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The Giant Hamburg



▶ A short order cook pauses to greet a customer from his post at the grill. Diners and lunch counters were common in the days before franchise fast food. The Giant Hamburg was a fixture on South Main Street for many years. Photographs such as those illustrating this article can be a vital source of information about small details. Note the display of Bromo-Seltzer for sale above the pies. (*The Key*, 1949)

Every town has businesses that are fixtures in the life of the community, whether it's the family business passed from generation to generation or the favorite "watering hole" where friends gather after a hard day's work. Tracing the history of such businesses reveals a great deal about the ways communities evolve and makes researchers aware of how much we take for granted in our surroundings. By using resources available at the Center for Archival Collections, or at the local history department of the public library, researchers can discover the history of the business landmarks in their towns.

The Giant Hamburg was known as a gathering-place for college students. The curved roofline supports the idea that the building was originally a railcar. (The Key, 1945) ▶

In the days before franchise fast food, lunch rooms and diners vied for customers with simple, inexpensive meals. While many of these restaurants were remarkably similar, each one attracted its own loyal customer base. With a good location and a consistent set of offerings, some restaurants remained in business for decades. One such diner was located at 215 South Main Street in Bowling Green. Appearing simply as a "restaurant" in the 1928 city directory, the Giant Hamburg closed its doors for the last time in about 1981, a constant in the community for over fifty years.



While most small restaurants or lunch rooms operated out of conventional storefront buildings, the "Jenny Dining Car" (as it was known through the 1930s) was a classic diner. In the early years of the twentieth century, many de-commissioned railroad cars or trolleys were adapted for use as restaurants, and manufacturers of pre-fabricated diners proliferated. The Jenny Dining Car likely got its name because it was a refurbished rail car. Set at a right angle to the street, it had a row of booths along the windows and a lunch counter with individual stools facing the grill.

First operated by Joseph J. Halloran, the restaurant changed hands and management at least twice during the 1930s. In the 1940 city directory, it appears as the Giant Hamburg, owned and managed by Mrs. Ethel Nelson. Although her husband George was occasionally listed as owner or manager, Mrs. Nelson remained as the public face of the business throughout its life. Because the public often associated small diners with "greasy spoons" of unsavory character, many small restaurants tried to counteract this impression by emphasizing feminine characteristics. The original name Jenny Dining Car is one example. Suggesting mom's home cooking, with Mrs. Nelson as the manager is another.

The Giant Hamburg was popular enough with the college crowd that it was a major advertiser in *The Key*, Bowling Green State University's yearbook, during the 1940s and 1950s. However, it seems to have relied on word-of-mouth for most of its promotion. A brief search of both the *BG News* and the *Daily Sentinel-Tribune* revealed no display advertising. Not only was there no display ad in the yellow pages of the telephone directory, the Giant Hamburg did not even have telephone service. Lacking the clues those advertisements would have provided, researchers must rely on interviews with former customers to get such details as hours of operation and menu selections. Fortunately, over the years local high school students also sampled the burgers there, and many lifelong residents have vivid memories of the time they spent. From this evidence, it seems that the diner was known principally as a teen/college hang-out.

By the late 1970s, much had changed in the restaurant business. Pizza and fast food outlets were everywhere, their nationwide sameness part of their attraction. With a quick hamburger and fries available anywhere, diners had to look for new ways to attract customers. The building which had once been unique and charming was tired and worn out. George and Ethel Nelson were ready to retire. So when Bowling Green began revitalizing its downtown business district, it seemed like the perfect time to close the business and put an end to an era. And yes, there is a parking lot there now.

Diners have not disappeared from Bowling Green, however. Many family restaurants continue to have lunch counters with stool seats for individual customers, and small locally-owned eateries have opened featuring an intimate atmosphere and homestyle cooking. The diner tradition lives on in its most original form at the Corner Grill, at Court and Main, where they have been serving up burgers since 1941.

The Name's the Same: Howard's, the Place to be on Main Street...



▶ Howard's Restaurant as it appeared in the early 1960s, was already a popular gathering-place for university students. (CAC General Photograph Collection)

While some businesses are truly unchanging, others seem to have long lives because they continue to fill the same place in their customers' lives year after year, adapting to the changes within the community. Because there is nearly a complete turn-over in a college population every four or five years, businesses which outlast two or three such cycles catering to the same clientele seem almost immortal. One such business has been located in the 200 block of North Main since at least the 1920s. The years have brought many substantial

changes, including a move to the other side of the street, and the business today has almost nothing in common with its original purpose.

The 1928 Bowling Green city directory lists the business at 213 North Main as *Fred H. Howard, Confectioner*, one of nine businesses so described. Even considering that some of these "confectioners" referred to the candy counters of department or drug stores, a city whose population was less than 7,000 seems to have had quite a sweet tooth. Confectioneries were something of a fad at the time. Sugar was inexpensive and readily available, and new commercial candy bars were constantly being developed. Besides candy, confectioners offered ice cream and dessert baked goods, like pies. Some offered a seating area like a tea room. In an era when home refrigeration was only just moving away from the icebox, a trip to the confectioner for dessert must have been very popular.

Fred Howard quickly adapted to the changing business climate of the Great Depression, expanding beyond sweets and tobacco products to develop a popular restaurant and manage a nearby hotel. From early on, he was a strong supporter of Bowling Green State University students, and the athletics programs in particular. As early as the 1930s, the business had a reputation as a college hang-out. As reported in the *BG News*:

Freddy Howard Sets Up Football Team (October 11, 1932, p. 4)

Freddy, as he is popularly known to the students of B.G., threw a party for the football boys last Wednesday night. The entire team and coaches, Stellar and Landis, were treated to cokes, sundaes, and sandwiches to their hearts content. In addition a small orchestra entertained the group with a number of popular selections.

Freddy is also running a little contest for members of the squad with some worthwhile rewards as an objective. He has already given both coaches an ash tray in the form of the stadium of Notre Dame as a present, and a similar reward will be given to both the honorary captain and the most deserving player at the end of the season.

With the repeal of Prohibition, Howard added wine, beer, and mixed drinks to his restaurant offerings, and in college lore, at least, the bar quickly became the most important part of the business. It was successful enough that in 1938, when Fred Howard himself sold the operation to move to Florida, the name "Howard's" was retained. Owned and managed by Paul (Red) Williamson for some twenty years, the building is remembered as dark and maze-like inside. When Williamson retired because of failing health, the popular night spot was purchased by a corporation of local businessmen, led by Stanley Kaufman. The seating capacity expanded to 175 by the late 1960s. Music was provided by juke boxes. The name "Howard's" was kept.

The interior of Howard's Club H before it moved to the east side of Main Street in February 1973 to make way for the construction of the new Wood County District Public Library. (University Archives General Photograph Collection) ➡

A variety of domestic and imported beers were available, and there was considerable competition with other taverns to offer the largest, highest quality selection. Howard's was also the first college bar in town to serve 3.2 beer, a low-alcohol offering available to the 18 to 21 age crowd, solidifying its popularity as a gathering place for students. A *BG News* article from 1967 describes the atmosphere at the time:

Extemporaneous folksinging is likely to happen at any time. This is what the rear room is used for (among other things). Students migrate to Howard's for "serious drinking." This substitutes shooting the bull for the evening instead of girl hunting.

An observant Howard's patron will notice an accumulation of pseudo-intellects in its corners. Their philosophies range from arguing over it amongst themselves to proclaiming it on bathroom walls. But this makes for atmosphere and people come back.

The jukebox is never hungry and on weekends it works overtime. A small dance floor is utilized occasionally, but dancing to canned music leaves something to be desired.

The biggest change for Howard's came in 1973, when, after years of planning, the west side of the 200 block of North Main was demolished. The Wood County District Public Library stands on the site today. But Howard's lives on.

Moving across the street to 210 North Main, in the building previously occupied by the Modern Heating Company, Howard's gained a large new seating area and space at last for a dance floor and room for live bands to play. Now owned by Jim Gavarone, the program begun in the mid-1980s remains the same—live music Wednesday through Saturday, sometimes more often. Surviving through the age of disco and programmed music, Howard's continues to book musicians of all styles and genres: rock, jazz, hip-hop, blues, and punk, whether the band is nationally-known or local. It is that variety which keeps new patrons coming, year after year. Howard's is truly part of the Bowling Green college experience.

