

RENNEBOHM BUILDING TO GO, BUT MEMORIES REMAIN THE DEMOLITION WILL MAKE WAY FOR THE INSTITUTES FOR DISCOVERY.

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For the early morning regulars at Rennebohm's on University Avenue, the smell of coffee, eggs and sausage has been just a pleasant memory since 1981, when UW-Madison bought the building and turned it into offices.

Now it's time for the building itself to go.

The process of "deconstructing" it - to remove all the materials that can be salvaged or recycled before demolition - began in December. Efforts to preserve the building as a landmark failed, and the former Rennebohm's, along with six other buildings in the 1300 block, will be razed to make room for the university's \$150 million Institutes for Discovery.

When the new building goes up, it will contain a soda fountain on roughly the same spot where the beloved Rennebohm's soda fountain once stood. "We want to give people the opportunity to know what had preceded on this site," said George Austin, who is overseeing the project.

The person who best remembers "Rennebohm's #1," as it was called, is Lenor Zeeh, 93, who was hired by Oscar Rennebohm in 1935. For \$85 a month, the young Zeeh was expected to dispense prescriptions, do janitorial work and wash dishes. He worked seven days straight, then had one day off.

"Most prescriptions cost about 85 cents back then, and I filled about 15 a day," Zeeh said. "I measured them out on a scale, and if it was something like eye ointment I had to be really careful because if I got it wrong it would destroy the eyes."

Many of his customers were students and faculty, because University Hospital was across the street. During the Vietnam protest years, Zeeh slept at the pharmacy to guard it. Rennebohm's #1 was not vandalized during riots, and many people believe students left it alone because they appreciated how "Rennie's" employees took such good care of them, feeding them and filling their prescriptions.

"I wish this building could stand as a symbol of modern drug stores, and as a memento to Oscar," Zeeh said. "But you can't stand in the way of progress." Zeeh, who got a nice pay raise and rose to a chief executive with Rennebohm's, gave \$1 million to the UW-Madison School of Pharmacy in 2001.

When the \$150,000 building opened in 1925, it caused quite a bit of excitement. In addition to the soda fountain, with its marble countertop and stools, it had beautiful walnut woodwork, a skylight and a tile floor. It was the brick-and-mortar testament to the success of a Columbia County farm boy who graduated from the School of Pharmacy in 1911. It was Madison's first self-serve pharmacy, meaning customers could pick nonprescription items directly off the shelves. "That was a big deal at the time," Zeeh said.

Oscar Rennebohm's dynasty began with the purchase of the financially troubled Badger pharmacy, where the old University Hospital now stands. Rennebohm's expanded steadily, mostly by acquiring failing pharmacies, and at its peak included 30 businesses in the Madison area. A local joke of the era was that the 15-foot-tall gilded bronze statue "Wisconsin" on top of the Capitol dome was Rennebohm's wife, Mary, pointing at her husband's newest pharmacy.

Rennebohm's business philosophy, which he impressed upon his employees, was to treat customers like family and do whatever was best for the Madison economy. In each of his drug stores, Rennebohm posted a sign in view of pharmacists that read: "Picture someone dear to you. Then utilize your ability in the compounding of this prescription as if you were serving this person." Home delivery service, which Rennebohm told newspaper reporters were "frequently made in the dead of night through heavy snows," included ice cream on Sundays. From his prow atop Madison's business community, and as founder of Wisconsin's largest drug company, Rennebohm was elevated to governor of Wisconsin from 1947 to 1951.

His legacy is the Oscar Rennebohm Foundation, which has donated many millions of dollars to education in Madison, including the Institutes for Discovery.

After Rennebohm's sold out to the national mega-pharmacy chain Walgreen in 1980, things changed. Lunch counters and soda fountains had no place in modern pharmacies.

When John Garver, who was a biochemistry professor at UW-Madison, retired in 1981, his colleagues gave him a red booth from Rennebohm's #1 as his farewell gift. "They were selling off all the fixtures in the building, and my colleagues thought that I could use the booth since I ate lunch at that Rennebohm's just about every day for 40 years," Garver said. "When I went in for breakfast they had a marvelous grilled Danish, swimming in butter. The food was nothing fancy, but it was good. It was a nice meeting place where you could talk to people from other departments." The booth is now in his office at the Fanny Garver Gallery on State Street, and it was in the gallery's front window during a recent exhibition on historic Madison.

While most of the things that gave Rennebohm's #1 its character, including the soda fountain, are long gone, a few things will be salvaged and some are expected to show up at Habitat for Humanity of Dane County's ReStore on Cottage Grove Road in the coming months. Architectural salvage includes prisms of glass from transom windows, a pair of "R" stone carvings, stone cartouches, mortar and pestle symbols carved in stone, and copper gutters. Above the pharmacy there were small apartments that were occupied mainly by students. From them, salvage will include built-in cabinets with glass doors and original solid core doors, including small doors for delivery of ice into kitchen ice boxes that pre-dated refrigerators.

Madison Environmental Group's plan for the demolition calls for the recycling of at least 80 percent of the building's materials. The red brick will not be salvaged, according to John Feller, a senior project manager at J.H. Findorff, because vintage brick dealers prefer other brick types, such as Cream City yellow brick from Milwaukee. After abatement for hazardous materials is finished, the wrecking ball will strike sometime in January, and demolition is expected to take about a month.