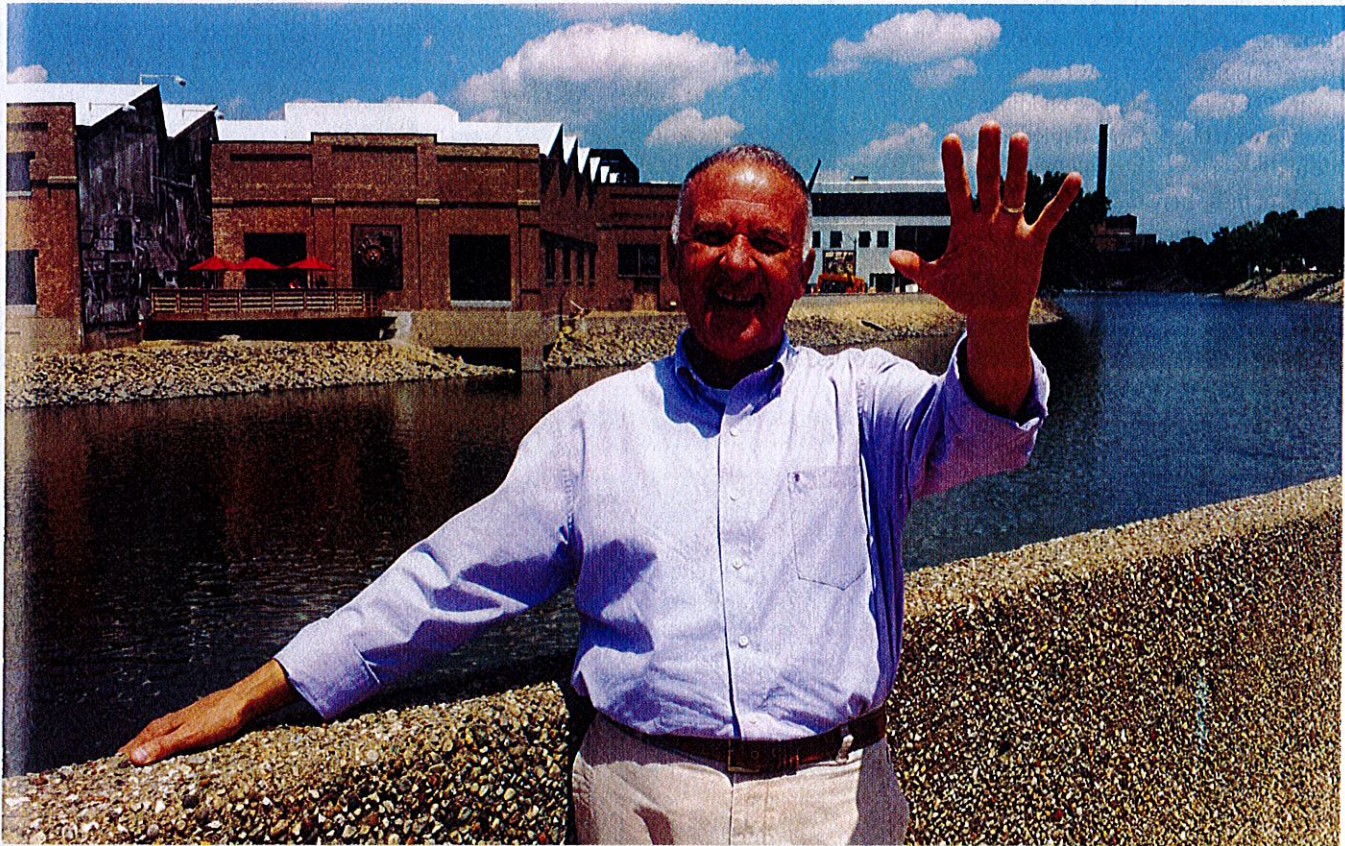


Renovation = Beloit

Revived industry, Clydesdales, a storytelling barber and farm-to-mason-jar dining: It all happens in Beloit.

BY JOHN MCGIVERN



When was your last visit to Beloit? Did you just say, “Where exactly is Beloit?” You sound like me before my week-long “Around the Corner with John McGivern” shoot during the summer of 2016. My knowledge of this community was vague at best. I presumed that since this city was once the company town of Beloit Iron Works, and since that company no longer exists, Beloit was going to be the Gary, Indiana, of Wisconsin! I was sure we would find a community that used to have an identity and we would now spend the week remembering what Beloit was... and not find anything that Beloit can say it is today.

What the hell was I thinking? I am such an idiot. We arrived in downtown Beloit at noon on a Tuesday in late June and could not find a parking space. COULD NOT

FIND A PARKING SPACE... The crowded downtown street was a loud, bold statement of what Beloit is today.

If the busy downtown did not tell me enough, then my first interview did. Beloit native and former Miss Wisconsin and current state Secretary of Tourism Stephanie Klett is the best resource to all things Beloit, a community of 37,000 people. We met Stephanie in Riverside Park, a downtown destination developed in the 1930s and a go-to place for generations. We could not get through the interview without someone yelling “Hello!” from a passing car or people stopping to thank her for all she does, both for Beloit and for our state.

Iron Works, founded in the 1800s, was built on the west side of the Rock River, and downtown Beloit grew up around it. The factory closed its doors in 1999.



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When you look at Beloit today, its success is based on the work of community visionaries and activists who were and are committed to Beloit's tomorrow. We could not come to this town without talking with Diane Hendricks, whose business, ABC Supply, is based in Beloit and who raised her seven kids in this community. It's because of her and her late husband's unending support that downtown is what it is today. With the renovation and re-imagining of the Beloit Corp., her family led the vision of what is happening in Beloit. We met at her home outside the stables that house her three Clydesdales. Have you ever stood next to a Clydesdale? YIKES...

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I was so distracted by the size of these horses and her great looking riding outfit that I'm sure Diane thought I was the host of a show on the Equine Network.

When you visit Beloit, don't just drive by the buildings on the east side of the river that once housed paper mill machine factories. Stop, get out and walk down the charming streets that border a wide variety of businesses that now call this area home. The outsides of these buildings are covered with huge murals depicting the life of the workers who built Beloit.

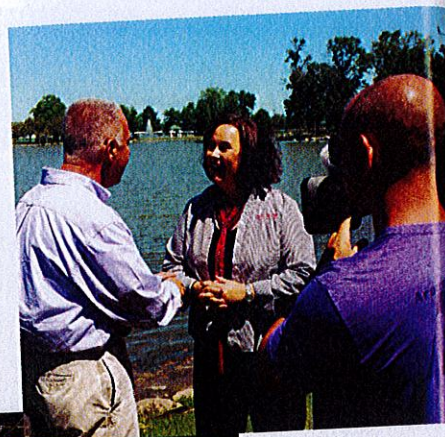
One of those here today is Richard Spanton Jr., the president of AccuLynx. His company occupies one of the old industrial buildings on the river – the same building where his grandfather spent his entire working career. This place is so cool. There is a giant slide (which I slid down twice) in the middle of this wide-open workspace and a pool table and a kitchen with a barista bar. It looked like the headquarters of a Silicon Valley company.

In addition to sightseeing and filling out job applications, visit Beloit when you need a haircut. I say that because we spent time at Austin's Barber Shop on State Street. Rod Gottfredsen owns Austin's, and while he cuts your hair, he will tell you why he never called it Rod's. He will tell you that and so much more. Rod can talk. Oh my Lord, can he talk! He has stories and jokes and the news and the history and the gossip in this barbershop that looks like it came out of the 1930s. If you're good, he might let you sit in the airplane to get your hair cut. Just ask...

Did you know that Beloit is home to the Guinness Book of World Records-certified Angel Museum? No, really. There is an Angel Museum in Beloit. You have to check it out. Joyce Berg is the curator/collector. She and her late husband started collecting angels as souvenirs when they traveled. She had over 10,000 figurines on display in her house before she moved them to the 100-year-old building that once was St. Paul's Catholic Church. Joyce met us at the door dressed as an angel (feathers on the wings, a halo, the whole outfit!) and gave us a tour of this collection that currently has over 14,000 angels, anywhere from a third of an inch to life-size. There are 700 African-American angels that were donated by Oprah Winfrey.

In Beloit, you have to visit Bushel & Peck's Local Market. Jackie Gennett is the brains behind this farm-to-mason-jar operation. If you have a relative who used to can and pickle vegetables, you will be brought back to a time and

the night in Beloit, treat yourself to the Ironworks Hotel. We made the mistake of staying at a chain hotel close to the highway, and were all awakened at 3:30 a.m. because that, apparently, is when truck drivers leave to start their day.



Top left: Diane Hendricks and her Clydesdales. Top right: John McGivern gets the lowdown on Beloit from Stephanie Klett beside the Rock River. Bottom: Do you think John McGivern is excited about these plates from Merrill & Houston's Steak Joint?

impressed beyond measure with all of the offerings. I am still dreaming about the pickled Brussels sprouts and green beans I brought home and devoured within days. Her menu of farm fresh offerings in the café was beyond delicious and I am still envious that Beloit has a place I wish was in my neighborhood in Milwaukee.

We were treated to such hospitality and cut-your-steaks-with-a-butter-knife at Merrill & Houston's Steak Joint, inside the Ironworks Hotel. It's comfortable and gorgeous, and the patio is THE place to dine on a summer evening. General Manager Jayme Braatz should be applauded for perfect front-of-the-house service.

A bit of advice. If you are going to spend

See what we learned about Beloit on March 2 at 7 p.m. on Milwaukee PBS. Or go to MilwaukeePBS.org and watch it – and all of my episodes – anytime. ♦

Come hear John McGivern and "Around the Corner with John McGivern" Producer Lois Maurer share behind-the-scenes stories about making their top-rated PBS show. Join them at noon on Friday, March 31 at the REALTORS® Home & Garden Show at State Fair Park.


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