

NEW BERLIN ALMANACK

NEW BERLIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY is dedicated to the 4 Rs:
Rescuing, Restoring, Recording and Recreating authentic New Berlin history

Your society president, a relative newcomer to this city, heard rumors that a pickle factory had been located here. A friend surprised me by pointing out exactly where it was, even though as it turns out, the family had moved to New Berlin 10 years after the pickle plant ceased to be a pickle plant. For his third contribution to the Almanack, we are indebted to Chris Barney for researching the history of New Berlin's first 20th century "factory". Not only does the pickle plant building still stand (although its status is diminished), the infamous lagoon, now part of Gatewood city park, has shed its putrid past.

WHEN NEW BERLIN WAS 'IN A PICKLE'

by Christopher N. Barney

"\$100,000 Pickle Plant Being Built Near Here", shouted the headline from the April 25, 1945 Waukesha *Freeman*. The new plant, being built by the J.G. Van Holten Company, was described as 'modernistic', and was designed by well-known Milwaukee architect John Topzant. There seemed to be no end to the superlatives regarding the new plant, citing the location of Sunny Slope Road in the town of New Berlin as being "close to raw materials, grains for making vinegar and cucumbers for making pickles."

The two buildings going up were to be a pickle factory and warehouse, with concrete block construction, large windows and a boiler room with a 40-foot chimney. Construction was being done by the S.M. Byrne Construction Company, 3100 W. Burleigh St., Milwaukee. Other units planned for later construction included a two-story office building, a barrel shed, three more warehouses, manufacturing buildings and numerous large pickle tanks. A railroad spur was also to be constructed, connecting the plant with the TM "Rapid Transit" electric railroad line. Landscaping was also planned by Milwaukee landscape architect Walter C. Holzbog, with particular attention given to creation of a 200x300 foot park in front of the office building.

The project, which at the time was the only plant in New Berlin, was given a high priority by the government because much of the factory's

output was to go to the armed forces. At the time, pickles were thought to be an important diet factor in the prevention of scurvy and other diseases.

Van Holten was interested in recruiting local farmers and people with victory gardens interested in growing cucumbers, and promised to pay attractive prices for them. Initially, Van Holten planned to increase operations in Waukesha County until eventually its entire operation was located at Sunny Slope.

Van Holten was founded in Milwaukee in 1898 by J.G. (Jerry Gerrit) Van Holten, and was initially a vinegar distributor. J.G. had initially been a salesman for the Red Star Yeast Company but yearned to have his own business. Eventually J.G. expanded into sauerkraut and pickles. He started out selling his products in walk-behind street carts, but eventually built a fleet of delivery trucks.

In 1939, Van Holten developed its "Pickle in a Pouch", selling single pickles soaked in brine in a sealed pouch. It became such a hit that it became a permanent part of the Van Holten product lineup, and is still sold today.

A rare and fascinating photo was recently sent to me by David Totten of the New Berlin Historical Society. It is a photo, looking west, of TM/Speedrail car 1142 eastbound at the Sunny Slope crossing. 1142 is running backwards on the eastbound track. The fascinating part about this photo is the pickle plant is clearly visible on the