnik was killed in the incident. A passenger in his car by the name of Sylvan Swetlik survived, as did the occupants of the Capone vehicle.

In 1936 a major snowstorm hit the area, making almost all roads impassable. The only snow removal equipment available was a caterpillar. The caterpillar had a plow, but operated very slowly. Sleighs had to be used to haul milk through the fields. The milk was then loaded into trucks and transported to the White House Milk Company. Late each afternoon, the empty cans were reloaded onto the sleighs. The Barouns (Harry, Joe, Frank, Ben and Butch) did the hauling with the help of Hank Radey and the Pfeffers.

Also in 1936, Tom Hayden opened a filling station below the hill west of the Farmers State Bank. Seven gallons of gasoline sold for \$1.00 or 14.3 cents per gallon! The business was later sold to Rey Reindl. In 1962, Mike Seefeld purchased the business and ran it in connection with the Highway 10 improvement project.

There were two blacksmith shops in the Village of Cato. One of them, operated by Jack Kohlbeck, was located in the barn directly north of Reitmeyer's Tavern. The other was located in the building west of the tavern below the hill, and was operated by a member of the Steffel family. That same building was later converted into an auto repair garage, run by Ted Meyer, and some years later, into a hatchery operated by John Gosz. Later, it was sold to Ed Zahorik, and used for storage.

Brothers Wally and Jim Hampton furnished ice for the coolers in Cato. Ice was hauled to Reitmeyer's Tavern, Huinker's General Stor, Scanlon's Grocery Store & Butcher Shop, and to the cheese factory . bob Sheahan and others would haul the ice, which was stored in icehouses at each of these facilities.

Pat Scanlon owned the building south of the tavern below the hill. This building was operating as a butcher shop and grocery store/post office. Following Pat Scanlon's fatal automobile accident, Ted and Agnes Pritzl ran this facility. Later, Al Hartman took over and operated the store until 1957. In later years, the upper level was converted into apartment units and used as such until the building was leveled in 1992 in connection with the Highway project.

The cheese factory was initially owned and operated by another member of the Schultz family. Later, Emil Sonnenburg took over and eventually sold it to Pauly and Pauly. In subsequent years, the operators under Pauly and Pauly were Art Wollersheim, Johnny Laughrin, Al Hartman, Earl Deets and Lloyd Weiss.

In 1946, I took over Reitmeyer's Tavern from my father, and operated it until 1992. During this time, I also operated a sign shop that was located in a building on our property just east of the tavern.

The last Ringling Brothers Circus Train traveled through Cato in 1954. The train's route was from Appleton to Manitowoc.

Ed Meyer operated a sawmill for several years until it burned down in the mid-1960's.

Art Dvorak dealt in used machinery and livestock during that same period of time.

In 1958, Kenny Brennan launched an electrical repair and refrigeration business. It was located west of the Ed Remiker farm on Highway 10.

1980 ushered in the first annual "Cato Daze" celebration, initiated by Marvin Braun who then owned and operated Marvin's Gardens, the so-called tavern below the hill. The event consisted of a parade, volleyball games, music, food and, of course, beverages. The parade kicked off about 1 mile north of Cato on CTH J, and ended at Marvin's Gardens. A Cato Daze King and Queen were chosen, and rode in the parade.

In 1992, the State of Wisconsin purchased nine properties in the Village, which were later razed in connection with a highway improvement project. Reitmeyer's Tavern, the post office and Marvin's Gardens were leveled to make way for the highway project that not only widened the road, but also moved it several feet to the north. Construction of the new road was completed in 1994.

The Village of Cato exists today only as a community of a few residences rather than as the vibrant and thriving hub of business and commerce it had enjoyed in days gone by.