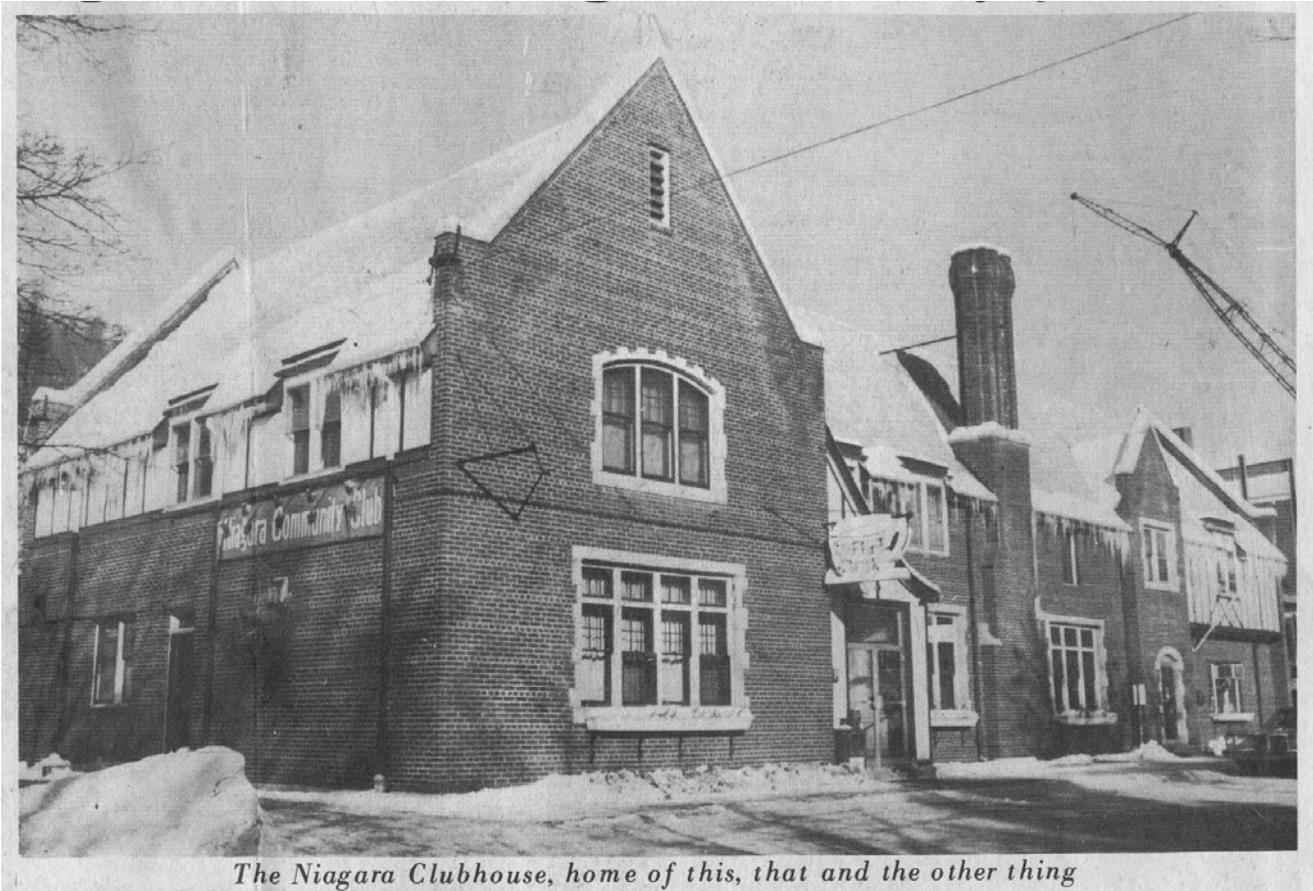


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Arlene (Erickson) Depas (NHS 1957) of Niagara, Wisconsin and forwarded by my
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A-6 – January 7, 1979 – THE UPPER PENINSULA SUNDAY TIMES -----

The Club House – Niagara's building with many faces.



By PETER NOCERINI
Staff Writer

NIAGARA — Close your eyes for a few moments and let loose the reins on your imagination.

Suppose there was a building that was a library and a bus depot, a restaurant and a village courthouse, a credit union office and a police station and a post office. Suppose that it had once even been a lodge hall, a movie theater, a bowling alley, a high school gym and a pool hall.

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Don Raboin _____ Niagara High School Class of 1955.

That structure would strike you as being as mixed-up as the Flub-A-Dub. But it's no figment of the imagination — it lives in Niagara, and it is unique in this area.

Right at this very moment parts of it are closed off to the public. New people have taken over the management of the coffee shop portion of the building and will be remodeling the inside to some degree. A back door entrance is temporarily needed to visit the credit union, village offices, library or police department.

But the remodeling won't take very long, and soon what has been described as "the center of the social life of the village" will be back in full operation.

The first pulp mill on Lower Quinnesec Falls was built by John Stoveken Sr. in 1889. By 1898, the Kimberly-Clark Co. had purchased the operations and in 1899 built a mill of its own.

Eight years later, the clubhouse was born. Its 1907 inception makes it seven years older than the village of Niagara itself.

A book issued by Kimberly-Clark in 1922 to commemorate its first half century of existence titled the Niagara section "In the Heart of the Hills." About the clubhouse, it said, "The Niagara Club, owned by the company but operated by local management, is the center of social life in the village."

A privately published booklet, "Niagara, Wisconsin: A Good Place to Live," published in 1924, tells more about the early club.

"The building contains a room, baths for men and women, a lodge room, soda grill, public library, reading room, pool and billiard tables and four bowling alleys." It went on to explain that the building, open to the public, is controlled by a board of directors elected by the club's own members.

"Membership in the Niagara Club is but \$2 per year, which gives all privileges of the institution."

One thing not noted in the booklets is that the clubhouse served another duty — it was a makeshift hospital during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1917 and '18. Beds reportedly lined the walls of the building.

"Early Days in Niagara," a book written by Carolyn Garvaglia and published in the Niagara Journal in 1976, recalled that in the early days the bowling alleys were located under a porch, which ran the length of the building on the river side. The gymnasium was also used for theater performances and was the village's movie house for many years.

"When I played high school basketball," remembered Ed Gaber, a former village president and now parks and recreation chairman, "the high school had no gym yet, so we played all our high school games there — and there was a community team as well. Gaber also said that there was a balcony, which formed a horseshoe around the gym.

"The old projection booth is still upstairs," Gaber added. "If you open the door, you'll find it like Fibber McGee's closet — all kinds of stuff are in there."

Garvaglia's book reported that the second floor originally contained a dining room, kitchen and rooms rented by the local Masonic lodge.

Nov. 29, 1926, was a red-letter day for the clubhouse it had been remodeled over the summer and fall and this date celebrated its reopening. The building had its exterior drastically changed, and afterwards no longer had outdoor staircases leading to the second floor or an outdoor porch (facing the mill).

The reborn clubhouse was Niagara, and a two-day celebration took place, including speakers and a four-piece orchestra that played in the evening and "gave some snappy jazz for the Charleston and the Black Bottom."

An extensive membership drive, still at \$2 a head, ended with 953 people registered for the club. One booklet 'of the time exulted, "Mere words cannot do justice to our community house — from its red brick and cream stucco exterior to its perfectly appointed interior it leaves nothing to be desired."

Besides its own members, the clubhouse also hosted several other clubs and lodges. The Masons rented rooms on the second floor for many years until moving out in 1951, when they bought an old school for their headquarters. The Women's Club met for many years in part of the large downstairs lobby, supplying furniture and reading materials. When they later moved to an upstairs room, the Girl Scouts began meeting on the ground floor. The Order of the Eastern Star has also met under the clubhouse's roof.

Originally, the library was located downstairs, where the post office presently is situated. The post office moved in during 1950, and the office was remodeled and re-equipped in 1961.

During World War II, servicemen found a special nook in the clubhouse's southwest corner. It was equipped with paper, postcards, magazines and a register book. Niagara sent its men away in style with a gift from the village's Community Chest. When home on furlough, they were given presents, as well.

A new role was taken on by the clubhouse in 1953, when the old Masonic Lodge was converted into a village hall. The walls were redecorated in pale green and a floor was installed in combinations of green tile.

The room where the village board and court convene has walls that are really maps of the Village. The maps were a 1957 addition and show areas of the village that are connected with village water and sewer lines.

Buildings on the wall maps are color coded to show whether they are public, business, residential or industrial structures.

One other function of the clubhouse was added in 1964, when it became the village's bus depot. Previously, buses had stopped at the old Kimlark Inn, but in 1964 the Kin-dark changed into the Maryhill Manor for senior citizens.

The old gymnasium burned in August, 1961, a blaze that took over three hours to get under control. It had not been used for many years and was being used by Kimberly-Clark as a warehouse.

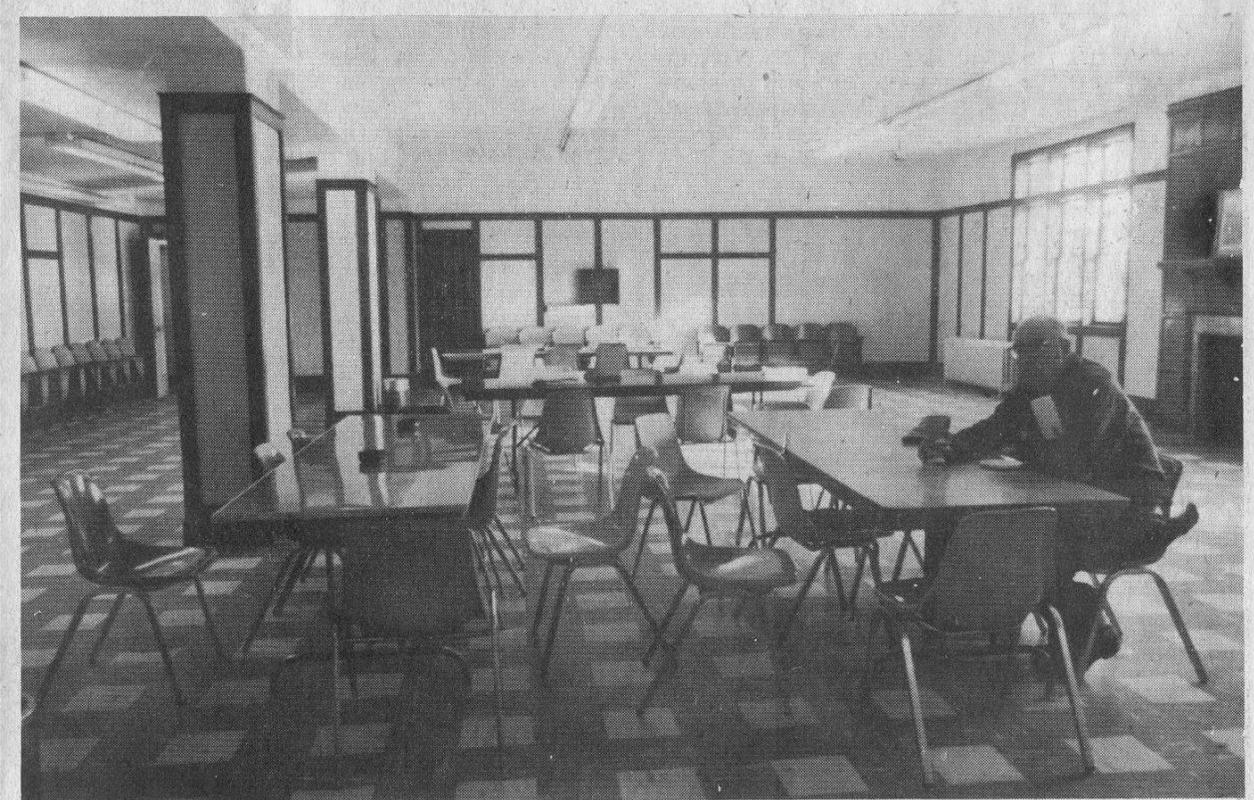
The clubhouse, as from the beginning, is owned by the mill, now the Niagara of Wisconsin (NOW) Corp. From the mill it gets its electricity and steam heat.

The clubhouse's heyday is behind it, though, and its future is cloudy. America and Americans — have changed a lot in the last couple of decades, and Niagara has not proven to be an exception. The building, Gaber said, is not being used as extensively as it had been a decade or so earlier. He cited two reasons: adults preferring to stare at TV rather than to take part in local events and young adults feeling that the Clubhouse doesn't have that much to offer them.

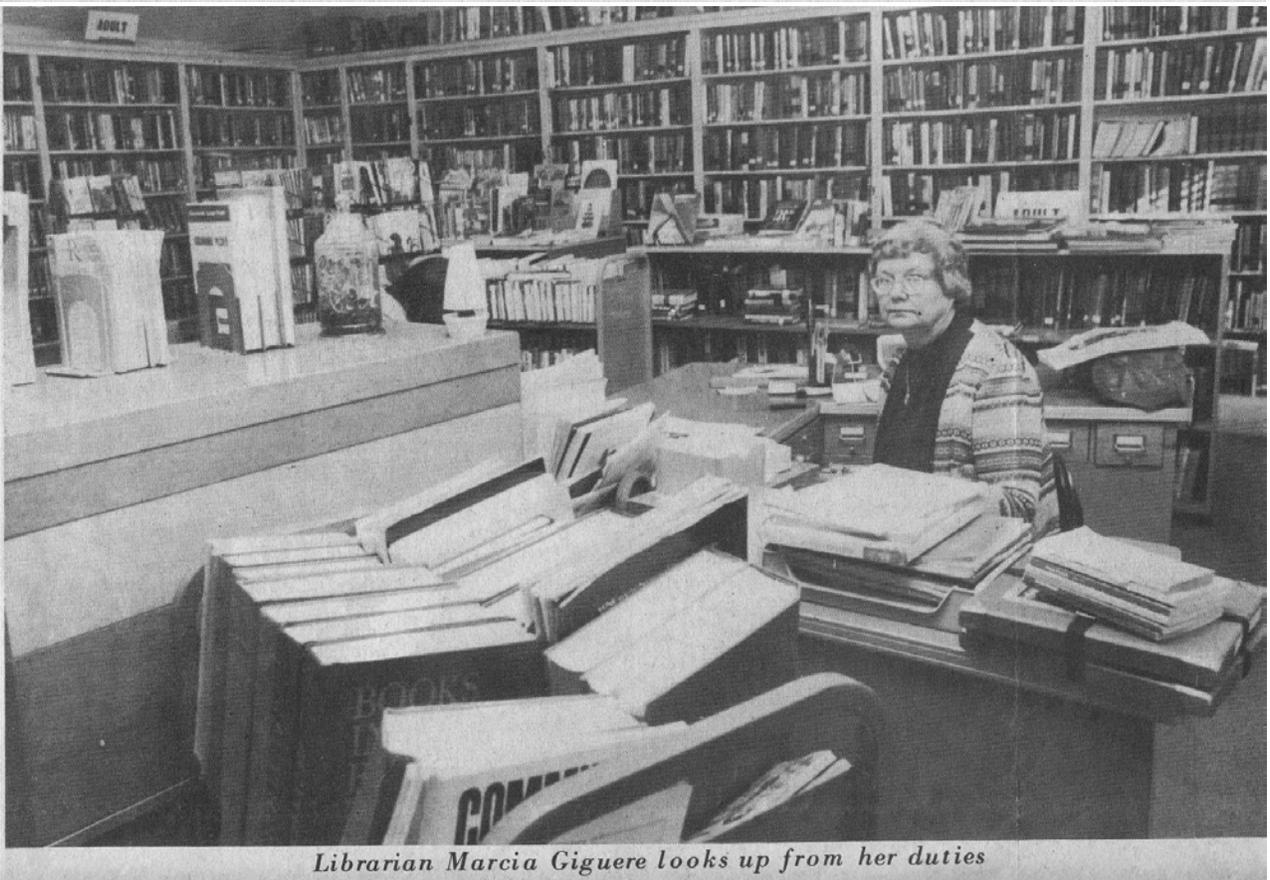
'It's a different kind of lifestyle,' Gaber said. 'It's mystifying to me. Gaber may be right, but when you combine so many of a village's vital functions in one structure, you find it very hard to believe it won't live for a long time to come.'



The noontime crew gathers around the lunch counter, now being renovated



There is plenty of room for gatherings at the Clubhouse – or for a cup of java



Librarian Marcia Giguere looks up from her duties

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The End

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