

STORY BY BENZIE SANGMA FOR THE INTELLIGENCER

Intell July 28/02  
Sunday p. 2

The sounds of boisterous laughter and happy chatter of young children used to fill winter's night air over the ice rink. It's now a parking lot behind Docter's Hotel on Station Street in Belleville.

Today, the sounds of play exist in the memories of city residents like Bob Carey who had frequented the rink with his children.

The ice rink was built at the time when Docter's Hotel was under the proprietorship of Barney Parsons and his two partners between the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the early years, the hotel's enclosed stable where clients put their horse for the night stood on its location. Parsons tore it down to make room for the ice rink and it turned out to be a much-appreciated gesture.

"My kids were brought up on that rink. I used to take them down there and they played hockey. Barney (Parsons) put a light out in the backyard so that the kids could play at night. He used to give the kids hot chocolate. They were good years," recalls Carey, a father of seven and now, a grandfather of 13. Carey, along with Don Foster and Eddie Pope, shouldered the maintenance of the rink.

"We used to get water from the hotel's boiler room for the rink. We had no trouble with that. At times, we had to watch for melting ice carefully but in those days we had nice cold weather in winter most of the time. So, we didn't have to worry much about that."

At times, he adds, children went there simply for skating and music was played for them in the background.

Carey recalls that Docter's Hotel used to be a favourite among travellers to the city. It was equally popular with the railway crew that his father, an engineer, had worked with. The building was a hotel and a bar in those days and had between 22 to 24 rooms.

"It was a popular hotel. It was separated into men only and ladies' only room. There were separate doors to the men's room and the ladies' room. On the west side, towards the driveway, was the ladies' entrance and on the east side was the men's entrance. At the back of the hotel was a large kitchen. They used to do the laundry and cooking in there."

The hotel was known for its excellent draught beer. One could buy a 10-ounce glass of draught for 10 cents in the 1930s.

As he recalls, the hotel was open from noon till midnight. He also remembers farmers sitting in the hotel's parking lot and selling vegetables.

"As a kid, I remember going down there to buy bread and tomatoes, peas."

William Docter, the original operator of the hotel, came to Belleville from England in 1863 to manage an area's brewery. Soon, he became an owner of a saloon called the Prince of Wales Saloon near the Grand Trunk Station. A grocery store that was attached to the saloon was later fitted with accommodations for overnight guests. At the time, the establishment was known as the Prince of Wales Hotel. Since 1886, the hotel has been located at its current site.

At the time when Docter started venturing into hotel business, competition in town was strong and travellers had many hotels to choose from. His rivals included the Dafoe House on Bridge and Pinnacle streets, James Daw and the Empire Hotel on Bridge Street, Covertt's Inn, the American Hotel, Robert Sanderson, the Willard House, and the Mansion House on the east of Front Street. On the west side of Front Street were Grant's Hotel, the Wellington House, John Weese, the Steven's House and the Farmer's Hotel. The Market Inn and Henry Sexton were located on the east of Pinnacle Street, and the Toronto House stood on the east of Mill Street. By 1880, Belleville was said to have 22 hotels and taverns, not including the saloons.

"At one time it (Docker's Hotel) was a good hotel run by good people. You have to remember that this was a railroad town and when railway life in Belleville went to pieces, everything else went dead," says Carey.

William Docter died in 1903 and his wife, Ann, ran the business until her sister, Cecilia Brians and her husband took it over. It was during their proprietorship that Barney Parsons came on board. He worked as a bartender between 1936 to early '40s and again after the war. He and two other partners bought the business in

the mid-1950s and sold their interests in the business in 1976.

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