

The Transformation of Ypsilanti

A View from Downtown

BY MIKE KABAT

When I Arrived

In 1976, I had the opportunity to purchase Haab's Restaurant from the Haab brothers, which, by then, had served residents of southeast Michigan for forty-two years. At the time, Downtown Ypsilanti reminded me of the famous theme from the television show *Cheers*: It was "a place where everyone knows your name."

Anchoring Downtown were the locally owned Ypsilanti Savings Bank and the National Bank of Ypsilanti, both committed to walk-in service for the community. Even Detroit Edison and Michigan Consolidated Gas Company provided walk-in service for their customers, allowing them to pay bills and make service requests. In one block, the owners of Campbell's Jewelers, Moray Jewelers, and Green Jewelers encouraged customers to purchase that "special item" from their stores. They even offered watch and clock repair.

"Service" was the byword everywhere in downtown: Brook's Market, Mack & Mack Furniture, Schaeffer's Hardware and Sporting Goods, Bazley's Meat Market, Richardson's Pharmacy, Willoughby's Shoe Store, Pear's Clothing for Men, and Mellencamp's Clothing (they even carried Boy Scout uniforms).

On the periphery, Carty's Music Store rented instruments to budding musicians throughout Washtenaw County; Ypsilanti Locksmith, Sesi Lincoln Mercury, Serbay Motors, and Jackson Cleaners all contributed to the owner-operated business climate. Haab's was joined by other owner-operated restaurants, including Casa Nova, TC's Speakeasy, the Tap Room, and the Spaghetti Bender.

A Changed Environment

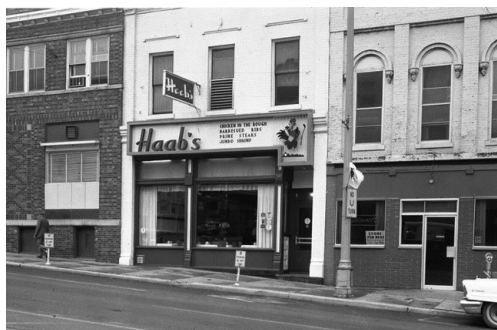
Ypsilanti had grown from a trading post in 1809 to a prospering community, largely due to the completion of the Chicago Road (a.k.a., Michigan Avenue and U.S. Highway 12).

A proliferation of beautiful homes had been built over the years, but by the 1970s, many were in disrepair and had lost the splendor of their original Greek Revival, Queen Anne, and Italian Villa architectural styles. The business district was made up predominantly of two- and three-story brick buildings constructed in the 1850s and 1860s.

Although Downtown Ypsilanti retailers had done well for years, the 1970s gave them new competition: the shopping mall. Eager to prove they could compete, business owners began adding all manner of shiny metal facades, hiding the original character of the buildings. Some felt that this approach was not beneficial and masked the unique historical architecture of a city chartered 150 years earlier. Some—apparently those

with clout—felt that modernizing the downtown's image would attract shoppers. Unfortunately, those facades only attracted pigeons.

That all began to change with the establishment of the Ypsilanti Historic District Commission. Much of the credit for the city's revitalization goes to Jane Schmie-deke, who chaired the commission and was instrumental in getting the district recognized by the National



Haab's Restaurant, c. 1958

Register of Historic Places in 1978. Meeting regularly for the past forty years, commission members have advised hundreds of property owners, landlords, and building occupants as to how to best showcase their own historical architecture. They have also encouraged removal of several buildings' metal facades, thus returning them to their original architectural beauty.

As more and more people became property owners in the Ypsilanti Historic District and began transforming their properties, the city began to bloom, which resulted in increased property values. The character of the city's business districts also changed as individual proprietors began to recognize the need to restore their architecturally interesting older buildings.

Downtown Lives On

Unique new stores and eateries began moving into Ypsilanti, which became known as a destination for lovers of antiques and anyone looking for something unique. When customers were drawn to one store, they discovered another in the same area...and then another. Since success breeds success, new retailers and eateries began springing up in the business district.

While it hasn't always been easy for property owners—or members of the Historic

District Commission—the establishment and recognition of the Historic District transformed an old, tired city into an exciting and beautiful one. This led to Ypsilanti being entered into the National Register of Historic Places and remains one of the largest historic districts in Michigan.

Sadly, nearly all of the businesses that populated Downtown in the 1970s have been gone for many years. Haab's joined those ranks, when we closed on March 3, 2022, after eighty-eight years in existence and in our forty-seventh year of ownership.



Michigan Avenue at Huron Street in the 1970s

A Note on Sources

Images are from the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

About the Author

Longtime Ypsilanti resident Mike Kabat was the owner of Haab's restaurant, from 1976 to 2022, when it closed. He served as chair of the Ypsilanti Downtown Development Authority and was founding chair of the Central Business Community (CBC), Mike was also chair of the Façade Grant Committee and chair of the Ypsilanti Convention and Visitors Bureau. Mike was a member of the Ypsilanti Chamber of Commerce for many years.