

Ohrenberger Blocks

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C1914 - L to R - Ripley Block – Hartwig's Market – Ohrenberger Block – White Lake Inn

The original Ohrenberger Block that sat on the northwest corner of Dowling and Water streets was built sometime after 1877. Based on a city map from that year, there was no building on the corner at that time. Ernest Smith is credited with building the structure for Joseph C. Ohrenberger at that time. However, records indicate that Ernest Smith, who was born in England, did not immigrate to this country until 1881 or 1883.

On an 1883 city map, the building appears to be only about two thirds the size of the one in the picture. The two-story building contained a saloon on the corner and a grocery store next to it on the first floor. Indications are that the rooms on the second floor may have been used as a hotel. In 1892 the saloon was still on the corner, but the grocery store had changed to a hardware store. By October 1896 the saloon and hardware remained, and a cold storage building had been added next to it. By January 1902 the cold storage area had been changed to a barber shop. A map from July 1910 showed the area where the saloon had become a jewelry store and small dwelling. The saloon had moved to where the hardware had been, and the barber shop remained in place.

Joseph C. Ohrenberger was born in Wurttemberg in 1840. He made his way to the US and settled in Wisconsin. In 1863 he married Wilhelmina "Minnie" Streich. They would have nine children during their marriage, three of whom survived to adulthood: a son Charles A. (1867-1959) and two daughters Minnie (1878-1917) and Annie (1880-1955). They made their first home at Sand Lake. In 1865 they moved to the Mouth where Joseph started a saloon in May 1867.

Two years later, they came to Montague, where Joseph worked in the mills for a while. By the 1880 census, he was back in the saloon business. His son Charles A. eventually joined him in the saloon as a bartender, and he took over the business when Joseph Ohrenberger died on 11 August 1897.

1900 city directory listings indicate that Charles was working in a saloon and he and his family and his widowed mother were living in the rooms above the saloon. By 1922 Charles was in the meat business and his son William was operating a general store. There was no saloon listed at that time.

On Wednesday morning, March 26, 1930, at 1:15 a.m. a fire was discovered which completely wiped out one of Montague's largest business blocks and contents. Three stores occupied by a grocery store, meat market and hardware, establishments of Charles Ohrenberger & Son and the barbershop of Robert Blackburn were destroyed. The wooden two-story structure was owned by Mr. Ohrenberger, who suffered a loss of more than \$15,000. The origin of the fire was undetermined and had gained much headway before being discovered.

The Montague fire department was led by its chief, Charles A. Ohrenberger, owner of the burning stores, and they fought a hard battle to stop the spread of the fire to other nearby buildings which were endangered. The Whitehall fire department also came over to assist the Montague department. The fire was hard to handle, and a heavy wind was shooting flames high and wide, while mid-winter temperatures prevailed.

Mr. Ohrenberger planned to use temporary quarters in the Ripley block until he could rebuild in the Spring. In early December 1930, however, it was announced that after being in business in the village for many years, Charles Ohrenberger and his son William decided to retire from the grocery business. With the burning of the Ohrenberger block, the hardware business had been discontinued.

By July 1930 the walls were already up on the new building referred to as the 1930 Ohrenberger Block. The oil and gas station on the corner was started shortly after. William and his son Charlie W. operated the service station. Around 1946 the gas station was enlarged. William died in 1951 and Charlie continued to operate the service station. In August 1956 the older portion of the station was torn down to make room for a new building. The part that had been added about 10 years previous was attached to the new building. The new structure was slightly smaller to allow for more parking space for cars and gas pumps.

Huston Grocery & Market was the first business in the new building. Stanley H. Huston opened the store in December 1930 and remained there until March 1933, when the weekly store ads seemed to disappear from the local paper. Further review indicated that he moved to Muskegon where he took up construction work.

In May 1936 the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Co. (A&P) signed a lease and opened a branch of their Whitehall store in the Ohrenberger Block. They remained in the building until October 1941.

After the A&P left in 1941, Taft Nesbit, former A&P branch manager, reopened the store as a Quality Service Store. He celebrated his 1st Anniversary there on 20 November 1942. At the time he went into business he only had 1 helper. Now he employed 3 clerks: Nina Roberts, John Meinert, and Virginia Hayes. Mrs. Nesbit frequently helped out in the store during rush hours.

In May 1945 the store, now called Quality Service Mart, was remodeled into a self-serve supermarket. In December 1948, the Taft Nesbit Quality Market moved across the street and into the former Sweet store building on the corner of Dowling and Ferry. Not sure what went into the 1930 building after Nesbit moved out.

In February 1961 the Montague City Hall rented the Ohrenberger Block. By the first week of March, the city offices and the library had moved from the old City Hall/Fire station located on the corner of Ferry & Spring to Dowling Street. As the Ohrenberger building had not been occupied for several years, it had become somewhat of a storage room. After being cleared out, the flooring in the front part of the space was sanded, and the walls were painted. There were plans to purchase some desks and tables and to partition off various offices. The City Hall offices and the library remained at this location until the new City Hall building was built in 1969.

In the Spring of 1971 Charlie opened Ohrenberger's Firestone store in the building directly behind the Ohrenberger Shell Service station. The building had been vacant since the City Hall moved out. It appears that the store was there at least through 1977. Sometime after that it seems there was a video store in the 1930 building for a short time.

In 1985 Tom Page bought the Ohrenberger building and the connecting gas station. Tom opened T-Car in the former gas station in 1986. Tom's brother Clark operated Pages, LLC in the Ohrenberger 1930 building from April 2002 until 2017 when they moved to Water Street. Tom and Lori Page then sold the buildings to Martin Bennett who did some renovating and updating of the 1930 building and then opened Sawyers Brewery Company in November 2020. The former gas station building, also part of Sawyers, is a work in progress.