

## “Meet Me at Laack’s”

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Carl Laack and his establishment, ca. 1912

Laack’s saloon and dancehall in Johnsonville has been a staple for music and entertainment in Sheboygan County for more than a century, and its use as a place for community gatherings and celebrations extends back many decades more to when the town was called “Schnappsville.”<sup>1</sup>

Heinrich Wolfe built the first hall in 1856 as a general store and saloon combination. He added a grocery store before passing it to his son Fred, who then sold it to Hugo Leibner, who in turn sold it to Karl Maurer. Maurer’s widow Minna then sold it to Frederick (Fritz) and Anna Mog in 1883.<sup>2</sup> Under Fritz Mog, the town’s first Postmaster, the structure also served as a Post Office. In 1909, Mog sold it to Paul Steinhardt, who sold it to Carl and Ida Laack in 1912.

Since this time, the business has remained in the same family, passing first to Carl’s son Edgar and his wife Esther in 1926, and then to their son William and his wife Audrey. For many years, William also was Johnsonville’s Fire Chief. Today Laack’s is owned by William’s son Carl, his wife Joan, and



his brother Donald, who still continue the tradition of serving “Estherburgers,” a fried burger on rye bread named after its creator, Esther Laack.

Laack’s ceased operation only one time in its long history, when the building was destroyed by fire on July 14, 1939.<sup>3</sup> There was a close call two decades later, on April 4, 1959, when an ice jam in the Sheboygan River flooded some of the village, forcing troops from Camp Haven to dynamite the river and break up the floes using an amphibious “duck,” but the flood did not reach Laack’s, and so it remained open.<sup>4</sup>

For many years, Laack’s included an “old time” general store that stocked everything from fresh bakery and eggs to clothing, paint, nails, underwear, and even bulk candy and peanuts during the Christmas season. During tougher times, many were allowed to purchase groceries “on credit.” Due to changing circumstances the store was discontinued in the 1970s.



William Laack, 1974



Esther Laack, ca. 1930

Nevertheless, what has remained a constant in the building’s long history, is its use as a gathering spot and “watering hole.” Even prior to becoming Laack’s, it served as the location for many town meetings, political gatherings, farmer union assemblies, holiday events, and card playing tournaments (mainly Skat and Schafskopf). In the early days, there was a small horse stable under the east end of the ballroom that contained an elevator to transport guests to the dance floor.

Under the Laack family’s management, the site became famous for its music. It quickly became a major location on the regional band circuit that boasted the musical groups of Bobby Art, Romy Gosz, Gene Heier, Harold Loffelmacher, Bob Mlada, Don Peachy, Dick Rogers, Russ Zimmerman, and more recently, “Carl Laack’s (eleven-piece) Orchestra” and “Carl Laack’s Polka Band.”<sup>5</sup>

National orchestras also performed there, including those of Jan Garber, Eddie Howard, Guy Lombardo, Russ Morgan, and Dick Jergens. The orchestras, several of which had their own radio and television spots, made the place legendary.



Dick Rogers Band, 1953

In fact, it is difficult to find a time when live music was not playing at Laack's. As one might expect, bands performed at numerous showers and wedding receptions. However, back in the day, all events were open to the public and non-guests paid a cover charge that helped the new couple cover the costs of the band. Before the times of hand stamping, one was pinned with a ribbon upon entering. Live music also accompanied the town's annual events, such as the Sausage Festival (first Sunday after the Fourth of July) and "Fasching," held prior to Lent. Fasching (i.e., "carnival") is a German tradition handed down from the town's immigrant settlers that features a masquerade ball. Many certainly also have heard of Laack's "Pretzel Bender," an event that began forty years ago. Solely by word of mouth, the event became a regular sensation that brought thousands of people to Laack's and featured a midnight parade. All of these were major social events that brought the community together while providing occasions for meeting new friends. In fact, many couples also first met at Laack's.

Indeed, "Meet me at Laack's," has been a familiar refrain for four generations, but sadly, like all good things, this family tradition is coming to an end. Carl has announced that the business is up for sale. The familiar place that hosted countless card games, dances, and friendly German conversations, will soon leave the family that has enjoyed it for more than 100 years.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Carl and Joan Laack for the photographs and for checking the information concerning Carl's family history.

<sup>2</sup> This information appears in Franke, *Geschichte von Sheboygan County* (Sheboygan, WI: Demokrat Printing Company, 1898), p. 137, who incorrectly cites the year as 1885.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Sheboygan Press*, July 14, 1939. The cause of the fire was unknown, and there was more than \$30,000 in damages. The Laack family narrowly escaped only in their bed clothing. The intense fire also destroyed the mill next door and melted two automobiles.

<sup>4</sup> See the *Sheboygan Press*, April 6, 1959.

<sup>5</sup> The Laack family is a very musical one. Not only has Carl played in bands since 1968, when he received \$25 a night, his mother Audrey also sang in the Sheboygan auditorium with her two sisters, Virginia and Joyce, and her brother William.