

I think I remember....The Argos Cigar Store

The Argos Cigar Store aka "Chico's Pool Hall" was located on the north side of the 100 block of east Walnut street. I think the building has since been torn down. The business was owned and operated by Jim (Chico) Martinez. Chico would set out front of the business in his car, listen to a ball game and would open for business when it was obvious that he had some patrons. The family lived at the NW corner of north Michigan and west Marshall streets. The store sold a variety of tobacco products including cigarettes, cigars and other supporting tobacco products. Soft drinks, candy bars, gum, etc were also available for sale. Occasionally, usually on a holiday weekend when most other food outlets were closed, homemade sandwiches were also available but usually consumed by the card players.

The above items were available for sale but the primary purpose of the business seemed to be two fold. First, there were two large pool tables available for pool or "billiards". The cost to play was a "nickel a stick (cue stick). At times, and I don't remember why, it was a dime a stick. Along the east wall was an elevated bench that would hold ten or more spectators or those folks waiting in line to play the next game of pool. Often, you had to wait for the opportunity to play. Most players, depending on how busy it was, would limit themselves to a couple of games so all could play.

Second, on most evenings, in the front corner of the store, was an active card game at a large table. There was a full wall hiding the table from the outside sidewalk and a shorter wall hiding the table as you walked into the business. Across the back was a railing that kept any spectator at a minimum distance from the card players. The table was usually surrounded by local men both from within the town, and many farmers as well. Never saw any woman playing cards there. Typically, there was a significant gap in age between the group playing cards (older) and those utilizing the rest of the facility. You rarely heard any nasty comments or language from the card game. Many times a baseball game was playing on a radio and card playing discussion was at a minimum.

The Pool Hall seemed to catch a bad rapt when being discussed among those who did not frequent the business. In hindsight, truth was that the availability of the Pool Hall to younger boys probably saved many of them from getting into trouble elsewhere because there was "nothing to do". Granted more time could have been spent on school work but with the lack of parental guidance in a lot of cases, it was a good secondary outlet. Chico allowed marginal foul language to a point as long as it was kept mostly under your breath. However, he would not tolerate any horseplay, fighting or boisterous activity unless it was minor and obviously part of having a good time. You were never allowed to watch or get close to the card game until you were adult and old enough to play. Breaking the rules first brought you a stream of nasty warnings from Chico. If ignored, you were banned from the establishment for a period of time, or forever. Guys just knew where the line was drawn and did not cross it. For many, it was a safe, warm place especially in the winter where you were welcome. You could get cheap entertainment, a bite to eat and drink, go to the bathroom (hard to find one at night in Argos) and have some fun without much chance at all of getting in trouble.