

# Recreation and Barateen, 1931-2012

## *Tales of Earlier Days*

**By Bob Dewel**

Although it was formed in 1931, little is known of the Receptions program in Baraboo from that date to 1951, as reported in the previous article. The lack of information was remedied in 1951, however, with a lengthy activity report in the News-Republic.

Those statistics are somewhat amazing for a program that was still largely self-sustaining. Attendance at all Baraboo recreational functions that year totaled 63,735, of which 50,571 had made use of the Community Center. Attendance at sporting events such as baseball and softball totaled 5565 persons (probably more) and playground participation totaled 5,355 individuals.

Some 1242 persons participated in youth baseball and volleyball, sports which were viewed by 973 persons, which seems a very low count. There are still more rather impressive statistics, with Junior Barateen drawing 2750 youth admissions, and Senior Barateen adding 6215 for the evening dances and activities. During the day, the Community Center listed 29,146 persons crossing the threshold for various senior activities.

### The Community Center, Location

175 adult groups met at the community center, as did 118 youth groups, and 83 "mixed" meetings, a term which remains unexplained. A surprise is that the center was also used for 21 wedding parties. These were probably dinners rather than the wedding itself, although the uses are not defined in the report.

And where was the Community Center? Ward, in his "Baraboo, History of the Commercial and Retail District", locates it as being in the upper level of a building no longer extant, located at 220 Third Avenue. Now part of the West Square parking lot, the large lower level was occupied by the Berkley Chevrolet Garage. There is no indication of an elevator for which must have been a long flight of stairs.

The Janesville Clothing Co had occupied the upper floor in 1916 following the Baraboo Business College, which was there in 1912. In 1942 the space was converted into a USO Club for Badger personnel, and consisted of a lounge, reading and writing rooms, and clubrooms. Other areas of the second floor included sewing machines, ironing boards and other facilities.

### Club Bara-Teen

The Youthful Club Barateen Club had been founded in 1942, meeting at the Knights of Pythias Hall, under the sponsorship of the Lions Club. With the downsizing of the Badger plant following WWII, Club Barateen moved to the community center location, and in 1947 it was already serving some 28,000 youth visits. Admission was only 5 cents. Also using the space



Barateen views, circa Mid-Century.

Photo: Baraboo Parks and Recreation Dept.



were some 17,000 adults. Some 500 group meetings were also held there in 1951. Directors included Nancy O'Meara, replacing Arthur Gilbert who returned to teaching in the High School.

A report by Erv Oman, another director, spoke not only of dancing but table games, stunts and a melodramatic acting group of youths. Attendance was as high as 350 a night for some Barateen events. Oman spoke of the Club as "the process of people learning to live together...to take their turn at bat and to accept the decision of the umpire...(they) find an outlet for their inner drives which are basic to all human beings."

#### Today's Recreation Programs in brief

In today's world, the interests of youth have changed. No longer is ballroom dancing a main staple of a club. In fact, Barateen no longer exists, being replaced in part by the very active Boys and Girls Club and by enhanced school functions. The Chevrolet Garage and its clubrooms and Community Center are gone, replaced by the much larger, grander and more accessible Civic Center, formerly the High School from 1927 to 1962.

Most city participation in recreation is actively managed now by the expanded Parks and Recreation Department. There also are many other venues in the city for club meetings besides the Civic Center. Parts of the interior of the latter have been handsomely remodeled and air-conditioned. The gymnasium has been restored and enhanced following significant donations including one from the will of the late Sandra Kuenzi.

As outlined in the previous article, Baraboo's recreation program had begun some 80 years ago. It started, as do many of the amenities of small cities, by an ad hoc committee of interested and determined citizens, who saw a community need and met it. A recent and modest example of ad hoc action is the new downtown playground on the SW corner of Oak and Fifth. Similar groups are the Friends of Devil's Lake and the Friends of the Zoo. I've surely failed to mention others.

Some of our readers may have a major city improvement idea? With others, form an ad hoc committee, as did our predecessors, and see if it grows. Citizen groups brought us the railroad, Circus World, the University Center, the Al Ringling Theatre Friends, and the many other features which make Baraboo an outstanding city!

Similar groups today are already working for expanded facilities such as a University housing addition and a major library expansion. It is a great way to get things done in a small city!