



This photo is from Howard Bernatz and is dated May 30, 1921. It is one of several photos of the Decoration Day parade on Water Street on that day. The Java John's building is in the background as the parade passes the corner of W. Water and River streets.



Winneshiek County Historical Society
Decorah, Iowa

This photo taken around 1900 shows a person believed to be Charles Tramm standing outside of 400 W. Water St. when he operated a furniture business there. The photo belongs to the Winneshiek County Historical Society.

Decorah's historic downtown

400 W. Water St. – Java John's Coffee House

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. It was 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.

DHPC member Judy van der Linden has coordinated a series of Decorah Newspaper articles on particular buildings written by volunteer researchers. This article was written by van der Linden, who did research on 400 W. Water St.

The building that houses Java John's Coffee House, 400 W. Water St., may be one of the oldest frame structures still standing in downtown Decorah.

Photographic evidence suggests it was built between 1885 and 1893, on a lot quite close at that time to the Upper Iowa River channel. Most frame buildings from that era were either destroyed by fire or replaced by ones constructed of brick or other less flammable materials.

The walls of this 2-story building are frame on the north, south and east sides, but brick on the west side. It has a deep limestone foundation that encloses two basements, one at ground level and one about seven feet below ground level.

Charles F. Tramm purchased the lot and building in 1893. He operated a furniture store there, and also may have had a mortuary business.

Newspaperman Bill Hart, in a 1979 *Decorah Journal* article, said

a mortuary was located in the building in the early years, and that coffins and even bodies awaiting burial were stored in the lower basement.

In 1909, Charles Tramm's widow sold the property to Ole Johan (O. J.) Ness, who moved his grocery business into the building and lived with his family in the upstairs apartment. Ness, a native of Norway, was a well-known Decorah businessman and property owner, and this corner of River and West Water streets was known for years as the Ness corner.

Ness's daughter Louise began working in the store as a teenager, and in later years told a newspaper reporter how the grocery business had changed since then: "Saturday nights sometimes we wouldn't get home until 1 a.m., since the farmers would wait to do their trading until after the second show."

Prices, of course, were also much different. A Ness Store advertisement from the Jan. 25, 1933, *Decorah Journal* offered bananas at 5 cents per pound, potatoes at 88 cents for a 100-pound bag, and Blue Ribbon Flour at 79 cents for a 49-pound bag.

Eventually, Louise and her husband Don Flickinger took over operation of the business from O.J. and his partners, and in 1980, Louise celebrated 50 years of working in the family store. The Flickingers continued the grocery in that building, which they called "The Family Store," until 1993.

After Don's death, the Flickinger's son Jan, operated the business with his cousin, naming it once again "The Ness Store," from 1994-1995. Later, an insurance agency and eventually Java John's located in the building.

Overall, the building still looks remarkably like it did when first constructed some 125 years ago. There have been two additions over the years to the structure — both extending it farther to the back — as

well as other minor changes.

The early storefront roof edge, with its wide molding and small roof brackets in pairs, was modified and modernized sometime after 1949. An outside staircase to the second-floor apartment was enclosed, and main floor windows and doors replaced or relocated.

The main building's basement windows at street level were covered over on the outside by a circa-1970s project that effectively raised the level of Water Street. And finally, the original wood siding was covered or replaced by more modern siding. This researcher would appreciate any more precise information about when these various changes occurred.

Christmas tree pickup Saturday

Decorah Boy Scout Troop No. 66 will perform their annual Christmas tree pickup Saturday, Jan. 7.

Trees should be clear of all decorations and lights. Place your trees by the curb by 8:30 a.m. Jan. 7. Trees will be delivered to the city garage to be recycled.

Call 563-379-1093 with questions.

Coming Up

DECORAH COUNCIL

The Decorah City Council meets 5:45 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 3, in Council chambers at Decorah City Hall.

WMC BOARD

The Winnesbiek Medical Center Board of Trustees meets Wednesday, Jan. 4 at 5 p.m. in WMC conference room B-3.