

A History of the Crystal View Café

By Loren Weiss

The Crystal View Cafe has become a staple of CSA life in the twenty-first century. It's a place for families to meet for lunch, for kids to grab ice cream after an intense tennis match, and for the nostalgic to stare out at the view from its vantage point just above Crystal Lake. However, did you know that behind the cafe's comforting, familiar exterior lies almost a century of history - all starting with a gas station.



The Crystal View in 2021 - takeout only this year! A colorful view reminiscent of the past.

William Olsen Sr. began the process that would eventually lead to the construction of the Crystal View when he built a gas station on the property in the early 1930's, complete with a car wash. Alongside it, Bob Niemann and Joe Upton were responsible for the creation of Bob and Joe's Pop Stand - a hot dog stand that sold various snacks like candy and soda. This is said to be the start of the idea of the Crystal View: a place right around the corner from the Assembly that could provide refreshments on a hot summer's day.



The gas station in the 30s before any upgrades.



The station after a significant remodel.

The gas station closed during World War II, but was reopened by the original owner's son, William Olsen Jr., in 1947. A couple of years later in 1949, a marina was added to the property alongside a small building called the Polka-dot. Similar to Bob and Joe's Pop Stand, the Polka-

dot served ice cream and soda, but the building was surrounded by tables with brightly-colored umbrellas that inspired the name.



Bill Olsen Jr.



A portrait of William Olsen Sr.



The colorful umbrellas that gave the Polka-dot its name.

After less than ten years, the Polka-dot was removed, and the Crystal View was built in its place. The land was purchased by the Assembly for \$52,000 in 1961, and it included the Crystal View, a gasoline station, and the small marina on the water. Though the idea of a “drive-in” at the Crystal View was proposed, it was voted down in 1970.



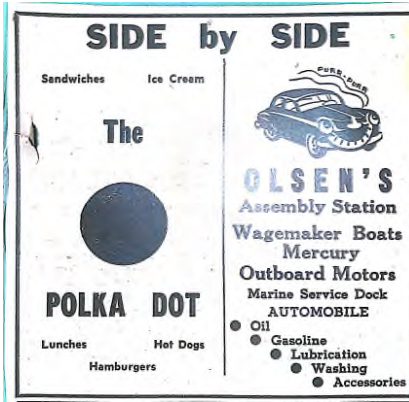
A picture of the marina (1955).



By 1972, the gas station’s profits had almost halved, causing it to close after being deemed unprofitable. Fueling at the marina dock had stopped before that due to a movement to reduce Crystal Lake pollution, leaving the Crystal View the only actively functioning part of the property. Though the facilities remained for a few years, trustees agreed to the destruction of the gas station and the marina in 1977, and the plot of land’s main purpose became focused on the cafe.



A color photo of the gas station.



A flyer advertising the Olsens' wares.

The acquisition of the Crystal View by the Assembly posed the question of who within the Assembly would be in charge of running the restaurant - so far, management had changed frequently over the years, with each new “owner” bringing a new spin to the restaurant we know and love. In the early 70’s, Chuck May and Chris Albright ran things in a more traditional restaurant fashion, serving a full three meals throughout the day. “I had a deal with Chuck May for a while where I was giving him tennis lessons and he would give me free breakfast at the Crystal View,” says Ken Cox, the current Managing Director of the CSA. “I really enjoyed those free meals!”

Since then, the Crystal View has gone through several different managers, including Joanne Frary, Laura and Harry Clark (who later bought the Cherry Bowl Drive-In), Jim Barnes, Matt Nahnsen (one of the owners of The Roadhouse in Benzonia), Maggie and Torrie Bingham, and Pete and Amy Taylor. Currently, Susan and Fritz Kraft manage the restaurant, which is open from 10-5 on weekdays and 12-5 on weekends. Call this number to place an order – (231) 399-0002.



Cindy Cox’s bike in front of the cafe (2009).



Susan and Fritz Kraft (2020).

Despite being around for so long, the Crystal View has been fortunate enough to avoid disaster up until recently. Late at night on October 27th, 2016, a driver speeding down M22 missed the curve in the road and ended up crashing into the back wall of the building. Luckily, no one was harmed, though the driver ran from the vehicle before law enforcement arrived. This crash resulted in the destruction of multiple facilities inside of the restaurant as well as the new mural, but since the crash occurred off-season, repairs were able to be done before the next summer came around.



A picture taken by Lou Cename after the accident.



The lost mural.



The repaired wall, done with concrete.

The Crystal View has been providing good food in a beautiful location since before it even had its current name, and the plot of land it sits on has been a source of memories for generations upon generations. Next time you go for a smoothie or a sandwich, remember the history behind the building - and let yourself wonder where the future might take CSA's favorite café!

*Photos taken from CSA's Facebook page, the CSA archives, and the CSA 411 Facebook group.