

Broadway Gas Stations, From 8 to just 1

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

We don't know exactly when Baraboo's first gasoline station opened, but a good guess would be the early 1900's. The newly developed fuel was perhaps first available at a coal yard—we don't know. What we do know is that with the rapid proliferation of the automobile came a corresponding expansion of "gas stations", primitive by modern standards.

Old timers well remember that gasoline was actually visible, high in the old gas pumps, and you could see the level go down as gasoline flowed into your gas tank due to gravity, the glass being marked with lines representing gallons. Occasionally an argument would ensue as to whether you got your full measure of the odiferous substance so necessary to operate your vehicle,

After your purchase was made, the attendant would pump gas back to the full level in the glass container, ready for the next customer. With the price at only about 15 cents a gallon, it is surprising that there were so many gas stations then, and that so many station operators could make a living. Today with the price some twenty times higher, there are hardly a handful of stations.

Baraboo's comparatively short business Street, Broadway, is a prime example. In the nine blocks from the Baraboo River to Eighth Avenue there were at least eight dispensers of gasoline, apparently all at about the same time. The recent closing of the Turner station, Broadway at 6th Avenue leaves only the old Smith Oil at Broadway and Fifth on that busy downtown Street.

Only one additional station, at Fourth and Ash, serves the downtown today. Ash Street once had three stations. Thus Downtown Baraboo, which once had 11 stations counting all of Broadway, now only has two. Only two stations serve Eighth Street-Avenue today, and South Boulevard has but two. Other locations with traces of departed gas station ventures include Walnut, Parkway, and Park Streets.

A photo with this article shows Baraboo's most unusual station, built in 1928 in the shape of a Japanese Pagoda. Our photo is from the Joe Ward collection, but the state Historical Society has the same photo, but wrongly located by them at 309 Seventh Avenue. The Wadhams Oil



The Mobil Station at Fourth and Broadway (also known as 132 Second Avenue) featured an unusual style, that of a Japanese Pagoda.

Company erected several such Pagoda style buildings throughout the Midwest. They sold Mobil Gas.

The actual location of this Service Station was on the Northeast corner of Broadway and Second Avenue. Back in 1874 a 24 by 60 foot two story carriage and wagon factory was built there, possibly remaining until 1927 when records show that a building was razed to make room for a service station. That was probably the Pagoda Station, replaced by the more modern structure in 1954.

Records show at least 14 different men owned or operated the station in the following 48 years of its operation, closing in the mid-seventies. The station was remodeled in 1954. Apparently the pagoda roof theme was discontinued at this time. This building was extensively remodeled in the following years and since 1988 has been used as the location for the attractive Johnsen Insurance structure and other business enterprises.

As for the eight gas stations on Broadway, one was on the East side directly north of the Broadway Bridge. Three of the four corners of Broadway and Second Avenue had stations, as did three of the four corners of Broadway and Fifth. Old photos show street-side pumps midway between Fourth and Third on the west side of Broadway. Add Kruse Motor and the late Turner location, and Broadway had possibly had TEN service station locations over the years!

Gone is the "service" from what we called "service stations", with their "free air". We now usually pump our own gas, wash our own windshields and pump air into our tires, the latter service now occasionally even requiring payment.

A friendly attendant, whom we knew by his first name, provided those services then. We can even pay at the pump now with a credit card, and the entire operation is free from human contact. These modern changes eliminated several dozen local jobs for men. It's called progress.