

From Railroads and Red-Light Districts to Restoration:

A History of the Hotel Rubie Marie

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At the corner of East Wilson and Blair streets sits a red brick building now called the Hotel Rubie Marie. During the year and a half I worked next door at the Essen Haus, my manager told me stories — outrageous, disgusting stories about what used to be a rundown, sleazy hotel. When beginning my research, I found none of these stories; instead I found pictures of the hotel and its surroundings. Clicking on photographs of block after block of Wilson Street gave me the impression I was simply walking to work. Aside from the storefront names and modes of transportation, it seemed that nothing much had changed. Digging deeper into the hotel’s history, however, demonstrates the odd dichotomy of the Wilson Street landscape: The buildings exteriors remain, largely unchanged, but the interiors exhibit the vast social and environmental forces shaping their existence. As an exemplar model of this process, the now-called Hotel Rubie Marie reflects the pressures driving its evolution. From its creation to serve the passengers of the adjacent railroad station to its decline into a hotel catering to the red-light district to its revival as a tourist hotel celebrating this odd past, the Hotel Rubie Marie is both a product of and a response to the social forces in the community that shaped its use throughout its history.

Brenda Wanless, manager of the Hotel Rubie Marie, told me in an interview that the first force acting upon the hotel was the first Chicago & Northwestern Railway Passenger Depot in Madison.¹ Built in 1871, the depot stood at the corner of Blair and Wilson streets, directly across from where the hotel now rests.^{1 2 3} In 1973, August Ramthun built the Ramthun Saloon and Rooms as a response to the influx of passengers who would get off the train and needed a place to stay the night, a common impetus for hotel creation in the time period before passenger trains made widespread use of sleeper

cars.⁴ In 1895, Charles Elver bought the property and renamed it the Elver House, a name the hotel would retain until 1939.¹ Wanless said the Elver House was a state-of-the-art hotel at this time, and an advertisement from 1896 boasted “modern steam heat, electric light baths and lavatories on each floor.”^{1 5} These amenities reflected the wants of the hotel population during this period — modern, technological advancements heralding change in city life.⁴

But by the turn of the century, the constant influx of transients left their mark on the Elver House, which Wanless described as being very simple, rough and dirty during that period.¹ Comparing an advertisement from 1896 to one in 1914 reflects this decline in quality over time — in 1896, rooms cost \$1.25 per day; in 1914, they cost only 75 cents.^{5 6} The railroad also brought crime to the Wilson neighborhood, most prominently prostitution operating out of saloons and hotels, and prohibitionists pointed to the area as a prime example of how vice grew out of the sale of alcohol.^{4 7} Madison’s outlaw of the sale of alcohol in 1917 and the passing of Prohibition in 1919 changed the nature of Wilson Street as well, leading to more family-based business, but the Elver House still catered to train riders passing through town.⁷

Through the end of World War II, the Elver House (and from 1940 though 1946, the Lake View Hotel) continued operating as a train depot hotel that mainly served passengers from the railways.⁷ But after the end of the war, the combination of an influx of displaced military men returning to Madison, the last railcar stopping at the Blair Street depot in 1945 and the slow degradation of the Wilson neighborhood signaled the need for a new kind of hotel — one that provided a home for people who had nowhere else to go.⁷

The Wilson Hotel served this need for the community, and Wanless explained that during this period, “it was basically a men’s hotel — rent by the hour, rent by the month; they’d throw you out on your ear because you hadn’t paid your rent for three weeks — it was a real rough part of town Those were the toughest years here; that was the era when it was considered a red-light district.”¹ Carol Crossan, a resident of the neighborhood since 1984, said, “when I came here 30 years ago, it was the scariest part of town. This was where the rents were the cheapest and the World War II veterans, who were pretty nutty, were hanging out.”⁷ And these were where the stories came in. My manager at the Essen Haus, Neale Hansen, also used to manage the Wilson hotel. Hansen said the hotel catered mainly to these veterans, alcoholics and others on the verge of homelessness, and he said residents “too crazy and drugged up to feel pain” routinely attacked him.⁸ At one point, a tenant paying by the month died in his room and wasn’t found for three weeks, and he was only found when the smell became unbearable.⁸ Up through the late ‘80s, the hotel’s use as a flophouse reflected the generally rundown state of the neighborhood.

The Wilson Hotel also catered heavily to the sex trade during this period, as other neighborhood improvement initiatives had pushed many of Madison’s prostitutes into the rough part of town Wilson Street had become.¹ ⁷ Community members worked to eliminate the prostitution plaguing the area, and as Crossan recalls, they used street patrols and lists of license plates to drive out the business.⁷ Even members of the Essen Haus staff pitched in to combat the problem, said bartender Nate Manning, adding they took regular patrols with police into the parking lot to drive off prostitutes and other criminals.⁷ “We took an active interest in working with the police and the neighborhood

association and it worked,” he said.⁷ As community members worked to clean up the area around the Wilson Hotel, property owners began to restore buildings in an effort to increase tourism. And after continuing to operate the Wilson Hotel with Hansen through the early ‘90s, Bob Worm, current owner of both the Essen Haus and the Hotel Rubie Marie, vacated the building to reflect the changing needs of the neighborhood and to prepare for restoration.

Before Worm gutted and restored the former Wilson Hotel in 2000, Wanless recalled of the building, “It was kind of creepy there. It was like the people who lived here has just disappeared — their belongings were still in the cupboards, there were still rusty old beds and leaky pipes, but they were just gone.”¹ She told me it was a place where dust a quarter of an inch thick coats every surface, where you had to watch where you step so you don’t fall through the floor, where ceiling tiles fell down at random — in essence, a place whose inhabitants abandoned it.¹ As local residents continued to clean up the area, the need for the Wilson Hotel disappeared, and the building sat empty for several years, waiting for a new purpose.

That purpose came with the revival of the Wilson Street neighborhood as a tourist district celebrating its history. Just as the railroad depot morphed the Elver House into a passenger hotel and general neighborhood degradation and the red-light district turned the Wilson Hotel into a sleazy flophouse, the restoration movement in the ‘90s created the need for a hotel celebrating the historic district in which it was built.

Today the Hotel Rubie Marie pays homage to its history by meshing the retaining original features of the building with reminders of its modernity in an odd hodgepodge of the past and present. In a tour of the hotel, Wanless showed me the lobby, complete with

the original wooden slab surface of the Elver House check-in desk, now supported by a glass brick base added during renovations in the '60s.¹ She told me the tile floor of the lobby and adjoining deli is over 100 years old, and the building has housed several restaurants, a barbershop and a shoe repair place throughout its history.¹ Up in the hotel, new carpeting covers a mix of original and refurbished woodwork, and an elevator resides next to the same wooden staircase that stood in the Elver House.¹ The rooms, which up until the hotel's restoration had no private bathrooms, now have Jacuzzis and gas fireplaces.¹ Fourteen of the original 28 rooms, complete with original doors, remain, but Worm placed false doors in place of the old rooms during the restoration to give a sense of what the hotel used to look like.¹

But the Hotel Ruby Marie's foundations, quite literally, remain the same. In the crumbling yellow-bricked walls, arched, low-hanging brick entryways and uneven dirt floors, I can see the origin of the Hotel Rubie Marie. August Ramthun built the then-Ramthun Saloon and Rooms primarily as a hotel, and through all its incarnations, the property has filled that use in some sense. The hotel's uses throughout its lifetime result from the societal and environmental forces molding its purpose while at the same time responding to the needs those forces created. The exterior of the building remains as it did over 100 years ago, as does the basement, and in many respects, so does much of Wilson Street itself. But this seemingly unchanged nature of the Hotel Rubie Marie shown in photographs and a sterile listing of hotel proprietors belies the changing pressures governing its usage. The foundation of this railway hotel lies in the people who used it, and the constant shift in the needs of its users, and the very people themselves, resulted in the history that comprises the Hotel Rubie Marie's character today.

Notes to the Text

¹ Brenda Wanless, interview by author, Madison, Wisconsin, 19 November 2008.

² “Transportation: Historical Photographs and Images,” Friends of the Historic Third Ridge, <http://www.thirdlakeridge.org/results.asp?category=Transportation>, Accessed 19 November 2008.

³ Angell and Hastreiter. “Blair Street Railroad Depot” (image, 1889). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

⁴ David V. Mollenhoff, *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*. 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 171, 296.

⁵ Madison Business Directory, Elver House Advertisement, (1896), 295. (attached)

⁶ Madison City Directory, Elver House Advertisement, (1914), 371. (attached)

⁷ Marge Pitts, *Gemeutlichkeit at the Crossroads: Fairly True Tales of the Good and Not So Good on One of Madison’s Most Notorious City Blocks* (2007).

⁸ Neale Hansen, interview by author, Madison, Wisconsin, 19 November 2008.

Images used for background information but not cited (attached)

Angus B. McVicar. “Chicago & Northwestern R.R. Crossing at Blair Street” (image, 12 November 1936). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

Angus B. McVicar. “East Wilson Street” (image, 8 January 1946). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

John Newhouse. “Chicago & Northwestern Railroad Station” (image, 1956). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

Harold N. Hone. "Train and Automobile at Intersection" (image, 1939). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

"Chicago & North Western Railroad Station" (image, 1918). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

"Chicago & North Western Railroad Station near Elver House" (image, 1918). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

James T. Potter. "Wilson Hotel" (image, 14 December 1969). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

Angus B. McVicar. "Elver House" (image, 17 September 1931). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

James T. Potter. "Wilson Hotel" (image). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

"500 Block of East Wilson Street" (image, 1918). Available from: Wisconsin Historical Society Image Gallery.

"1936 Railroad Crew" (image, 1936). Available from: Hotel Rubie Marie.

"Train Station 1940" (image, 1940). Available from: Hotel Rubie Marie.
