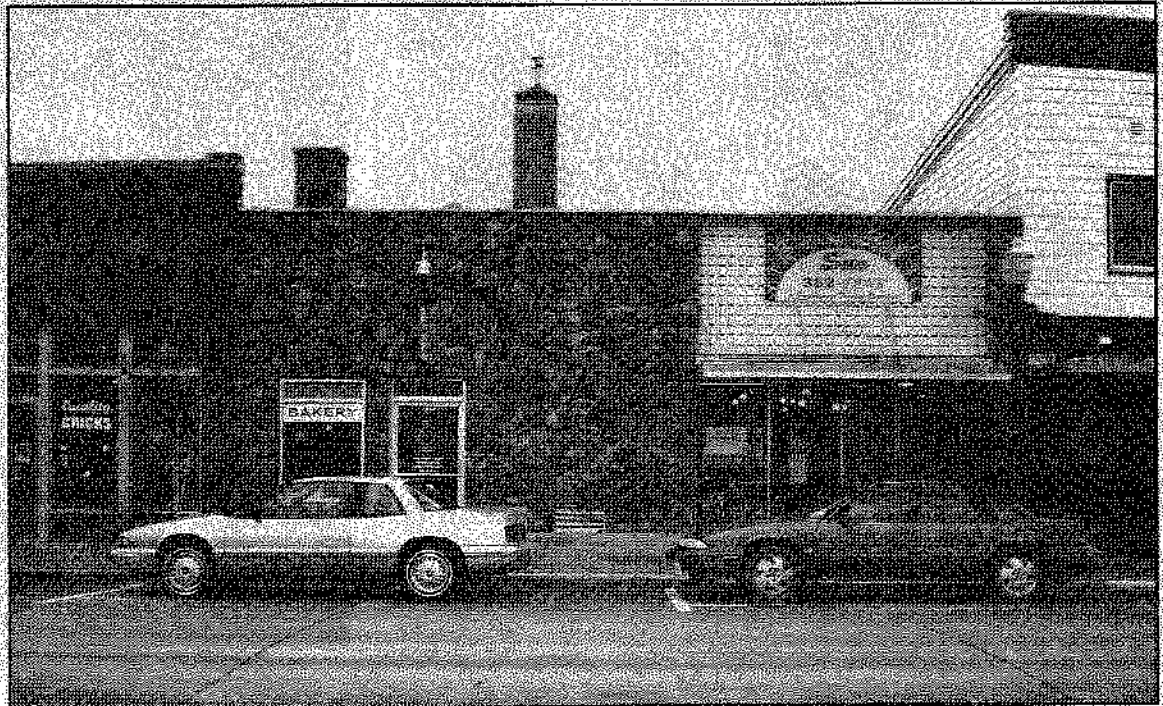




402-404 W. Water St. in 1921 above. (Photo courtesy Howard Bernatz) Below, a current photo of the building



Decorah's Historic Downtown

402-404 W. Water St. – Paradise Sun, Beyond the Bar

In the fall of 2014, the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission (DHPC) began a lengthy process to nominate the city's business district to the National Register of Historic Places.

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In 1914, Ole Johan (O.J.) Ness purchased the lot and building from owner-operator F. N. May. At that time, Ness also owned the build-

the Tapestry Brick storefront.

The remodeled façade, which is still in place today, is predominantly lava rock with some red, yellow and white signage. The lava rock itself is said to have been so lightweight that it could be cut to size or

In the fall of 2014, the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission (DHPC) began a lengthy process to nominate the city's business district to the National Register of Historic Places.

The district consists of some 130 buildings, mostly on Water, Washington and Winnebago streets. Over a period of seven months, a group of about 15 volunteer researchers gathered information and photographs of the buildings. Their findings were turned over in May to project consultant Jan Olive Full of Iowa City, who is incorporating it into the formal nomination and hopes National Register status will be granted by the U.S. Department of Interior by the end of 2017.

In the coming weeks, DHPC member Judy van der Linden will coordinate a series of Decorah Newspaper articles on particular buildings written by volunteer researchers. The article below was written by van der Linden, who researched 402-404 W. Water Street.

The two storefronts at 402 and 404 West Water Street were once a single building that housed a laundry business for over 70 years.

Today, "Paradise Sun" and "Beyond the Bar Bakery" occupy the two storefronts. But as early as 1892, the *Decorah Republican* carried ads for one business, "Decorah Steam Laundry," at this location, with L. J. Miller as proprietor. At that time, many residents relied on laundry services to clean and press linens and clothing, since home washing machines were rare.

The original building was probably constructed around 1890, based on a photograph believed taken between 1885 and 1890 of that block of Water Street. Artist Carl Homsstad's mural on the west wall of the NE Iowa Montessori School, 418 W. Water St., was painted from that photograph, and shows a building signed "Laundry" at the location of this lot.

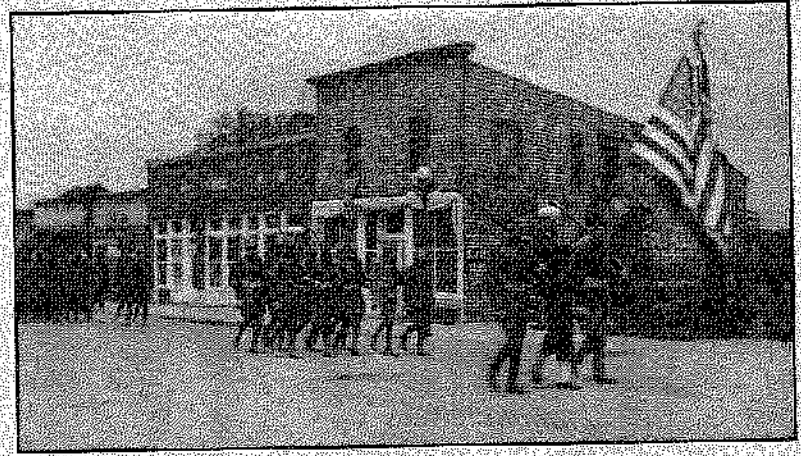
The building was constructed of brick, with a limestone basement, and originally was smaller, occupying just the east two thirds of the larger-than-average lot. A wagon shed sat for many years on the west side of the lot. Newspaper ads for the business often mentioned that

a wagon would pick up and return cleaned laundry for the convenience of customers.

In 1914, Ole Johan (O.J.) Ness purchased the lot and building from owner-operator F. N. May. At that time, Ness also owned the building east of the laundry, what today

the Tapestry Brick storefront.

The remodeled façade, which is still in place today, is predominantly lava rock with some red, yellow and white signage. The lava rock itself is said to have been so lightweight that it could be cut to size or shaped with an axe or saw.



A corner shot of the 1921 building. (Photo courtesy of Richard Bernatz)

is "Java John's," and a year later would purchase a share of the lot to the west, where the "Decorah Hatchery" now sits. Eventually he would own it as well.

The *Decorah Republican* noted on March 9, 1916, that Ness was putting a new façade on the laundry. It was multicolored brick — so-called "Tapestry Brick" — and featured the name "Ness" in a masonry rectangle near the center top. Contractor A. R. Coffeen also repaired and enlarged the building at this time, probably to the size it is today. Photos taken of a parade on Decoration Day, May 30, 1921, show the finished laundry building's brick façade in the background. (Ness later would also replace the façade at 406 W. Water St., his grocery warehouse at the time and now the "Decorah Hatchery," with matching Tapestry Brick.)

A succession of operators continued the laundry business. Ness sold the property and business to W. C. Slayback in 1937, and then it changed hands again in 1954, with M. V. and Dorothy Spalding as new owners. The Spaldings made a number of changes in the early 1960's, including adding an attached building to the north (which now houses Jeff Burke Auto Repair). They also decided to replace

Willis and Norma Wangsness purchased the property from the Spaldings in 1970 and remodeled the inside of it for their photography business. The back of the west portion of the building had 12-foot ceilings, and had been used by the laundry as cold storage for furs. The Wangsnesses converted that into their camera room — where posed photos were taken with a backdrop — and set up a darkroom behind it. Their store also included reception and office areas, dressing rooms and workrooms. Later the front west portion of the building was rented out to Clark Mikkelsen for his insurance business.

In 1979, the Wangsnesses retired and began renting out the remaining building spaces, eventually completely dividing the main building into the two separate businesses existing today. Norma Wangsness still owns the property.

Remnants of the old steam laundry business include the large chimney stacks visible above the roofline and part of the brick base for an iron chimney in the basement. The building's back brick wall can be seen from the section of West Day Spring Lane that runs behind the block.