

The A & W Drive In Restaurant

The A & W Drive In, at one time located at 1315 East Blue Earth Avenue in Fairmont, was well known for its root beer, delicious swiss burgers, and car hops for many years. It was a favorite restaurant for all ages.

The A & W Drive In was originally opened by James Olsen in 1946. Mr. Olsen was discharged from the Army Air Force in December of 1945 as a twenty-one year old 1st Lieutenant. He had a desire to own his own business and found that an A & W Root Beer franchise was available in Fairmont. Since Olsen had lived and grown up in La Crosse, Wisconsin, he felt that this opportunity in Minnesota seemed to be a good choice at the time.

Lumber, plumbing, and electrical equipment were all extremely hard to come by during that time, which made the development of the franchise somewhat difficult. However, he was able to find enough materials to build a small building on a lot on Blue Earth Avenue. He then obtained some second hand root beer equipment, and consequently, opened the A & W Drive In on July 4, 1946.

Olsen also made improvements to his building, initially primarily to protect the building from the elements. The first addition was added to the front, eventually the gravel parking lot was paved, canopies were added to protect the customers, and an electronic ordering system was installed. In the early 1970's, a complete renovation took place that included the addition of a dining room. The menu was then expanded from Swiss hamburgers, hot dogs, chili dogs, and root beer to include Broasted Chicken, shrimp dinners, and broiled hamburgers.

During the early years of the franchise, a group of young boys approached Olsen asking him if he would consider sponsoring them as a fast pitch softball team. He would have to provide uniforms and equipment. Olsen agreed, and thus the A & W softball team became a reality. Fast pitch softball was very popular during that era. It also proved to be an asset in advertising by spreading the A & W Root Beer name all around surrounding counties as the team, being quite successful, participated throughout the area. The team remained in existence from 1946 to the early 1960's.

An interesting event took place in 1955 in which the Fairmont Martins baseball team, managed by Jim McNulty, was scheduled to play the A & W fast pitch softball team. The game was to serve as a benefit for James McNulty, Jr., who was hospitalized in Rochester suffering from polio.

The game was to be divided between each sport, softball for the first half and baseball during the second half of the game. The Martins signed Sheriff Bill Klusendorf to pitch that game. According to an August 26, 1955, *Sentinel* article, "Klusendorf is one of the few pitchers, five to be exact, to have notched a win over the strong A & W club. He tossed a 4-hitter in winning 4-3 for Berchy's earlier in the season." The A & W team planned to borrow a Martin's pitcher for the baseball innings to be played.

The game resulted in the Martins defeating the A & W team 3-2 in ten innings. Ironically, each team was beaten in their own sport. The Martins won the five inning softball segment 3-1, but lost the five inning baseball segment 1-0. Seven hundred fans turned out for the game which resulted in a \$350.00 benefit to help offset medical expenses for the McNulty boy. Although losing that game to the Martins, the A & W team was very successful that year finishing 29-5 for the season and later competing in the state softball tournament in September.

Hundreds of teenage girls and five "token" boys held their first jobs at the A & W Drive In. Their employment there helped them pay for their education in becoming nurses, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and entering careers in other professions as well.

The A & W franchise existed in Fairmont for twenty-five years, and when it ended, Olsen trademarked the name "Red Sun Drive In." He continued to operate the drive in until 1975 when it was sold. The new owners purchased another A & W franchise and continued its operation at that location for some time after that.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Carol Olsen as a resource person for this article.

For more information, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



JULY 1956



JULY 1956





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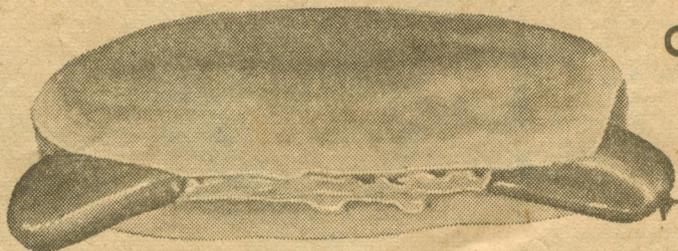
Fairmont

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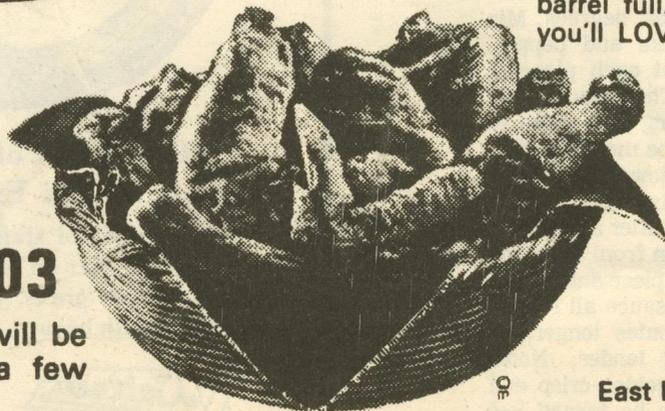


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