

**THE HISTORY
OF THE
YELLOWSTONE
GARAGE
1920 -1966**



**NORTH FOND DU LAC,
WISCONSIN**

MARK A. MOWBRAY

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INTRODUCTION

My Dad began working at the Yellowstone Garage when I was less than a year old. Before I turned three, he bought the business. When I got older, I worked (or goofed off) there summers, after school, Saturdays, and "snow days" to earn my allowance.

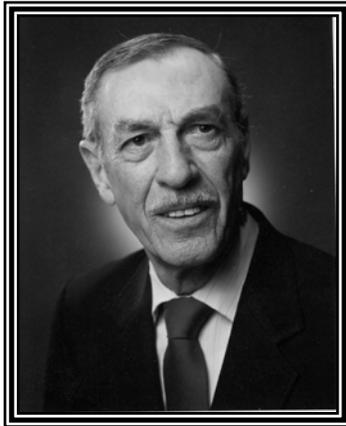
I liked being "one of the guys" and learning all of the neat stuff, but as I got older, I realized that being a mechanic was not the greatest career choice. It was hard and dirty work.

Therefore, after finishing high school, with my parents' encouragement, I went to college.
My Dad closed the business when I was 20 years old.

The Yellowstone Garage was a big part of my early years. I hope you enjoy reading this history as much as I enjoyed researching and writing it.

Mark Mowbray

**DEDICATED
TO
JIM MOWBRAY
1914 - 2003**



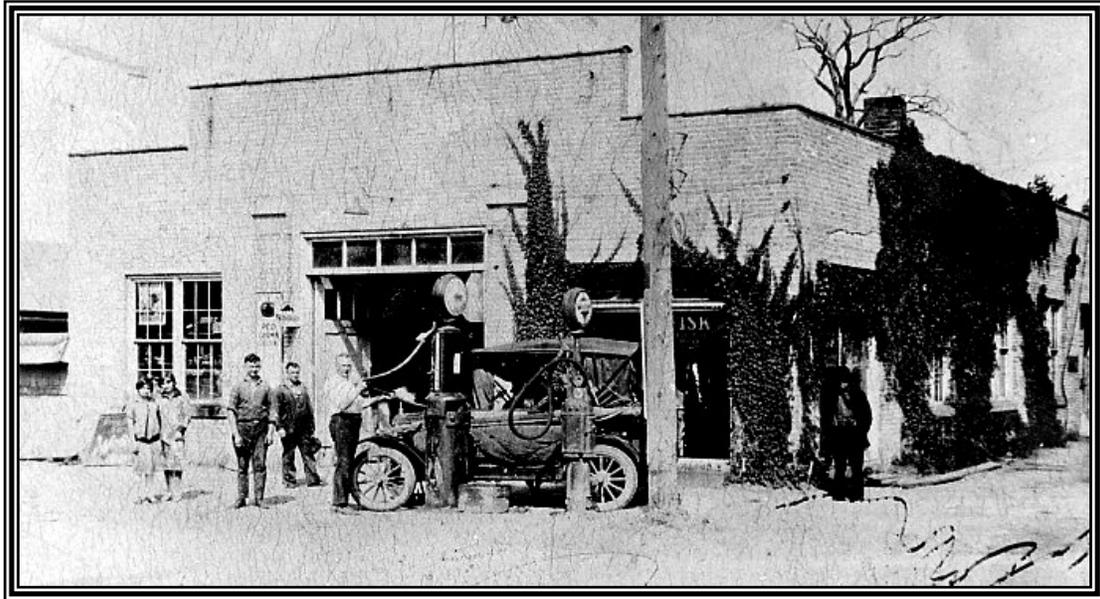
“A man tells his stories so many times that he becomes his stories...they live on after him...and in that way...he becomes immortal”.

Big Fish by Daniel Wallace, 1998

Also dedicated to:

Leo, Ed, Eddy, Eddie, Mac, Gib, Gibby, Carl, Harry,
Dale, Joe, Jimmy B, Sims, Mike, Bill, Rich,
and the rest of the “guys” who breathed the exhaust fumes,
skinned their knuckles, and had a few laughs at the Yellowstone Garage”

THE YELLOWSTONE GARAGE



THE BEGINNING

This building, shown above in a 1920's photo, was known as the Yellowstone Garage for almost five decades. The building still exists (2005) in North Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

The earliest known names associated with the business were Joe Braun and Frank Herman. Both Braun and Herman had connections to the Soo Line Railroad, the largest employer in the area. Records show that Joe Braun was a machinist for the Soo Line. Frank Herman was at one time a district manager.

A filing was made with Fond du Lac County on August 12, 1920 for ARTICLES OF ORGANIZATION for the Yellowstone Sales and Service Company. Frank G. Herman was listed as President and Joseph Braun as Vice President. A real estate transfer was made from the Fond du Lac Land Company to Yellowstone Sales and Service Co. on October 2, 1920.

The building appears to have been built during this time, as local Real Estate Tax records show the building having been built in 1920.

The 1921 Fond du Lac County Directory listed the business as Yellowstone Sales and Service. Another reference indicates that the business sold and serviced farm implements and automobiles.

THE RAILROAD CONNECTION

The railroads were the main reason that the Village had sprouted at this place. The railroad yard was a main terminus and the yard housed the "car shops", where passenger and freight cars were built and repaired. Steam locomotives were also maintained and repaired. The shops and yards operated 24 hours a day, and the shops employed many craftsmen, skilled in metal and woodworking. Those who owned automobiles needed a place to have them repaired.

The stories passed down through the years say that some of the materials used in building the Garage were salvaged (or liberated) from the car shops. The building was built of local brick and the original size was approximately 50 feet wide and 70 feet long. There were swing doors on the front (west) side and on the south side. They were later replaced with overhead doors. The tops of the doors and the ceiling were quite high and probably were required to allow entrance of tall, steam powered tractors and other farm implements such as grain threshing machines.

The 1924 County Directory shows the business listed as Yellowstone Garage, with John Leo McCarthy and John Tynan as principals. It also notes that they had a dealership for Graham-Paige automobiles and Scott Atwater home radios. By 1926, McCarthy and Spencer Tynan were listed as principals in the business. They continued to be shown in Directories as principals through 1942. Spencer Tynan, known as Spence, is also listed in some Directories and a local history book as an engineer for the Soo Line. Tynan's involvement in the business appears to have been a sideline to his full time job with the railroad.



ON THE "TRAIL"

The Yellowstone name came about because the Garage was located on the Yellowstone Trail, a transcontinental automobile route that ran on a patchwork of public roads supported and maintained by local businesses and groups in a time before state or federal highways. The "Trail" was organized in 1912 to attract tourists traveling through towns on their way to Yellowstone Park. It came through North Fond du Lac in 1915, and by 1920 was known as "A good road from Plymouth Rock to Puget Sound". The "Trail" was organized the year before the Lincoln Highway Association and preceded Route 66 by many years. The best source of information on the Yellowstone Trail can be found at the www.yellowstonetrail.org website.



Sometime in the 1920's, individual, hand carved wooden letters spelling YELLOWSTONE GARAGE were added over the large front door. They were carved by Spence Tynan, one of the owners at the time. A white neon outline was added to the letters in the 1950's.

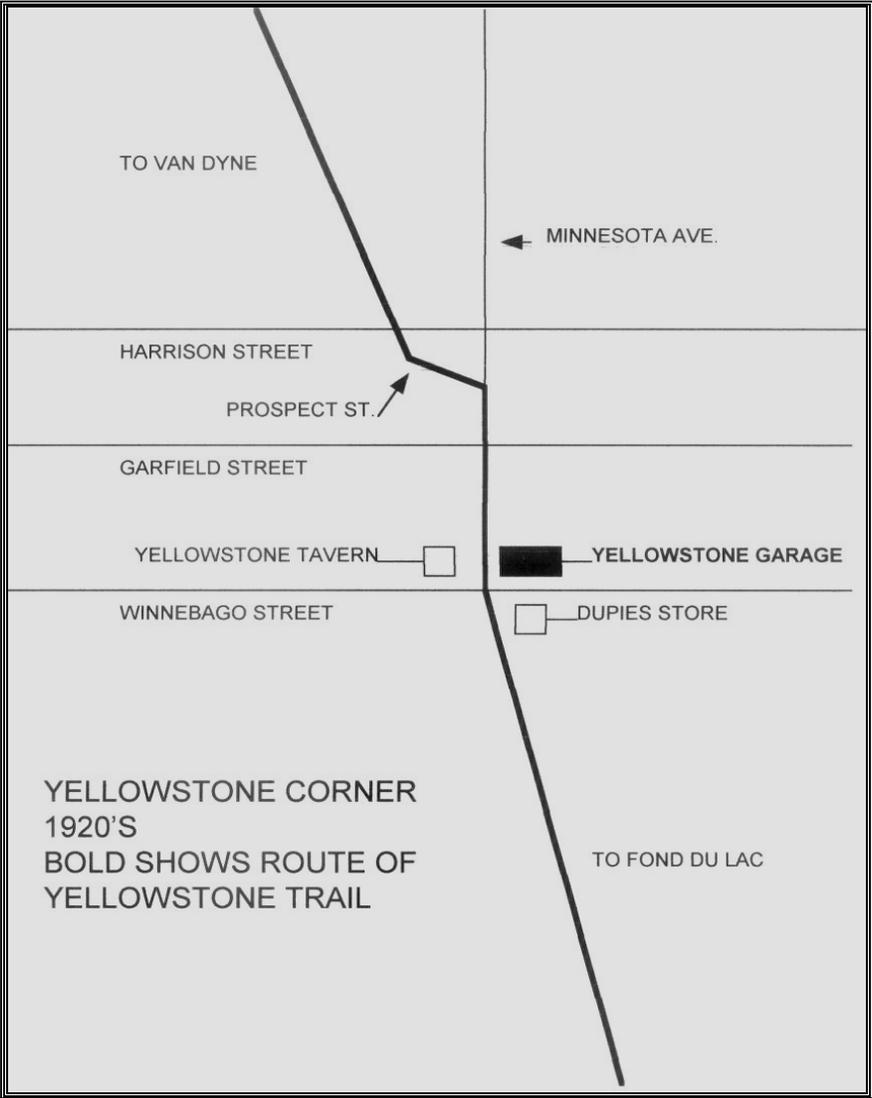
The Garage serviced farmers, tourists, business travelers, and locals needing gasoline, oil, or mechanical repairs. Welding services were also provided. It was a general repair shop for farm implements, automobiles and trucks. Of course, tire repair was a very important service, as flat tires were very common due to poor roads and the crude early design of tires. Radiators and hoses were also prone to failure, and it was not unusual for cars and trucks to “boil over” and need repair.

The Garage sold Wadhams gasoline and oil products in the early years, then Wadhams/Mobil. Starting in the 1940's, Skelly gas and oil products, along with Quaker State products, were offered. The local Skelly Oil distributor was the Van Dyne Oil Company, owned by Al Marcoe. He also supplied "Skelgas" liquefied petroleum gas to area farms and homes.

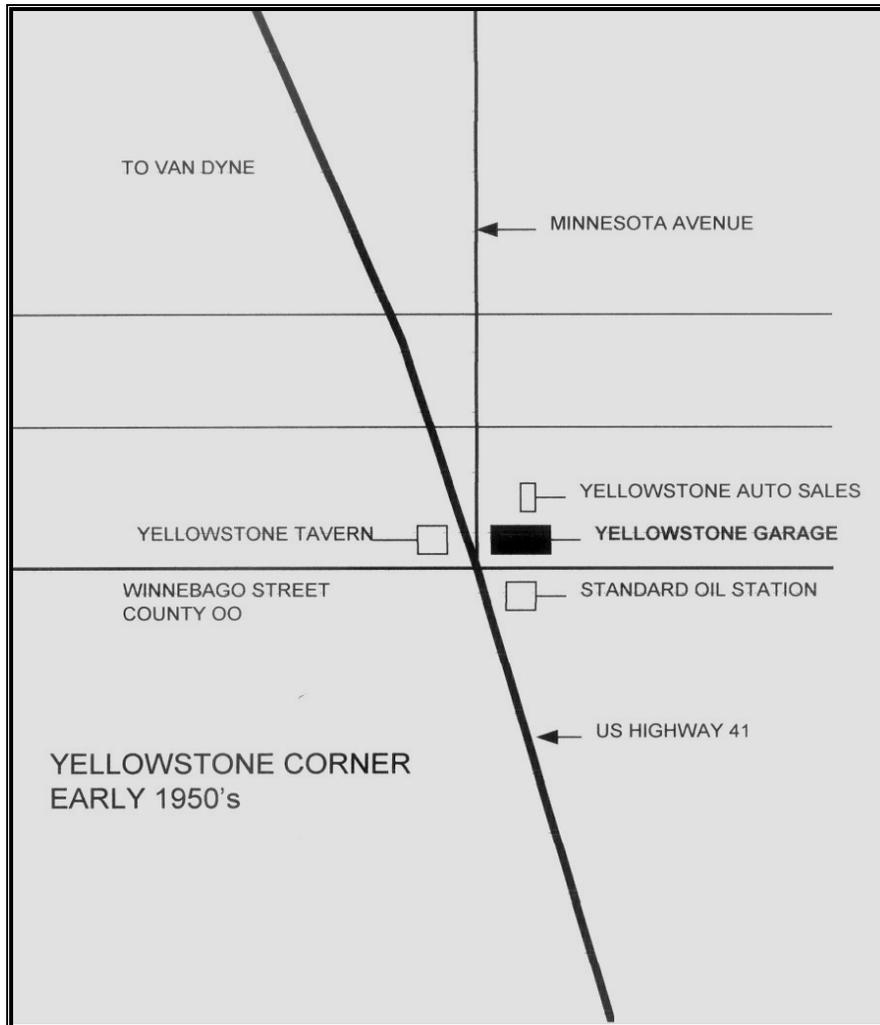


Road maps from the 1940'S and 1950'S

THE YELLOWSTONE CORNER



The Garage was located on the Northeast corner of the intersection of Minnesota Avenue and Winnebago Street. The original path of the Yellowstone Trail followed Minnesota North past Winnebago for two blocks and then angled Northwest on what was then Prospect Street.



During the 1930's, the road was re-routed at an angle from Winnebago to connect with the original Trail route at Prospect. That same basic configuration exists today, however the original section of Prospect Street is no longer there, as it was abandoned many years ago. Highway 175 is now, in 2005, again, called Prospect Street since the recent rebuilding project.

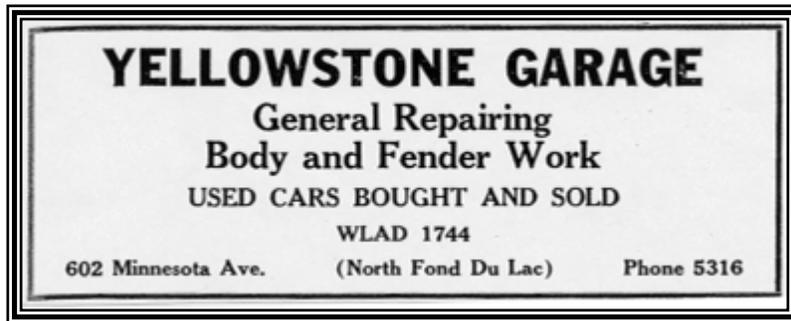
In 1917, the "Trail" through North Fond du Lac became Wisconsin State Trunk Highway 15, although the "Trail" markings and name remained for many years. When the new Federal Highway Marking System was created in 1926, Wisconsin Highway 15 became US Highway 41. In 1953, Highway 41 was relocated on a new route west of the village. It was commonly known then as the "Super Highway". The old US Highway 41 became Wisconsin State Highway 175, as it remains today. This road has also been known as Van Dyne Road since the early years, as its route travels from Fond du Lac to Van Dyne and beyond.

Winnebago Street was known as the "French Road" west of the village because of the many people of French descent who lived in the area and is now County Highway OO.

Located on the Southeast corner was a grocery store owned by "Bud" Dupies. It burned down in 1945 or '46. A small drive-in restaurant was operated by the Bell family on that site until the mid-50's when it was replaced by a Standard Oil station owned and operated for many years by Dick Bednarek. This building is currently occupied by a catering business.

There was a tavern operated by Harry Dunbar on the Northwest corner in earlier years. What became of him and that building has been lost to time, but during the 30's, another building was moved from a few blocks away to that corner. This building became the Yellowstone Tavern and was originally owned by the Bechaud Brewery of Fond du Lac. In the early 40's, Doyle and Myrtle Sapper purchased this business and ran it for about ten years. Leo and Evelyn Soll then ran the bar for many years, followed by Ron and Betty Klein. Subsequent owners abandoned the Yellowstone name. Over the years, many shots and beers were poured, card and dice games played, and tall tales were told. The Tavern was well known for great hamburgers and a very popular Friday night fish fry, a Wisconsin tradition. The building was demolished in 2000 during the latest highway renovation project.

During the 30'S and 40'S, a small seasonal ice cream stand was located adjacent to the North side of the Garage. It was run by two sisters for a while. This site later became the location of McArdle's Yellowstone Auto Sales that operated there from the early 50's until the early 70's.

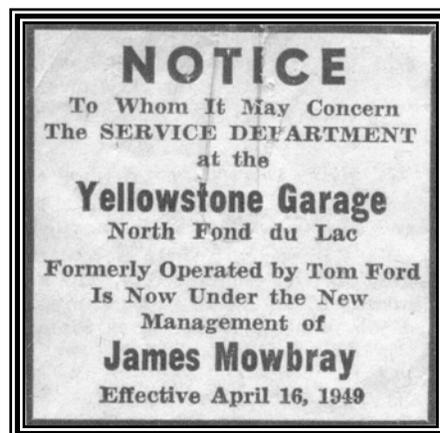


1948 City Directory Advertisement

Leo McArdle purchased the Yellowstone Garage property and business on July 27, 1944. He did mechanical repairs, paint and body work, and sold used cars. These were all a hot commodity during and after WW II due to shortages. He later leased the repair portion of the business to Tom Ford, while he continued with used car sales. McArdle remained the owner of the building until the early 70's. The Auto Sales and Garage real estate properties, although adjacent and both owned by McArdle, were separate and deeded individually, as they still are today.

MOWBRAY'S YELLOWSTONE GARAGE

Jim Mowbray worked at Giddings and Lewis Machine Tool Co. in Fond du Lac as a tool room supervisor during and after WW II. He also worked part time for McArdle and Ford for about two years before buying the business in April of 1949. From 1949 to 1966, the business was named Mowbray's Yellowstone Garage.



Jim Mowbray was born in Wales, in southwestern Great Britain. He came to Wisconsin with his parents and brothers in 1923 when he was almost nine years old. He graduated from Fond du Lac High School in 1933, but due to the Depression, there were not many opportunities for employment. In search of work, Jim took an extended "road trip" through many western states in a 1929 Model A Ford. After many months with little success, he returned to Fond du Lac and a series of low paying jobs. He married Kitsy, had his first son, Mike, and eventually found work at Giddings and Lewis.

Like many immigrants, Jim had the ambition to better himself and be a success. He was always learning, trying new methods, and expanding the services offered at the Garage.

At first, the services were basic maintenance and repair. One very popular item was converting older cars with bulb/reflector/lens type headlights to sealed beam units. This was a major improvement to nighttime vision. Over the years, more services were added such as engine overhaul, valve jobs, electronic wheel balancing, and automatic transmission work. As new technical advancements appeared on cars, Jim would acquire the skill and knowledge needed, use it, and also pass it along to the "guys" that worked for him. He showed early on that he had the knack for teaching. Jim was also very skilled at rebuilding starters and generators, engine tune-ups, and other electrical work.

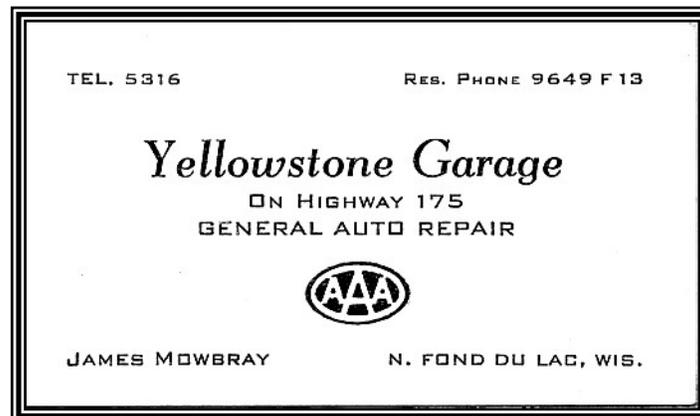
In the late '50s, alternators were first introduced to replace generators. Jim was the first mechanic in the area to learn how to troubleshoot, repair, and re-build them. Local new car dealers whose mechanics did not have these skills brought cars with alternator problems to Jim so that he could work his "magic".



Jim Mowbray and Mark - 1951

In the 50's and 60's, 24-hour wrecker towing service was also offered. Phone calls in the middle of the night to jump start a dead battery or tow a drunk out of a snow bank were not unusual for Jim and his sons. There were a few serious accidents but there were also more mundane calls like the one to pick up and move an injured cow (the cow survived).

Of course, oil changes, lube jobs, and "Full Service" gasoline were always offered. For those of you too young to remember, "Full Service" meant that the customer stayed in the car while the attendant pumped the gas, washed the windshield, checked the oil, and the tire pressure if requested. Both Skelly "Regular" and "Keotane Premium" with Ethyl (tetraethyl lead) were offered. Jim always said that gasoline was offered only as a service to the customers and that the profits from gas would not even pay the electric bills.



Jim's sons: Mike, Mark (the author of this piece), and Bill all served their time working at the Garage. Duties included sweeping the floor, washing parts, oil changes, pumping gas, and repairing tires. They also cut the grass and shoveled snow, along with any other work that came along. Mark also did auto body repairs and painting while still in school. He learned the basic skills from Leo McArdle.

Jim's wife, Kitsy, as always, "kept the home fires burning". She was a very dedicated mother and excellent cook. She raised four children and had at least one of them living at home for a period of forty years. She was not involved in the daily operation of the business. Their daughter, Maria, was born in 1962 and has few memories of this era.

Other services included welding, lawn mower repair, exhaust systems, and truck fleet servicing. Over the years, Jim owned and operated a small trucking business. This consisted of from one to three dump trucks or flat bed trucks at a time. Sometimes the drivers doubled as mechanics and vice versa. Jim would occasionally drive truck also and enjoyed the quiet time. The normal working hours at the Garage were 7:30 to 5:30 on weekdays and 7:30 to noon on Saturdays.



Early 1960'S

During the seventeen years that Jim operated the Garage, He hired and trained a long list of young men. Most moved on to other jobs but carried what they learned with them. The philosophy of Jim and the guys evolved into two phrases: "we can fix anything but a broken heart", and "let's do something, even if it's wrong" for when they were had a difficult problem.

Jim always extended credit to his customers because sometimes they could not pay when they needed work done on their cars. Most paid off the debt as soon as they could, but a few did not. When Jim closed the business in 1966, he was owed quite a bit of money, and most of those debts were never paid.

Jim was recruited to teach a night class in basic auto maintenance at the Fond du Lac Vocational School in 1964. This grew into three or four different classes and eventually also one day a week for apprentices. During mid-semester in 1966 Jim was offered a full time teaching job at the school. The salary and benefits offered far exceeded what he made at the Garage so it was not a hard decision to accept. He offered his son Mark the opportunity to take over the business but Mark was already in his third year of college and declined the offer.

Jim went on to work at the school, later known as Moraine Park Technical College, for eighteen years. He was an auto mechanics teacher for many years and also taught machine shop, math, and many night classes. One of the most popular was a night class called "Auto Mechanics For Women" that was offered for many years. He eventually was promoted to Department Supervisor. In 1984, Jim reached seventy years of age, the mandatory retirement age at that time. He was very unhappy about the forced retirement and did not hesitate to say so. He remarked that, more than once, "it was the only time in my life I was fired from a job".

THE END

An article in the November 17, 1966 Fond du Lac Commonwealth Reporter noted that “For the first time in 50 years, the doors of the Yellowstone Garage ... are closed. Equipment in the establishment will be auctioned off Dec. 3”.

The building continued to be used as a body shop, with “Butch” Schraven operating it for a few years. Leo McArdle died in 1971, and the building and adjacent property was sold to Orville Jeager in July of 1972.

Jeager operated Ironsides Battery on the property for many years and continues to own it. It is currently leased to Northern Battery.



2002 Photo of building

POSTSCRIPT

Although the building remains, the Yellowstone Garage is long gone. It does, however, live on in memories and stories.

“I REMEMBER....”

I remember I was in charge of grease jobs, tail pipe and muffler work, tire repair and that sort of thing. The grease rack was on the East end of the building and the gas pumps were in front of the building on the west side, so when a car pulled up to the pumps, it ran over a rubber hose that was connected to a bell. When the bell rang I dropped everything and ran the length of the building to put gas in the car. At that time we had oil in cans but we also had bulk oil tanks that we cranked one full turn to dispense a quart of oil and it was cheaper than the cans so we sold more of that.

Mike



Mike (Shown here with wrecker – 1950's)

I remember that when Dad started at the V0-Tech school, I would come over and tended the gas pumps and would run the grease rack up and down for fun and entertainment. Sometimes we would ride it.

Bill

I remember a funny line that still comes up once in a while. I was refinishing the local priest's large speed boat in the Garage. One day, Steve Winkler, a retired railroad guy came in, looked at the boat, and said "whose canoe?"

Mark

The so-called office/lounge was small but was cool in the summer and heated in the winter. We always had a couch and easy chair for customers or regulars who stopped by for a soda or a cigar. Every year or two, "Farmer" Krueger, the local garbage truck driver would drop off an especially "nice" couch or chair that he picked up at the curb. Of course, he took the old ones. Early recycling.

Jim

"Car in ditch, man in tree, the moon was full, and so was he"

Burma Shave

(Jim's favorite)



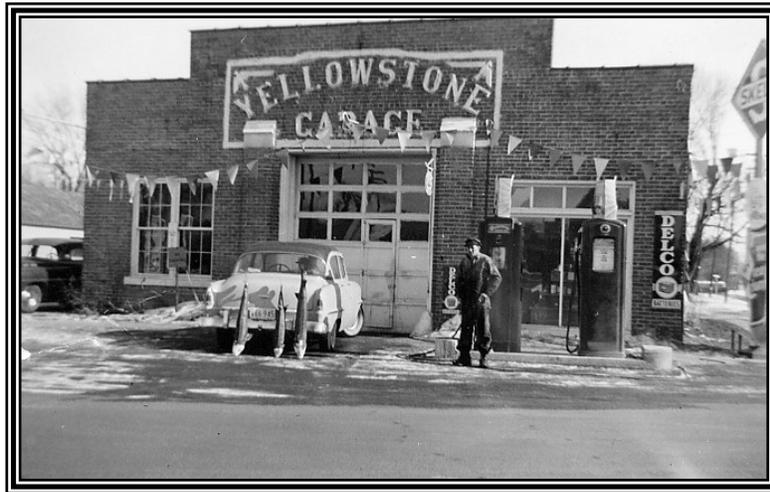
The former Yellowstone Tavern before demolition in 2000

I remember great hamburgers from the Yellowstone Tavern on Saturday noon when we closed the Garage for the weekend. I also remember buying cigarettes and beer illegally because they thought they were for my brother.
Mark

One night a local guy and his wife had a few (too many) beers at the Tavern across the street. When he backed out across the highway, his bumper hooked on the hose for one of the gas pumps. He dragged the entire gas pump up the highway for about two blocks before his wife said "what's that noise?". No one was arrested.

Jim

Village Marshal "Corny" Olson called our house late one cold, snowy night. There was a car in the ditch. Another local guy full of beer. Dad and I bundled up, went to the Garage for the wrecker, and proceeded to pull him out. "Corny" told him to drive careful and go strait home. He agreed and got in his car and proceeded to drive right back into the ditch. Said "Corny": Mark, do you have a drivers license? No. Well you can drive better that he can so drive him home". I also drove a local Judge home once, in the afternoon! The tavern opened pretty early those days. Mark

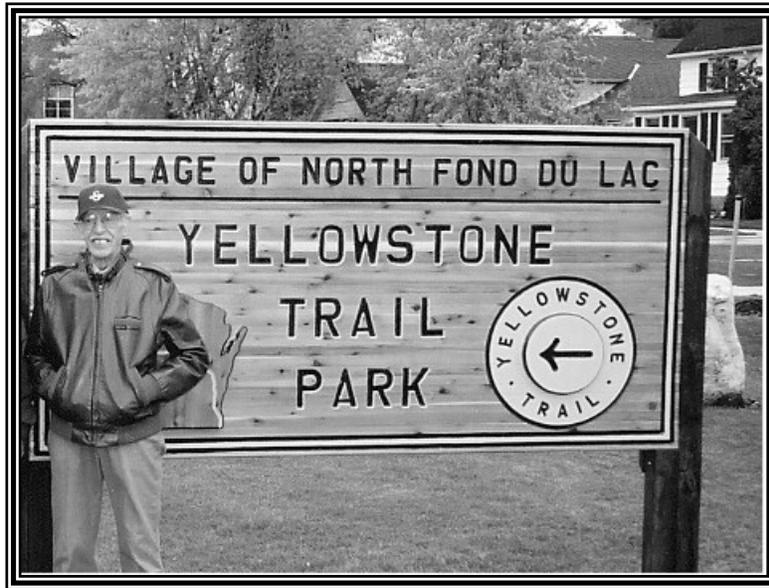


Joe Streblow with sturgeon speared on Lake Winnebago

Hunting and fishing was a big deal, so when somebody got something to brag about, they would stop at the Garage and the Tavern to show off.



Bill Mowbray and the "boys" camping on the Yellowstone Trail
1936



Jim Mowbray at the dedication of the Yellowstone Trail Park in October of 2002. The park is adjacent to the former Yellowstone Garage building. Jim donated the money for the sign. He died in April of 2003.

References:

Interviews with Jim Mowbray, 2002 and 2003

Photos courtesy of Mike Mowbray

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Village of North Fond du Lac Real Estate Tax Records.

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Original Real Estate Abstract
courtesy of Orville Jeager

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Special thanks to everyone who helped me on this project.

Happy Trails,

Mark

Additional copies can be obtained by contacting:

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