

**These Men Built  
Baraboo, Brick by Brick  
Tales of Earlier Days  
By Bob Dewel**

Do any of these men's names mean anything to you? Thomas Thompson? A.J. Carow? Gorge Holah? A.J. Capener—well there's a Baraboo name anyway! These men were responsible for constructing most of our present downtown buildings, sometimes alone and sometimes in collaboration. Now they are forgotten.

Much of the present-day Downtown Baraboo architecture dates back to the 1880's and 1890's. The buildings rose rapidly in the thriving community following the disastrous fires mentioned in earlier articles. As a result, within a small time period and a limited number of contractors, Baraboo hosted a largely cohesive downtown in architectural terms.

The net effect is suggestive of the drawings of Norman Rockwell and his New England villages. The style is different, but the cohesiveness is there in both cases. As a result, Downtown Baraboo presents a pleasant and distinctive series of facades to visitors, as well as to home-towners. Much of the square is particularly unique in this manner.

#### The Early Builders

All four men were born British, emigrating early, though not directly, to Baraboo. The oldest, and the earliest to arrive, was Holah, in the early 1850's. He was the architect for the 1855 brick courthouse which burned in 1905, as did the high school he designed and built in 1870.

His 1905 obituary too generously credits Holah with all but one of the downtown brick business houses. This is not far from the truth, for the Baraboo Intensive Survey, from which some of this material is taken, credits him with 34 commercial buildings, largely on Third Avenue, including the 1867 Italianate style Sauk County Bank, predecessor to the Baraboo National Bank.

Holah also built an unnamed school, plus some residences. Exact locations may be obtained by consulting the Intensive Survey, this being true of A.J. Carow, and Thomas Thomson also. Arriving from Canada, Carow is best known for construction of the Warren Opera House, now part of the Corner Drug Store, and a significant number of other commercial locations. He moved to Beloit after 30 years in Baraboo.

Born in London in 1829, George Capener arrived in little Baraboo Rapids shortly after 1850. Many of the early frame churches were his design and workmanship. He paired together with Holah at times in construction of commercial buildings, particularly on Third Street. The telephone book lists several Capeners today, presumably descendants.

#### Larger Buildings

Larger churches and public buildings were sometimes designed by out of town architects and sometimes bridges also, Both St. Johns Lutheran (the earlier red brick structure), and Trinity Episcopal were designed by out of town firms. The Episcopal Tower now sports effective night lighting

A Henry Foller is said to have designed St. Joseph Church, but this may refer to an earlier frame structure. Conover and Porter of Madison built the old YMCA, Third and Ash, as well as



Much of the downtown was rebuilt after the 1870 fires. Facades, though all different, held to the same facade theme of the period. This gives Downtown Baraboo an unique appearance comparable to the Norman Rockwell style of 19th Century construction



the large red brick city hall, the old jail, and the Second Ward school. All have since been replaced.

Frank Lloyd Wright and Baraboo's Louis Claude worked with that firm in the early days. Wright has had almost no influence on Downtown Baraboo, but Claude distinguished himself with the design of a high school now the Civic Center. Similar is design is the new History Center building by Claude, formerly offices of the Island Woolen Mill.

Old reports credit Gollmar and Co. with the First Ward Schoolhouse in 1886 and the Ewing block at 107 Fourth next east of the Cornerstone Gallery structure. The Intensive report lists some 25 builders, some with only one building as their legacy, many of them being later arrivals on the scene.

#### Rapp and Rapp

Most outstanding, of course, are Rapp and Rapp of Chicago and their grand European style palatial Al. Ringling Theatre. Partly because of the success there, they went on to design some 400 theatres throughout the country, each with an ornate palatial theme,

Although they did not do the actual construction of the Ringling, the firm of Balaban and Katz worked with the Rapps on many of those theatres, and an early newspaper reports the visit of Mr. Katz to Baraboo to inspect the ornate palatial work of the Rapps in the Ringling. Balaban and Katz later became Paramount Theatres.

A later builder to be mentioned is Carl Isenberg, who built many of the finest homes in the city, including the Jacob Van Orden home, which now houses the Sauk County Historical Society. Charlie Ringling admired Carl's work so well that he

commissioned him to spend two years in Florida in the 1920's constructing his lavish and tasteful marble home. Carl took Baraboo workmen with him.

Business was good at the time of the great fires of the 1870's and 80's; good for the builders but also good for the merchants who contracted the structures. Baraboo then was well into the height of its railroad boom, soon to be followed by the huge circus industry. It must have been a great time for the sidewalk superintendents!

It was good for the city and good for us today. We now present a downtown unique in its fairly consistent display of period structures. Business changes have made most of the lower stories modern, sometimes in the Art Deco mode, but in most cases the upper façade has not undergone significant change.

This consistency of upper floor design featured individual touches in many cases. These little variations help make the downtown so attractive. It carried through to the structures on lower Ash and Walnut.

It all goes back to the fires, which many persons even at that time said were a good thing, weeding out a riff-raff of pioneer frame structures. The Downtown of Baraboo today arose from the ashes of those fires.

