

1879 Photo Reveals Early Industries

Tales of Earlier Days
By Bob Dewel

A picture is said to be worth thousand words, so I'll only use 535 on this picture of the riverfront in Baraboo in 1879. I've used the picture before, including in my books, but never had a date or an accurate description of what we were seeing.

In the picture above, you are looking east, with what became known as the McArthur or Oak Street Dam in the foreground.

This old photo and description in the Southard scrapbooks caught my eye recently. The story was published in 1919, but referred to the picture as having been taken 40 years before, which would be 1879. Shot by Matthew Mould, it is one of the earliest panoramic views of Baraboo that we have.

Actually what you are seeing included Water Street in the foreground, though the street seems to be barely in existence at the time of the photo. The larger building on the left appears to be occupying the space now occupied by Towne and Associates, but at that time it was the early flouring mill operated by P.A. Bassett. That building is frequently shown in a close-up shot, and was quite imposing.

The bridge in the distance was a marvel of home-built ingenuity in those early days. It was replaced later by a covered bridge so the horses didn't spook out—what they did on this bridge we don't know. Two more bridges followed the covered bridge—not a very good longevity record for bridges!

Our unknown writer in 1919 recalls that the building across the river and by the dam was the Shark Foundry. It was still standing in 1919 though dilapidated.

Further downstream on the right was the leading factory. Though P.A. Bassett operated the foundry, the writer says that "in this worked Thomas W. English, M.H. Mould, and E.M. Hoag of the Stanley Company. Tom English operated a buzz saw."

"Eddie" carried away and packed the pieces, and Hank Mould piled the staves. Only with the word staves do we learn that they built barrels there. Mould and English were the President and Cashier of the First National Bank. Apparently in those days our bankers were hands on, physically operating the industries they financed!

The writer quoted English as recalling those as "happy days, when there was a lot of fun mixed in with the work, and responsibilities were few and not weighty".

One other note about the picture: The writer says that far in the background can be seen the faint outline of H.H. Potter's old hop shed. In the 1860's Sauk County had led the state in the production of hops, which for a few golden years made many farmers rich. A disasterous crop failure in 1869 plunged the area into a severe depression. Hops were used in the production of beer.

This then was the industrial center of little Baraboo in 1879. Wisconsin Power and Light is currently vacating the area on the upper right in the photo. The present Riverwalk will be extended along this riverbank. The river area is valued more now as place of beauty than it was in those days 130 years ago.

