

A Faded copy of one of my first articles, in 1997.

See my 2012 comment which follows this.

THE FUTURE BENEFACTORS OF BARABOO

Are they among us now?

By Dr. Bob Dewel

12-4-1997

*Figured to do
2012*

This is the last of a series of articles about the past benefactors of Baraboo, with a summary and comments.

In the past few months several articles have appeared in the Baraboo Sun regarding benefactors to the city, ranging from early times to relatively recently.

It is obvious that the articles have not covered each and every major benefactor, nor could they, for some benefactors are anonymous and some gifts are difficult to categorize.

The Benefactors articles

A review of the benefactors might be useful to a discussion of bequests and other gifts. Here are the matters which were covered, in approximate order of publication:

1. The Warner Memorial Road by W.W. Warner of Madison, whose 1916 bequest was matched 5 years later by the city, county, and state, providing an all weather route from the city limits direct to the Chateau at Devil's Lake.

2. Prescott Brigham, whose donation of the courthouse square and adjacent property to the empty treasury of the infant county assured Baraboo its position as county seat.

3. The Al. Ringling Theatre, provided by Al. to a city which lacked an auditorium for 10 years despite a local inducement gift by the "city fathers" of 25% of the cost of an opera house to anyone who would build one!

4. Oschner Park, a donation from Dr. Albert Oschner and other family members, with some money from city funds also.

5. Alma Waite, whose fine gift to the city provides many amenities for the citizens and, oddly, the purchase of a fire truck, normally paid for from tax receipts.

6. John and Murel Lange, whose 9 million dollars in gifts went to the University center, the Nature Conservancy, and

several city institutions.

7. Two articles about the Northwestern Railroad, essential to the city's future. Baraboo's financial gamble of \$70,000 of 1880 dollars made possible not only industrial growth, but the circuses, the Circus museum, The Al. Ringling Theatre, and the Mid-Continent Railway Museum.

8. An article about the Ringling Theatre and its cultural sisters, the library and the University Center. Unlike the others, the theatre has paid taxes for 75 years but now needs help.

9. Two articles on the importance of the Circus World Museum (CWM), and of John Kelly and Chappie Fox and others who made it a place of international significance.

Despite an open invitation in one article, the only suggestion we have received for a donor article was the idea that the DNR is a donor to the city, having contributed to the hockey rink and a shelter at Oschner Park! Others might feel, however, that its edict for all practical purposes destroys the historic dam and the lake near the CWM, so the idea was not explored. Another significant donor to city institutions is expected to be announced soon, and it is hoped Baraboo citizens will continue to be as generous as their predecessors were.

Ben Franklin Started It

It may have been Ben Franklin who started it all 250 years ago, for in Philadelphia, the largest city in the colonies, he persevered in starting the first hospital, the first library, the first college (now U of Pa.), and even the first fire department! In his Will he gave a modest sum to that city and to Boston, with some of the interest to be reinvested, and some to be used for education. Each fund is now worth millions to those cities, demonstrating the power of compound investing.

Alexis DeToqueville

In the 1800's, a perceptive French traveler named DeToqueville commented as follows: "These Americans are peculiar people. If in a local community a need is not being met, a

committee suddenly comes into existence. The committee thereupon begins to operate on behalf of the need, and a community function is established".

One only has to consider the Industrial Expansion Corporation, the CDA, BEDC, BID, Downtown Baraboo, the land donors for the high school, many parks, and fund drives for the hospital, (including the past and on-going fund drives), to recognize what DeToqueville foresaw in those early days.

Consider also the recent hockey rink, the downtown street lights, and the Baraboo Scholarship Corporation to know that volunteerism is alive and well in Baraboo, even before Colin Powell took over national leadership of volunteerism. The local churches have also provided significant services.

In a more commercial way, local citizens banded together to provide such amenities as Thunderbird Lanes, the Merrimacs camping, and for a time the Devi Bara supper club.

The city's Involvement

One thing DeToqueville failed to note may be the reluctance of Americans to have our government finance projects normally assumed elsewhere by a governing body. No European city, for example, would fail to at least partially fund a public building of such beauty and history as the Al. Ringling.

The city generously funds the library (now well endowed), the university center (now expanding), the airport, the outdoor pool, and similar public benefits. Although sometimes reluctant, the city council usually comes through.

Although this series of articles has confined itself to projects within the city limits, it should be noted that some of our significant community leaders live outside those city limits. Since they do not pay city taxes, the efforts of these community leaders to "pay their dues" are especially recognized and appreciated.

Also to be noted is the long time generosity of the late Dayl Sorg and his family to our very close neighbor, West Baraboo. Presumably the two entities, so closely entwined, will surely agree to a successful marriage in the future.

About Being a Benefactor

Back at the turn of the century, the unsavory "robber barons" of unbridled capitalism "got religion", the result of which was the formation of huge foundations providing funds for the public good. The Carnegie Foundation's gift in 1912 to build our library is an example of that event.

Even while these articles were being written, Ted Turner dramatically served notice that he was reviving that tradition of public giving, and is challenging others to "cough up" also for the public good.

Baraboo Donors

Only rarely does Baraboo have citizens of such comfortable circumstances, such as John and Murel Lange, to make really large donations to local institutions. Surely, though, there are many Wills locked up in the files of Baraboo attorneys which will eventually reveal significant bequests to the city. Not to be overlooked also are the gifts which are lesser in monetary value, but are given from the heart, as told in the Biblical story of the widows mite.

But there are others who, like Alma Waite, Prescottt Brigham, Al. Ringling, and the Langes, who decide that "enough is enough" when it comes to money for themselves or their descendants. They distribute part of their fortunes while they are still living, and able to see their donations go to work for the citizens.

One can make his donation in a will, or can make a contribution while living, through an accountant or banker or attorney. The donation can be public or anonymous. If to a tax-free organization, the gift may be deductible to up to 50% of your adjusted gross income, saving taxes on both the federal and state tax returns.

This is the final article on the benefactors of Baraboo. We trust that a generation from now, a new series will report on the generous gifts and donations which are yet to be announced and reported in the Baraboo media. For some, like the theatre, the gifts cannot come too soon.

12-4-1997

Surely the spirit of Ben Franklin and DeToqueville, so important in earlier days, will continue to be alive and well in Baraboo!

