

A short  
8 page history  
Of  
Neva Corners

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From the beginning to June  
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# History of Neva Corners

The History of Neva Corners - Langlade County

Much has been written about Melnik and Neva, an early part of the town, built around the saw mill purchased by Dan and Jim Gillis. Beside the saw mill, there was a store and dance hall. The tavern was operated by George Bohner, Sr.

Another part of the town, plotted as the village of Deerbrook and Deerbrook, has been updated and was also built around a saw mill. There were two stores, a hotel, pool room and, when the railroad was built, a depot to serve the railroad.

In all sincerity, I feel there should be some history about the part which was endeared to me, "Mattek's Corners." I don't know how far to go in each direction but to me the nucleus of the agricultural industry was here. We are proud of the town of Neva. I am sure it has been recognized as an outstanding township in Langlade County.

We must recall that the highway was straight north from Antigo, thus Neva Road in Antigo, and made a very sharp left turn around the tavern and proceeded west across the railroad track and thence a right turn following closely near the track through Deerbrook.

If we begin at County Highway I, the first farm on the west was homesteaded by the John Novak's. They were the parents of Mrs. Anna Kasek from whom I have gotten much help. The Novak's were the grandparents of Mrs. Peter O'Brien, a Neva resident and active in civic affairs. The Novak's were succeeded by the Nine Brothers, Ed and Adolph, but today this farm is owned by Fred and Irene Hofmann.

The next place was settled by the Albert Cahak family. The Albert Cahak's brought up a family of twelve children here and the farm was sold to Andrew Bunda. The farm home was near the highway and when the new 45 was constructed the home was moved farther west and today is the home of Ray and Florence Grams. The balance of the land up to the "corners" was originally owned by the Fred Jacobus family.

In the late 1880's, Wenzel J. Mattek, a young man from Manitowoc, came to the area to be a bookkeeper for the Gillis Saw Mill. In 1893, he purchased an acre of land from Fred Jacobus and erected a building which served as a tavern. Later he built a lean-to on the south side which served as a store. The present tavern is not the original tavern but part of the old foundation can be viewed in the basement of the present structure.

In 1897, Wenzel Mattek married Wilhelmina Jacobus. The bride's parents gave her one acre of land and the Mattek home was built on that site. Wenzel and Minna Mattek shared their home with his parents, John and Anna Mattek, who had also come to Neva as did most of their children, Frank, Joseph, Mary, (Mrs. Frank Plzak), Katie (Mrs. Joe Plzak), and Larcara.

August Mattek remained at Two Creeks. John Mattek was known for making spinning wheels and would carry them on his back to Wausau for sale. Francis Holup McGrath has one of these original spinning wheels in her home at Birnamwood today.

The present store was built in 1906. Buildings in those days were constructed in a short time. A good basement, dug by hand, with stones mortared in place for the foundation, was the first step. Next was the 2 by 4 studdings with tin on the outside and lathe and plaster on the inside. Plenty of wood was available for furnace heat. The store operated for seventeen years before I came here but I recall in the bitter cold winters how Ed banked the furnace well before he closed for the night and went over to throw another log on before retiring. In the extreme cold weather, he would get up during the night, go over and pile more wood hoping it would hold until morning. With all the effort it took to keep the temperature above freezing, I recall we put the cases of eggs on the counter during the night to prevent them from freezing.

When referring to a general store it was all that. It carried celluloid collars worn by the gentlemen to horse collars. All staple groceries and bulk prunes and raisins and apricots packed in twenty-five pound boxes were sold bulk. There were also bins for sugar, flour, salt and rice. The bread rack was quite an addition - a glass case that held unwrapped bread and bulk sweet rolls.

The hardware department, with nails, hammers, hinges and hay forks, rakes, and shovels, was necessary for the hard work done by hand in haying and harvesting. I can still see the wagon loads of full potato crates, stacked high on top of one another, on their way to the railroad cars in Deerbrook.

The drug department, that in later years entailed a drug permit, saved people a trip to Antigo for non-prescription drugs. The man who was shopping for a laxative and in broken English tried to explain "move bowels" to the clerk. The clerk was baffled but tried to determine what he was shopping for and showed him moth balls.

About the turn of the century the need for farm machinery began to become evident. W. J. Mattek had a franchise with International Harvester Company. Anton Plzak recalls his father telling how he worked for Mattek. He would go to Lily by wagon because the machinery came on the Soo Railroad to Lily. Sebastian Plzak, at that time, lived where Joe Lane does and worked for Mattek setting up machines.

In 1942, the machine shop was added to the north side of store and as the machinery business expanded, the shop on the south side of the store was built in 1948. In 1915 a Neva Farmers Bank was organized which made it convenient for the farmers to cash their checks and do routine business. The bank closed during the peak of the depression and never did reopen after the death of Wenzel Mattek. The bank was housed in an addition on the north side of the store. Later it was used as a display space for tractors or other machines. Finally, the partition was removed and the store was enlarged.

The present store was operated by Mattek's from 1906 - 1968. Some of the early clerks were Anna Mattek Lane, Anna Jacobus Stribrny, Martha Motte, John Kosbick, Bessie Preboski, Lois Pingel, and Fernadine Rusch Incha. Some of the employees in the machinery department were Dewey Hartman, Plach, Earl Kaiser, Peter Preboski, Sr., John Martl, Dan Romall, Joe Kirch, Jack Kryka, Frank Wegner, Herb Rusch, Peter Preboski, Jr., Terry Wiegert and Arnold Benes. Today the business is owned and operated by Bev and Tom Sikora.

I cannot neglect to mention the slaughter house as the farm where hundreds of head of cattle, cows and pigs, were slaughtered for sale in the store and for custom butchering. Emil Plzak was kept busy and during the '40's and '50's it was a busy place but as state regulations became more rigid slaughtering was phased out. The slaughter house remains on the land owned by Eugene and James Mattek.

I think I am safe to state the Qu-Inn is one of the oldest taverns in the county. As stated before, it is not the original building but was built and remodeled on the same site. The dance hall was added and later remodeled. There was a dance hall attached to the first tavern that was supported by a pole in the center of the building. The early bartenders were Sebastian Plzak, Frank Novak, Jake Honzik, Adolph Novak, Oscar Baunknecht and Kurt Wiegert. Frank Plzak worked during the Second World War while Harold Quinn served his country in active duty and was severely wounded in Italy.

When Harold returned from service, he continued his bartending and this year marks the forty-fourth year his license has been renewed. The ice house behind the tavern has been torn down for years but some of you might remember buying ice, made in the winter at Neva Lake and packed in sawdust.

Over the years Quinn's has been quite a central place for social events. It served the annual farm day for Mattek's Store, the first church dinners, (for St. Wencel's Church) basketball games, dancing, box socials, and parties of the Deerbrook School. Wedding receptions, including silver and golden ones, birthday celebrations, the golden anniversary of the Deerbrook Woman's Club and the list could go on and on as business still flourishes. For several years it served delicious meals when the dance hall was converted into a restaurant. At that time it became known as the Qu-Inn but the aroma of good food served there still lingers. Ruth Schmutzer and Lucille Benes, both managed the dining room at one time.

The first cheese factory built at the "corners" was built by Wenzel Smetana about 1903. It was located on the south side of County Highway B nearly across the road from the Neva Farmers Cheese Factory. The first Cheese maker was John Smetana.

In May 1895 as the herds grew in number the second cheese factory was built west of Quinn's Tavern by Mattek and Benishek. Joe Benishek was the first cheese maker. Other cheese makers were Mr. Prvonka and Ted Gjermundsen.

The Smetana factory, which had served the farmers for many years, was converted into a blacksmith shop. A blacksmith became a necessity for the farmers to help keep the horses shod, the wagons repaired, etc. A Mr. Cleveland was the first blacksmith and later Ben Psenicka.

In 1923, the Neva Farmers Cooperative Cheese Factory was completed. The first cheese makers in this factory were the Schrano Brothers from Bear Creek followed by Bert Jeske, F. X. Myers, Henry Stefl and Harold Stengl, the last cheese maker before it closed its doors. Many of the local men helped weigh in the milk and helped with the mixing and processing of the milk as it was made into cheese. In the early years everything had to be done by hand. Anyone who walked through the cheese factory could always sample the warm, rubbery cheese curds. Little did we realize what an expensive snack we had the pleasure of snitching.

The roaring twenties could have been referred to as the flowing twenties and a vast amount of milk was hauled in milk wagons. The cans were lined up and each farmer had a number. "The corner" was a congested place every morning. Being a five corners, it seemed wagons came from every direction. It was a toss up to see who would be the first customer but Joe Holup or Smetana's were usually first.

Early one morning in 1925 the Mattek factory burned. The Neva Farmers factory took over the added load of milk. Some of the farmers began breaking away and already were hauling to Krafts at Antigo. The Neva Factory operated until 1958. With the milk haulers establishing their routes, milk was hauled either to Krafts or the Antigo Milk Products. Milk Trucks picked up at the individual farms. Schultz of Phlox also had a milk route through this area.

After the Mattek Cheese Factory burned, Steve Pucek purchased the land and erected a garage. The northwest corner of the building served as living quarters. This building served as the Chevrolet Sales and Service. Henry Savina, a brother-in-law of Steve's, was the mechanic and later James Sindelar, another brother-in-law, was salesman and bookkeeper. Henry Savina moved to Antigo because he purchased the Nash Sales and Sindelars and Gleich moved to Kentucky. James Sharon and Richard Martiny followed but today this building houses the Antigo Disposal Service, owned and operated by William Teschner.

In about 1928, Mr. Pucek purchased the St. Matthew's parsonage that was on Highway A and the large house was moved to the corners. Today that house is the home of the Dave Bauknechts.

The home occupied by LaVerne Gray was originally built in 1897 by Frank and Katherine Janousek. He was a blacksmith and built a blacksmith shop just east of his home where the Steve Illichman home now stands. Mr. Janousek died very young and the place was sold to the Adolph Novak's. (Thanks to Mrs. Gabe Kaplanek for the above information.) Mrs. Novak boarded the teachers, served meals to the cheesemakers and perhaps a bartender. After Mr. Novak's death the house was sold to Martin Lajza and Mrs. Novak went to Antigo to live with her daughter, Mrs. Walter Shadick.

In the mid thirties, Mr. Pucek built a brick filling station just south of the Dick Martiny home. The road behind the garage was the main highway U.S. 45 and was convenient for the highway traffic and other customers. Lu (Red) Hurlburt was the first manager of this filling station and Al Savina was also an attendant.

When Highway 45 was relocated a little farther west, the station was not so conveniently located and was torn down. The home built by James Sindelar, now the home of Richard Martiny, was quite an addition to the corner. It truly raised havoc with the neighborhood children's playground though.

At one time there were three taverns at the corners. Adolph Novak remodeled the original Janousek blacksmith shop into a tavern. Albert Guenther had had a repair shop in it at that time. Later it was purchased by Dan Quinn and made into a comfortable home. Stanley Plzak's retired there and after their death the property was purchased by Steve Illichman. He built an attractive home on the site. His wife is well versed in the botanical names of her varied array of flowers that grace their property.

The old school house, used until 1905, occupies a prominent place at the corner and hopefully if restored will be a landmark to be proud of. As we travel north from the corners we are enchanted by St. Wencel's Church with its beautiful grounds. The church was completed in 1952 with Reverend Henry Hubert serving as pastor. Today it is listed as one of the tourist attractions of the county.

Several homes were built in between the church and the original Joseph Mattek farm that is owned and operated by a grandson, Dan Honzik and family. Across the road, the home of Joseph Lane was once occupied by Sebastian Plzak and later by the Joe Schleis family. The Arthur Lane's purchased the home which is Joseph Lane's home.

Several years later this building proved to be inadequate and the second tavern and hall were built. This building was a popular center for dances, ZOBY meetings and conventions, wedding receptions, etc. Nearly every Saturday night the two dance halls at the corners would alternate for dancing and occasionally there would be a celebration in both halls. The south end of the tavern was partitioned off and served by a kitchen and living room with sleeping rooms upstairs. On the north end was another partitioned area that served as a meat market with Mr. Peroutka in charge. Later he closed shop and moved to Antigo. Harry Tomany opened a shoe repair shop, then.

Some of the bartenders were Frank Augustyn ( no relative of the local Augustyns), Ben Kryka, James Francek and George Honzik. George was the last operator of the Smetana Tavern. It was a sad day at the corners when the tavern burned early one morning in 1940 and Mr. Honzik suffocated before they could get him out of his upstairs bedroom.

The first wife of Wenzel Smetana was a sister of John and Albert Barta. They were the parents of Louis, John, Albert, and Mary (Mrs. Joseph Legro). Wenzel Smetana and his second wife lived in the log house that set back a short distance to the south and east of the tavern. After his death the old log home was torn down.

A Schraml home that was the first place east on County I was the retirement home of the Senior Schraml's. Later it was rented and a tornado went through and took part of the front off the house. At the time it was rented by the Edward Jesse family. Frank and Elsie Plzak purchased the house and it was moved up to County Highway A and repaired. Later the Frank Plzak's sold it and the present owner is Fred Kakes.

In 1939, John Jacobus built the former Crescent Club. It was a real addition to the Corner and was operated by Frances and John Jacobus. This was a real night club and featured delicious chicken and dressing. It was a popular place for weddings, showers and club meetings. The home, a former railroad building from Antigo, was moved in behind the tavern to provide adequate room for the family. This home has been extensively remodeled recently.

In 1964, Eugene and Louise Brandt purchased the property and it is known as Geno's. Excellent meals, including their broasted chicken, along with choice of drinks are served.

Across from Geno's, during World War II an Honor Roll for the service personnel of Neva and a flag pole were erected. The Honor Roll has been replaced by a granite monument inscribed "In honor of the men and women of Neva who served in the Armed Forces of the United States of America." Deceased soldiers are listed by name. People travelling County Highway A notice this attractively kept memorial.

If we continue on County A from the corners, the first place on the right was originally the Seaman home. Bert Jeske and Dewey Hartman lived there and so did Wenzel and

Lynda Mattek and John and Merdith Sotiros. Today it is the home of the Jack Spiegl family. The next place was moved from the Pearson area and was the home of Katie Plzak and her son Emil. It served as the home for the operators of the Mattek farm, Emil Malitz, Herbert Ruzah and Art Gallenberg. Today it is owned by John and Vi Crha. It has been remodeled and could not be recognized as the original home that had been moved there.

Harold and Doris Quinn built their home, the next one, in 1954. Mrs. Anna Quinn, Harold's mother, was the first person active in 4-H Club work at the corners. The next two homes were both moved in from White Lake, one for Ernest Fischer, which is the home of the David Schmidts today and the other Evangeline Jacobus McDougal purchased and moved. She lived there with her three children until her marriage to George Gray. Her parents, the late Fred Jacobus, resided there until Fred's death and today the home is owned by the John Spurgeons.

The home of William Gresch is the homestead of the John Schultzes. A large family grew up there and the hospitality of that home was outstanding. Many of the clergy and hosts of friends were banqueted here.

Across the road the former John Nowotny place, one of the oldest settlers of the area, followed by the Louis Novak family and now the comfortable home of Bessie Duchan, formerly Bessie Lajza Koutnik.

The last place on the west and nearest the corner is the home built by Joseph Pecka. Later it was purchased by Joseph and Agnes Blahnik and now the home of the Taugtes family.

This brings us to the cemeteries where many of the past residents of this area rest in peace. And we come back to "the old school house", an old landmark of Neva Corners.

To the best of my ability, I have tried to provide historical fact but if any discrepancy is noted, I am sorry. I am grateful for all the help that has been offered me through personal contact.

Josephine Mattek Kondzela

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