

**A Walk Down Superior Avenue (aka Main Street) in 1950
by Don Boulanger
Written in 2004**

Note--The accuracy of this document may be questioned. It was written strictly from memories of some fifty years ago and is not intended to be a historically correct document. It is hoped that it is of some interest to those reading or listening to it and that it brings back memories to those who knew the town in the 50's. To others it may give an insight to changes in the Superior Avenue business district

*If you have any other memories of this time and/or pictures and you would like to share these, please send them to:
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My pregnant wife, Jean, and I arrived in Crystal Falls in time to begin my teaching assignment at the Crystal Falls High School. We drove into town in our new 1949 Willys Jeep Station wagon loaded with two suitcases of clothes, an ironing board and very little money. The Superintendent, K. W. Schulze, was to have located a place for us to live, but because of the reopening of the local mines and the influx of miners, rentals were non-existent. At the last minute he was able to find us a single room to rent. The house, owned by a Mrs. Gitson, was located on 6th Street and had one other room rented to Ralph, "Red" Chiesa. Since there were no kitchen privileges all of our meals had to be eaten out. We got to know the eating establishments in short order!

In our walk down Superior let's pause first at the main intersection at the top of the hill. If one looked west, the impressive Court House seemed to stand as a guardian for the town. At that time, the old jail was to the north of the building and the addition had not yet been built. Looking south one saw the post-office which looks pretty much the same today. Just beyond the post-office was a house that was made into the community library. A Mrs. Richards was the librarian for the city and also was in charge of the library at school, sharing her time between the two. The house was torn down and the new Christ United Methodist Church was erected in its place. The original Methodist Church, located across the street from the new one was dismantled.

Back at the main intersection and looking north on the west side of the highway, stood three houses. The first belonged to the VonZellons, then a white house owned by Clarence and Willa Dove and a home owned by Bill Bisanko. Beyond the three houses and on the corner was the Aval West Shell Gas Station.

The station had the only car washing facility which was often the responsibility of the two West sons, Ray and Bud. The VonZellon home was moved to High Street and the owners continued to live in it for a number of years. When the house was moved the Lutheran Church was built on the corner site. The Doves moved out and rented the

house to us for a year since we were desperate for a place to live. At present, all three houses are gone and the church owns the entire block.

Now let's go back to the main intersection and begin our walk down Superior Avenue. On the south side of the street was the Plymouth garage, owned by Virgil Skews. Next to the garage was the Ivor Maki tailor shop. Mr. Maki would measure a man and make him a dress suit of clothes. He could often be seen sitting cross-legged on a table stitching the elements of a garment together. It wasn't long before the ready-made retailers absorbed most of the men's suit market. Next door, in a very small building was the Jacobs Jewelry store. Most of the business was that of selling men's hunter case pocket watches worn by all miners and work men. When Timex and other wrist watches became available at every drug store or general store, the little old fashioned jewelry store also went out of business. The area now is a used car parking lot! At the end of the block stood the City Hall, an impressive brick building with an auditorium on the second floor.

Back at the main intersection, the first establishment on the north side of the street was the Biagio Trepasso Standard Oil gas station. It was a full service station where your tank was filled, tires and oil were checked and minor auto repairs were made. Even today there is a filling station on the corner but it is a self-serve ministore. The next building as we work our way down hill was the Rossi Candy store in one half of the building and the Bendick paint store in the other half. The Bendicks took over the candy store and ran it as a teen hangout for quite a number of years. In the early 90's the building was taken over by the city and housed the Contemporary Center, a youth activity center. When the center found a better building, the structure was torn down and was added to the gas station property.

The next building, as far as I know, had been the hospital. .At any rate, in 1950 it housed the offices of Doctors Palm and Addison. Next was the very active and impressive Crystal Inn Hotel. Since there were no motels at that time a hotel in a busy little city was a place of buzzing activity. The night clerk, Mr. Merdy McDonald, was one of the town's memorable characters in that he had a dry, mysterious personality, fitting of a hotel night clerk. The hotel also was the location of the Western Union Telegraph and housed the American Legion Bar in the basement. The hotel served as a community hall for many holiday and fine function dances and parties. When motels began taking over the tourist trade the hotel closed and later became the Crystal Manor nursing home. Now the Manor will be closed and the future of this magnificent building is in question.

We are now one block down from the main intersection at the corner of 4th Street and Superior Avenue. If we meander down the north side of the street we will visit the main businesses of the town in 1950. Our first stop is at the F and S Mercantile. The F and S stands for Finnish and Swedish. The big corner store was a grocery and feed store cooperative. Most of the clerks working there were able to speak one or both of the foreign languages. "Woody" Stoor was the store manager. As the animal feed business declined and the self-serve groceries came into being stores like the F and S could no

longer compete. The building now houses a paint and decorating business owned by Mrs. Steve Plowe. The next building was a barber shop. The barber was Rubin Sandstom, a one man shop. This little building now houses the Reporter newspaper office for Crystal Falls. Next to the barbershop was a variety store run by Beno Mottes but was soon sold to Marlene and Ray West. The Wests remodeled the store front and for a time lived in the apartment above the store. Marlene ran the store and truly had a variety of merchandise. If you needed it, she had it! Next to the variety store was the Hammerberg Drug Store. The drug store, as many in those days, had a soda fountain and was a great place to stop for a sundae or milk shake. The store was run by Rolland Hammerberg who had taken over the business from his father. The building today still houses a drug store called the Falls Drug. Next in our tour of the busy side of the street were two grocery stores. The first, Osterby's, run by the owner "Blacky" Osterby was a successful little grocery store. The owner later built a larger store located on 5th Street which is now the Catholic Church educational building. The other grocery store was an A&P store. I remember shopping there and buying their store brand Tudor beer. Stores in those days were open until 9 pm on Fridays so we often did our shopping in the evening. A&P closed many of those small stores and our Crystal Falls store was one of the first to go. The town also had a J.C. Penney store, just down from the A&P. It was one of those old time stores where a clerk waited on you for whatever you were interested in buying. Each clerk's counter had an overhead trolley into which the clerk would put your money and the sales slip and then pull a cord sending the container to a person in the balcony. That person would make change and send the overhead trolley container back to the clerk, who would give you the sales slip and your change. J.C. Penney went to modern self-serve large stores and eliminated these old-time small town stores. Next down the hill was the Lou Henry Furniture store. Mr. Henry was also in the funeral home business. Many early furniture stores also ran funeral parlors. I suppose they were in a good business for buying caskets! For the past many years Steve Plow has operated a quality furniture store, occupying many of the adjacent buildings. Next was the Delft Theater. Remember, in those days there was no Television so theaters were busy providing entertainment for the whole family seven days a week. Most nights the Delft ran two shows a night, one at 7 pm and then one at 9. To avoid having to get baby sitters we and another couple would alternate times and baby sit for each other to see the same show. As TV grew, theater participation vanished and the theater went out of business.

In recent years the old theater has been beautifully refurbished and is now open to stage performing concerts, plays and a variety of local and imported programs. It has become an important asset to the community. We are now at the last building in this block. Here, a second drug store, the Rezin Drug, run by Bill Rezin. This drug store also had a soda fountain. Competition between the two drug stores was quite fierce. Both of these early drug stores closed after the deaths of the owners. Before leaving this last building I must mention the office of Charles Richards, a lawyer and a lender of money. The office was above the drug store and if one looks up there at the window his name is still there. When we bought a small house and needed to borrow money he lent it to us for our house mortgage. When the mortgage was paid off we burned it but I wish I had

saved it for the agreement read, " \$30.00 a month, payable when ever possible". Just try to get a loan like that today!

Now let's go back to the 4th Street corner and work our way down the south side of the street. The first building, a well built brick structure had been a co-op store before the 1950's but in our walk down Superior Avenue it housed a Gamble Store and also a grocery store operated by Wally Ostrand. Both were thriving businesses in that day but vanished as new, larger self-serve stores emerged.

Today the building is used by a land insurance company and not much else. It seems that such a building might be in demand but it hasn't been.

Next to the co-op building was Sparky Slatterly's Bar. Since I, as a teacher, didn't frequent the local bars I have little to tell about them. It is now a bar and eating establishment called O' Mally' s. Next was the Essie Shoe Shop, where a lot of work boots and shoes were repaired. It also had a backroom where local men would gather to gab. The restaurant next door was run by a young man called "Red" Robichaud. It was a tiny little place but was always busy. This is where we ate most of our meals while we lived in the single room at Mrs. Gitson's. The building now has a card and gift shop operated by volunteers for ecumenical church aid. George Slattery had a tavern in the next building. The tavern changed hands several times but now stands empty with little prospects of opening again. The next establishment, Will's Hardware, did a booming business in those early days as it was the only hardware store in the area. It had everything from meat saw blades, to furnace parts, to plumbing fixtures, to fishing tackle, and most anything else one could need. Mr. Etalo Pivatto managed the store for many years. The business folded when the larger chain stores entered within driving distance. The hardware was re-opened some years later but couldn't make the grade and it too closed for lack of business. The building with its large glass store front stands empty but is often decorated with historic memorabilia. Next to Will's Hardware is an impressive building that was the First National Bank. It must have been too small for the needs of the bank as they build a new bank building farther down the street. The old bank building now is the Dennis Hulbert dental office. The last business in this block is the Ben Franklin Store. In the 1950s it was owned and operated by Albert Sartori and his wife. They ran a nice store and stayed in business until they chose to retire. The store was then taken over by the Sartori's daughter and son-in-law, Jeff and Staria Syrjanen, who still operate an important business for this small town.

Let's continue down the hill on this, the south side, of the street. A new building on the corner of 3rd Street is the Flood Auto Supply owned by Robert Flood. Though auto parts and some household appliances were sold, a big part of their sales was in heavy equipment parts purchased by local and surrounding mining operations. The mines were in full production at the time but soon were unable to compete and one by one the mines disappeared. With the loss of the industrial parts market the Flood enterprise could no longer exist. In recent years the building was donated by the Floods to the local library. The library had the building completely renovated and have now moved from the city hall into their fine new location. The Diamond Drill newspaper building is

next as we stroll down the block. The "Drill" was a permanent part of the city for many years but it too got to a point where advertising money was not great enough to support the paper so it terminated its printing. For the past few years the paper re-emerged as the Crystal View newspaper owned by a native of the City, John Skewes. With his untimely death and the family not interested in continuing the newspaper it abruptly ended publication. Left without a hometown paper, the Iron River paper the Reporter, nicely reports the city's news items. A small, well kept building next to the "Drill", originally was a coffee shop owned by Chet Nettle. He closed the coffee shop and went into the automobile and home owner insurance business. The agency is still in the family and is owned and operated by Lawrence Arcand and his family. In those days I got my hair cut by Dick Welch. His shop was located in a basement next to the Nettle property. It was just a basement, with no building above the basement. When Dick wasn't cutting hair he could be seen standing on a chair, watching the traffic on Superior Avenue through his small basement window. Then and now, the last building in the block has always been a bakery. I believe it was called the Blue Bird bakery originally. For many recent years Ken Whippier ran a fine bakery but very recently sold it to another party. What would the town do without a bakery? When the iron mines were operating, ore was sent from the mines by train. The string of ore cars crossed Superior Avenue in two places. One set of tracks crossed the street just east of the bakery. In 1950 those trains were drawn by steam engines which soon gave way to the more modern diesel locomotives. Traffic was often held up by those passing trains. After the mines quit operating the trains ceased using the tracks so they were removed and the street was blacktopped, leaving little evidence of the community's past.

We will now climb back up the hill to the 3rd Street corner and work our way down the opposite side of the street. The first business on the corner was then, and still is, the Infield Bar. In 1950 the bar was operated by Cal Baur who had recently returned from the war. It has always been a bar hang-out for those interested and active in various sports. In the early days before television and the now very restrictive laws pertaining to drinking and driving, the bar was usually crowded with patrons. Bar keeping today is still a viable business but the tavern hey-day seems to be past. Next to the bar was the Miller Furniture store owned and operated by Herman Miller. We bought some of our first furniture there because his prices were very reasonable. Before the natural gas lines were run through the city many folks relied on bottled gas, mainly for cooking stoves. John's Bottled Gas store was the next building east of Millers. With TV in its infancy John also went into the television sales and repair. We bought our first Zenith black and white television from John, the only televisions business in Crystal Fall in the early 50's. Next to John's was a small building that at the time was another building before the train tracks was an odd shaped structure designed to fit the lot. It is now nicely remodeled and serves as a private home. Just below the tracks was an automotive parts store. Through the years it has remained an automotive store but has changed owners and franchises several times. The last business in this block was the Miller Department Store also owned by Herman Miller. Both of the Miller stores closed at about the same time though the dates are not in my memory. The Miller Department Store was for a number of years the General Electric appliance store owned by Dave

Stoor. It is now the new home for the Contemporary Center for the youth of the community.

Let's cross 2nd Street and remain on the north side of Superior Avenue for another block. The Mendlesohn Clothing and Department store occupied the corner building and had a good selection of everyday clothing. Just inside the entrance was a glass counter containing jewelry and lady-type merchandise. It will be remembered by those of the time that a cattle truck lost its brakes on the hill and ran through the entrance, smashing into the glass show case, leaving quite a mess! The Mendlesohns went out of business at about the same time the Miller store closed. When the two of them were off the main street, citizens had to find new places to shop for their clothing which usually meant a trip out of town. The building now houses the St. Vincent DePaul Store. My wife and I have been doing volunteer work there for several years and know the importance of the program to the community. Next door to the clothing store was a small meat market operated by a family named Warshawski. Over the years it continued to be a grocery store and even today the business is mainly a meat specialty store called the Sommer's Sausage Shop. With a vacant lot between, the next enterprise was that of the Anderson Pop Shop. Here they brewed and bottled a variety of soda pop drinks which were sold locally. We lived next to old "Pop" Anderson during our early years here so knew him and the family. The pop shop went the way of most mom and pop, (pardon the pun) businesses and went out of production of their soft drinks. The building eventually was remodeled into a restaurant called the Pub and remains a dining place today. The only other building on that side of the block is the VFW building and has remained essentially the same all these years.

Would you care to walk back up to the corner of 2nd Street with me before crossing the street? The store on the south east corner was the Pivatto Grocery store. It was a fine grocery store with an excellent meat department run by Larry Simioni and they also delivered groceries. When the Pivattos quite, the store was raised and the new First National bank was built on that corner. A small bar called the SPA and a welding shop were located next to the grocery store. Both of those buildings have been long gone. The Bowling Alley is next. In the 50's the pins were hand set by high-school-age boys, many of whom were in my classes. Often times these boys would set double alleys and work the 7 and 9 pm leagues. It is a wonder they ever made it to school the next day! Today the alleys have automatic pin setters so it eliminated some teenagers' incomes. Next to the Bowling Alley was Billy Z's bar. The bar was sold to "Red" Janov. and was a popular gathering place after bowling. Shortly before Red died he told me that the biggest money maker in the bar was the pool table. It only cost a player ten cents per game of pool! The bar burned down but there remains a corner of the foundation yet today, as a memory of days gone past.

We are getting near the bottom of the hill and we are now at the corner of 1st Street. Let's stay on the south side of the street and continue our walk. On the corner of this next block stands a small building that at various times housed a variety of small businesses. At one time it was a ladies beauty parlor. At present it is a residence. Next is a cement block structure, the Ahlberg Implement Dealership. Arnold Ahlberg had a

John Deere and Pontiac Car Sales for many years and at one time sold the Vauxhall automobile when foreign cars became the rage. Mr. Ahlberg still has a hand in business but on a very limited scale. There is a small house next to Ahlberg's and then we are looking at the Joe DeMuri Buick Garage, a very small building for a car dealership. When the dealership left that site the building became a bait and tackle shop and remains as DJ's Sport Shop, owned and operated by Dave and Joan Schiavo today.

Would you believe that we are now at the corner of River Street and Superior? This next block ends the business community of Crystal Falls. If we continue down the south side of the street we see a Sinclair Gas station on the corner. The station later became a Garage owned and operated by Hugo Groop and today is owned by Ted Egge. The business is called Ted's Service. The final building on this side of the street is the Malkin establishment. Alec and his brother Ralph had taken over the business from their father. Ralph ran the cattle business and Alec had the international franchise and also sold farm machinery. Today the doors are closed and the stock is gone but both men, now in their 80's, still have a hand in a limited amount of sales.

We will now go back to 1st Street and complete our tour of the north side of the street. On the corner is the PX Hotel. The hotel catered to many local persons who need a rooming house. It later became known as the Nelson Hotel and continued to serve as a rooming house though they also had hotel rooms to rent. When the hotel closed it was purchased and extensively remodeled and is now a very fine antique store. Mike Stanko had a barber shop next door to the hotel. Mike was a favorite barber for many men because he was fast. One didn't waste much time in the barber shop if you went to Mike's. That building is gone now and the land is used as parking space for the Lorti Plumbing. In 1950 there was a restaurant in that building but the name is not remembered. Next, Emil Bicigo still runs a shoe store and shoe repair. For many years Bicigos sold Red Wing shoes and boots to local workers and repaired them when they became worn. Emil took over the business from his father and is still keeping the doors open for business, one of the oldest establishments in the city. Next door was a grocery store run by Lionel Robichaud and his wife. The two of them kept the store open from early morning until late at night. It was their life! In later years the building held a variety of businesses including a restaurant and an auto parts store. At this writing the doors seem to once again be closed.

We are again at the River Street corner. Crossing the street we would find the Camillo Camilly establishment. I guess it was mostly a tavern but also served some meals. The building no longer stands and is now a vacant lot. The last business is that of the Sartori Gas Station. It was a small, full service station for years but as self-serve stations entered the community, Chet Sartori eliminated the gasoline pumps and enlarged the garage to do tire work, oil changes and minor auto repairs. It is today a viable and thriving business.

Earlier I mentioned that railroad tracks crossed Superior Avenue in two places. The second crossing was here at the bottom of the hill. Today the tracks and ties are gone but the right-of-way remains as a recreation trail. It is common to see snowmobiles and

four wheelers crossing the street. If we continue our walk we come to the Paint River bridge. The bridge is a magnificent structure and has been recently rebuilt but has retained its historic structure and bridge lighting.

Did you enjoy the 1950 tour? It should bring back memories to some of the older generation and enlighten the younger folks

Should you like to add anything to this story, or perhaps share another story about Crystal Falls, MI, as well as pictures, please email sharedmemories@harbourhousemuseum.org