

**1937 Aerial
photo shows
different
Baraboo
Tales of Earlier
Days
By Bob Dewel**

The Historical Society has many maps and photos, but they had never seen an aerial photo lent to me recently by Keith Meicher. Taken on September 19, 1937, that date may have been selected for the photo because of the completion of the West Baraboo Highway 12 Bridge. This was the second in a series of highway bypasses of Baraboo to speed people north, still happening soon with a new bypass.

The new bridge is clearly shown near the center of the photo, which covers a mile or so in each direction. As a result, only the western 1/3 of the City of Baraboo is shown, with lots and lots of farm land. More on that later.

Eastern side of Town

As for the missing Eastern 1/4 of the city, a photo then would have shown mostly homes, plus the fairgrounds and a school. None of the businesses now lining 8th Street existed then, nor did the hospital and adjacent medical and dental facilities. That part of the city on either side of County T was entirely farmland, and there were no churches in the eastern 1/3 of the city.

The photo shows that only a small part of Baraboo occupied territory north of Eighth Street or Avenue. Between Birch and Elizabeth, 9th and 10th streets only extended about eight blocks. Eleventh Street only went 5, with 12th street consisting of a four block

street. The old wood frame hospital was near the northern city limits.

West Baraboo

Other than buildings facing Eighth Avenue or Lynn Avenue on the North, there were only scattered homes between Birch and Highway 12 in West Baraboo. There was no Draper Street nor the high school and residential area to which it leads.

West Baraboo was but a collection of streets four blocks by four blocks square. Connie Road was a country road, with only a couple of farm houses. No Boo-U of course, and nothing to the West of Highway 12.

Bright and clear however, was the brand new Highway 12 bridge, diverting the highway away from its former trip through Baraboo. Merchants had fought hard to keep highway 12 for the tourist travel it brought, and it could have proceeded North on County A. Again today, unknown powers are planning to bypass Baraboo to the West. Despite these political insults, the city continues to thrive.

City and Country aspects

Amazing, however is the view presented south of the railway overpass on Broadway. Other than a few homes on Lynn Avenue, there is nothing but farm land! Areas occupied now by Sysco, Teel, Flambeau, and all the businesses along South Blvd were "out in the country". The abandoned roundhouse area was a mess.

The same is true of areas now occupied by Menards, Walmart, and associated businesses on Commerce Avenue. The Warner Memorial Road, (Highway 123) was a lonely drive to Devils Lake, while today the city limits seem to be approaching the area.

That brings us to the western two thirds of Baraboo proper, with several changes. The original Courthouse seems lonely, standing alone, not dreaming of the addition and the large West Square building. Today's Civic Center was the fairly new high school then, with the red brick Junior High crowded on the same



The pictures are not taken from the exact same spot, but both are of the south side of the river. Half a century in time separates the photos.

The farm land between the railroad tracks and South Blvd. was filled over the years by industries, readily visible in the lower photo. Industries mean jobs. And up to 1000 persons must work in the buildings shown here.

Photo by Tom Michele



block. At least seven gas stations line Broadway, but the YMCA was already gone.

The golf course was but a dream, land useful for boys like Phil Wedekind for hunting. The old Cahoon mine railroad spur shows even though the tracks have been removed. An elongated athletic track shows at Mary Rountree, with no bleachers for football. The Oschner riverwalk of today was a gravel automobile road then, surely one-way but readily traversed

Scattered through the area are the old two story brick grade schools, one of which burned. The others have all been replaced by the responsible taxpayers of mid-century, as well as the aged jail and the equally inefficient City Hall. Only 22 years old, the Al. Ringling Theatre was already regarded as ground-breaking in the movie industry. It saves the taxpayer millions even today by replacing a civic auditorium.

Baraboo was not a thriving city in those Depression days. The Depression, the loss of the Ringling and Gollmar circuses in 1918, and of the railroad division point and roundhouse over that period of time, saw a decrease of population, from 6324 in 1910 to 5545 in 1930. Today we boast well over 11,500 not counting West Baraboo or the ubiquitous "developments" outside the city limits.

The Turnaround

The Depression had not faded significantly in 1937 in small town America, with the exception of excellent public works by the CCC and WPA. They were widely denounced as Socialism, but they provided a small income for otherwise unemployed, while at the same time producing civic improvements still serving today.

The advent of the Badger Ammo plant and its subsequent rapid demise was a wakeup call, and much credit for the new Baraboo goes to the visionary men of the Baraboo Economic Development Corporations. Thanks to the industries which they attracted, jobs

were created and with those jobs came new schoolhouses, the city hall, Boo-U, a new hospital, and so many other city amenities we now take for granted.

With prosperity, the now modern and lively city established the CWM, welcomed the International Crane Foundation, and spearheaded development of Boo U. Young and progressive city councils helped create a modern city from a small town, newly attractive to residents and newcomers alike.

One thing about it: aerial views today must be made from much higher-flying planes, if they want to include all of Baraboo. Thanks again to Keith Meicher for sharing the photo with us.