

Traces of yesteryear flavor old train depot

Story: KATHY PARKER
Photos: DOUG BAUMAN

Century-old graffiti dots the wall panels inside the old building, and a railroad freight scale stands in working order among wheelbarrows, rake tools and paint cans. When a train of 1000 trucks dug from old Woodward Avenue in Detroit sparked along the railroad tracks running beside the building.

Along the walls, much-seen wax panels, supported by antique apple crates, store space for copper pots, flat iron, porcelain tea pots and many other "kitchen and metal" pieces.

The old-fashioned general store atmosphere in Rochester Hardware at 273 E. University is no accident. It is a conscious effort of hard work in and around the old Rochester train depot where the store is housed. Its interior is a testament to the dramatic changes the building has

undergone. "We just had to work around it, rather than remove it. It was a lot of work, but you forget all that when it's finally completed," says Mancour.

I could be dead here in a week, and no one would ever know a hardware store was here," Mancour says.

Mancour left little undone in his efforts for authenticity. Although the old sign designating the Rochester train stop was removed from the building when Mancour acquired it, he located an old photograph of a sign and arranged to have several Rochester Hardware signs placed in its likeness.

The building's exterior, with its freight doors and dark wooden steps and hand-hewn timber supports, remains virtually unchanged.

When we got here, there was a stencil painted on the building that said "This building received two coats of paint in 1941," which was left by the train company," Mancour says. And that was the last time the building was painted until we took over in January 1972.

ABANDONED BY the railroad for 13 years, the building left remnants and traces of its one-day-in-every-two-and-a-half-century life. Three passenger waiting rooms, ticket office, and freight rooms were without electricity or heat when Mancour began renovating. It was a long, arduous task attempting to restore the building without destroying its look, he said.

Although the walls are now lined with

pegboard for display of Mancour's hardware items, he carefully removed panels, put the pegboard in place and replaced the shelves and along one entire wall, which he did not touch, are scratched names and dates left from the fingers of bored freight carriers, station managers and others who passed through the depot in the early 1900s.

Sometimes some of the older folks come in here to take a look around," Mancour says. "It's funny to hear them say they remember this guy or that one, or how they used to sit here and wait for the trains. I'm really proud of the way we kept it looking like a railroad station."

Mancour also operates a hardware store in West Bloomfield that opened six years ago. Before that, he was an engineer.

Mancour offers many of the old hardware services, such as fixing screens, cutting glass and making keys, but he attempts to keep those services in tune with the atmosphere. He sells nails and screws by the "earth" and has not turned to pre-packaged bolts and nuts. He acquired an old glasscase from a firm going out of business, and says it works "just as well if not better" than the modern new ones.

MANCOUR RECENTLY decided to add antiques to his line of offered items, and the old passenger waiting room now sports a commode from 1790 and a completely restored commode from 1850. He has



Rochester Hardware resembles in every way, indoor and out, the old train depot as it stands at the edge of the tracks.

Tables and chairs, hanging gas lamps and old broad axes hanging alongside newer ones.

Among the levels he offers are also some antiques.

In the former ticket office in the center of the building, Mancour exchanges items and money from a new-painted brass cash register—when only registers up to \$10.

Old stove covers from wood and coal burning stoves, hanging in an early railroad days and a hand axe that railroad workers used to haul timber into the building. He has them displayed between the ticket office and the freight room.

The original, wrinkled glass panes remain in the building's windows, and the board and batten walls along the back were rich in nostalgia, Mancour says. While removing things to save the building

he discovered old posters, papers and railroad specification sheets left from its early inhabitants.

PRESERVATION of the past artifacts was not the only incentive Mancour had for opening a hardware store in Rochester. Raised in Clawson, Mancour says he knew what was right for the area.

Rochester has a lot to offer," he says. "I wanted not only to keep the building from becoming a rubble pile or destroyed, but I wanted to keep it the way people like it. What moved a lot of people to Rochester in the first place was its quaintness, its small downtown shopping area. I hate to see it destroyed."

Now painted a pale colonial blue with red trim, the building could well be a train station again if the trains were running. The last train passed Rochester Hardware in 1964, and it is now expected again due to Penn Central's request for

track abandonment between Utica and Oxford.

The work all six months of it was worth it," Mancour says. His wife Lucy has taken an interest in refinishing antique furniture and was responsible for revitalizing the brick commode, he says. And while he was hard at work painting the exterior with 20 gallons of paint, his children laid the sand or bricks and painted the inside.

They're all old art students and did a lot of the work here," Mancour says of his children, Carl, Jane and Tracy. "We all worked very hard and we're proud of how it looks. The brick windows still work, and we're always working with the dock to keep it looking good. But it's been worth it."

Mancour says some of his visitors never get inside the door. They come to photograph for car advertisements, to model clothes and generally to use the building as a backdrop.



Jerry Mancour delivers an old-fashioned brand of business in an atmosphere of rustic nostalgia.

business

RUSTIC

DUSTY NOVEMBER 4, 1976

Vintage grain elevator dresses up crossroads

Story: PATRICIA HINSBERG
Photos: DOUG BAUMAN

Time was when all the crossroads needed to traffic moved into a town was a gas station, a grocery store and a grain elevator," says Lawrence Smith.

Though Rochester's growth has zoomed far past that stage, the grain elevator that once offered prominence on University Drive in east of Main Street is still in operation today.

Built 104 years ago, Rochester Elevator is one of the few vintage business structures here still used for its original purpose. Mancour, one of the few grain elevators still operating in the Detroit area.

Lawrence Smith has owned and operated the tall red frame building since 1956 when he bought it after it had stood through the feed and grain trade he inherited from his father-in-law.

SMITH, WHO also finds time to run a 1000-acre chicken farm on his homestead in Milford Township, bought the Elevator as a way that former owner Doug Wagon believed the feed and grain market was declining.

But unlike the business, says Smith, who has seen the feed and grain market decline for 20 years, just last summer he added two prefabricated wings for extra storage.

Smith says that, at first, his Elevator catered to people who sold chickens, but the market dried up as the number of nearby chicken farms declined.

The water ran with the change and diversified his stock. He emphasizes feed for farm animals, less instead, featuring foods suited to modern tastes.

Two types of corn make up the bulk of his business now. One is water sorghum and a half a bushel for Rochester city residents who otherwise face a daily bout of vomiting the next morning in sink.

Another is pet food, with a dog and cat food feed, and in that order. Still other items include bird seed, fertilizer and wood shavings.

In spite of a contemporary line, the Elevator's rustic character still provides over 100 years of history like a queen who has been razed with the years, but still inspiring.

WITH ITS tall and angular lines, the Elevator is certainly a large warehouse. Only a small office downstairs has space for transacting business.

The elevator, part of the building is comprised of three electrically powered pulleys and screw mechanisms to save time when storing grain. Smith says he uses those devices loaded legs only about once a week now.

Legs are installed in the sides of the building. Grain is dumped into a metal container at the bottom of the leg and from there, hauled to the top and dumped into a storage bin via a series of metal scoops attached to a chain.



Rochester Elevator once lifted grain from cars that traveled the Penn Central railroad line, now abandoned.



Lawrence Smith assumed ownership of the elevator 20 years ago with a clientele of mostly local farmers.

In old farming communities, grain elevators always sprang up along the railroad lines, and Rochester was no exception. The line, however, that fed Smith's establishment—Penn Central—now is closed ground over with weeds and wildflowers.

Smith says he has taken his business to Grand Trunk railroad, which crosses about a block away. This isn't as convenient as Penn Central, Smith admits, now he needs a truck to haul his grain shipments back.

Though commercial pet food is standard at the Elevator, Smith still manufactures his own mix of chicken and horse feed from corn, oats and vitamin concentrate.

"It's cheaper," he says. He makes the stuff in a corn cracker, which automatically sorts the grain into four different chip sizes, and a mixer.

Early each morning, Smith hauls a load of fresh eggs from his chicken barn—about 200 dozen—to the Elevator to sell. Scores of local residents swear by Smith's eggs, several times fresher than the store-bought variety, since they bypass packing and distributing delays.

At his farm, Smith employs four full-time and three part-time workers, two of these his sons, Steve and Mark. Both still in school, neither has yet made a decision about whether to follow Dad into the feed and grain business. "But I'd certainly like it if they did," Dad said.

LIT sets talk by GM exec

General Motors Executive Vice President Howard H. Kehrl will speak at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 11 at Lawrence Institute of Technology's Science Building Auditorium, 2100 West Ten Mile at Northwestern in Southfield.

His topic, "Why Students Should Enter the Fields of Science and Engineering," should be of special interest to high school students considering a scientific or engineering career.