



Small Towne Short Stories
Watson's Soda Fountain & Café: Part I
By Alma Fausto

It seems no Orange County history lesson can begin without a chat with Phil Brigandi.

During my research into Watson's Soda Fountain & Café (or Watson's Drugs & Soda Fountain, or Watson's Drug Store or just Watson's to most people), the veteran historian and true Orange County man started off our conversation with a gem that would wrap my many questions into one concise thought:

Which Watson's depends on *when*.

I'd gone through old newspaper clips, anniversary party invitations, photos and even old menus from Watson's. Every version of the place had its own character, each its own story.

Brigandi and I sat inside the newly renovated Watson's and talked about the iterations of the store and diner that came before it.

The Watson's born in 1899 was much different than the establishment now sitting on the corner of Chapman Avenue and Orange Street. When people think of the landmark joint now they think of a place to grab a bite of diner fare. But long before it was a retro restaurant, Watson's was a soda fountain. Before that it was a drug store with a series of changes in between.

And those changes can all be matched with the innovative ideas of those at Watson's helm at the time. My research gave me insight into not only the evolution of the Old Towne staple, but into the lives of the tireless workers behind the drug counter, soda fountain, gift shop and eatery.

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It all started with a drug store.

A 29-year-old Kellar Watson opened up the small storefront in a wooden building in August 1899—Watson's Drug Store. It replaced the old (and only) drug store—Orange Drug Store—on South Glassell Street and took the prime spot on the main thoroughfare.

The practice of pharmacy and remedies still had many strides to make back then. It would take another 30 years after Watson's opened for penicillin to be discovered.

Much of Watson's stock would have been herbal pharmaceuticals. In those days opium and heroin were common over-the-counter medicines.

Kellar was from Louisville, Kentucky and had worked as a druggist in Arizona before settling in Orange County.

When Kellar became a proprietor, the City of Orange had been incorporated for less than 10 years, having officially established itself in 1888; Orange County was incorporated one year later. The region's economic growth, fueled by impresarios like Kellar and coupled with local pride, pushed it to break away from Los Angeles.

As once successful crops like grapes disappeared—they were severely affected by blight—citrus emerged dominant. Growers also planted beets, lima beans and celery, but citrus was the most popular.

By the 1930s Orange County was producing one sixth of the country's Valencia oranges supply.

In the southern part of the county, cattle grazed the vast ranches while dairy farms were established in the northern region.

Elsewhere, the oil industry was growing. Oil fields soon developed in La Habra, Olinda, Brea Canyon and later Placentia and Huntington Beach.

In the developing years of Orange's center Plaza, Kellar was also building his own thriving enterprise. He began work with the Odd Fellows to construct Watson's new home as well as the fellowship's lodge space, where Kellar was also a member.

He moved into the 118 East Chapman Avenue building—one of the first modern structures in Old Towne Orange—in May 1901, next to the busy post office.

* * *

December 19, 1903

"We're doing just fine, Mrs. Hadley. Thank you for asking," Kellar replied to one of his regular customers.

She'd gone into the drug store to talk to Kellar and ask about his new bride, Alice.

Mrs. Eugenia Hadley was a pleasant, older woman whose plumpness hid her age. Her graying brown hair was pulled back under her wide-brimmed black hat topped with folds of fabric that resembled roses.

"Well, that's good to hear," Eugenia said. "She's a good teacher and such a nice woman."

Kellar wrapped Eugenia's soap in parchment paper and notated her purchase.

She browsed Kellar's newest wares, which included soaps and cosmetics. She thought she'd tag along with her husband, who had brought them into town.

Under her grey winter coat, Eugenia wore a daffodil-yellow long sleeved shirt with a high collar and a long, brown skirt that nearly touched the floor.

Eugenia was the gossipy type. She gathered bits and pieces of information and developed stories almost the way a bird gathers materials to build its nest. But she wasn't malicious, just curious, as she always said to her husband. Kellar knew this and was kind, but not too chatty. Small talk here and there was enough, especially when dealing with Eugenia.

Otherwise Kellar was a genial man with fast candor and a sharp wit. He was young, 33, and had neatly trimmed dark hair combed up and to the right just a bit. He typically wore a three-piece suit and dark tie knotted at his white collar. Some days he'd take off the jacket, but on cold December days he kept it on.

Kellar had been situated in the middle of the store restocking shelves and cleaning equipment when Eugenia walked in. He hadn't been able to give the store a good once-over lately because of the influx of customers needing his attention.

It was taking him a couple of hours just to clean his mortar and pestle. He kept reminding himself that the pulverized substance in the mortar was uncooked rice. It was the best way to absorb the leftover bit of herbs and spices he'd spent the morning concocting.

Next to his mortar was an unopened bottle of Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup that Kellar had found in an old box. He wasn't sure he wanted to put it on his shelves. The stuff was good at hushing colicky babies, but he kept hearing about it being

dangerous. He just shined the label and set it down, figuring he'd make a decision about it later.

The store was always neat and tidy. Kellar spent a lot of time dusting shelves, cleaning the glass cases and wiping down tonic bottles. The entrance door had windows on either side and when people entered they could see science and medical books, and rows of different sized glass bottles lining the walls all the way up to the ceiling. The wood paneling and stained shelves gave the place character and warmth.

"Here you go," Kellar said, handing Eugenia the soap.

It was near Christmas and the store was busier than usual, with people coming into town to send or pick up cards and gifts from the post office next door.

More people entered the store during this season. Women delighted in the new selection of toiletries, children gawked at the soda fountain and the young men had eyes only for the pretty, female switchboard operators—the Hello Girls. That year Kellar had made space in the store's back room for Orange's first telephone system, which became the Sunset Telephone Company.

The Sunset Telephone Company was later absorbed by the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company—much later known as Pacific Bell.

The Hello Girls stayed busy, inserting pairs of phone plugs into the appropriate jacks as they managed dozens of calls every hour. They never said more than a few words per call, speaking into voice receivers on their bulky headsets that resembled miniature phonograph horns.

"Hello?" "Hello." "Hello!"

Eugenia turned to the Girls with a knowing glare before she noticed her husband outside looking for her.

A man who appeared to be a farmer limped into the store, but didn't say anything. He awkwardly meandered near the line at the drug counter, patiently waiting his turn. He wore faded blue overalls, a heavy grey coat, worker's boots caked in mud and a pained look on his face.

Winter was harsh on farmers. Crops aside, old work injuries would flare up in the cold. The quiet man looked to be in his 40s with a receding hairline; sunken cheeks and a narrow, creased face.

Kellar didn't recognize him, but nodded anyway. He wished Eugenia would leave.

"I'll be back for that bottle of liniment later this week when I pick up my package next door," she told Kellar. "My son's working in Indianapolis now, you know."

"Oh, that's right," Kellar said with feigned enthusiasm.

Eugenia's son George was a smart one. He always wanted to know about the bottles on Kellar's shelves and what maladies they could remedy.

Why are some bottles brown, some green and others clear? George would ask. He inquired about every concoction in Kellar's glass cases. The young man would walk into Watson's Drug Store and want to know what herb's aroma he was smelling. Kellar would answer his questions as he did with all visitors. But he knew why George wanted to know more about drugs than his usual customers, who were just interested in curing their gout. George wanted to be a druggist too, and was trying his hand as an apprentice at a drug store in the Midwest.

"You make sure to bring him in when he comes for a visit," Kellar said. "He's a good boy, that one."

"What about you and the Mrs.? Have you thought of when you'll have your own?" Eugenia asked.

"Someday," Kellar said with a soft smile and nod, and moved to help his next customer.

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Kellar Watson Sr. (left) and John Harms inside Watson's Drug Store, 118 East Chapman Avenue, Orange, California, ca. 1910. View is toward the back of the store. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.