

Baraboo to New York City---on Bicycles

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

You're 17, and just out of high school. You know you can do anything. You are a guy, Earl Wichern, and there is stirring in your blood, an overpowering need to do SOMETHING--- whatever it is you don't know. It's time to break the traces, get out on your own somehow, somewhere, whatever it may be.

There's no high school to look forward to now--- that is over. But, it is Depression time. No skipping out to Europe or some exotic place. It's all you can do to scrape up enough to go the Saturday night dance. Your wheels are when you can borrow the family car, and you don't even have a bike (but soon will). Somehow you often get town after chores to meet with your buddies, Bob Schult and Ken Harvey at the Bluebird Café

Everyone is talking about the great New York World's Fair. "How could we get there--- we don't own cars, and gas and oil would be prohibitive anyway. But wait, why can't we guys get bikes and ride to New York City and see the 1939 World's Fair! No expense there, just our leg muscles. Why not? Why not?"

Well, maybe it wasn't exactly like that, but this writer relates closely to those days, and older readers may relate to it. We know more details, because 55 years later Earl Wichern wrote in detail on not only the origin of the plan but its amazing fulfillment by the three Baraboo adventurers. They did indeed procure bikes and ride to New York City that summer, after careful study and planning!

With precious little money but all of the varied skills known to farm boys, and an amazing ability to harmonize on dozens of songs, they achieved their goal. Those skills would serve them well as they surmounted considerable unexpected odds, as recounted in detail by Wichern in his book, "Life in The Slow Track". Published in 2000, Earl has a few copies still available.

The book is easy reading, as he relates in detail the frequent turns of events as the boys progressed toward their goal. Wichern tells his story in a pleasing and forthright manner, interspersing religious and moral views into the latter parts of the story. He will be discussing the adventure at the Historical Society on Fourth Avenue on Thursday October 6 at 6 P.M.

The adventure might have faltered the first day on Sauk Hill south of Baraboo, as leg muscles complained. The boys had constructed heavy 2 x 6 trailers for two of the bikes, looking like miniature covered wagons. One bike was unhampered by a trailer and was used by taking turns, providing a little break from pulling the heavy trailers.



SCHULT WICKEN HARVEY

In a show of maturity, rules were drawn up, with a democratic decision making process, namely the majority rules. Having been made, any decision was final. Rare was there friction, though on two occasions moderate violence held forth, regretted by all the next day. Chores were divided, with Ken Harvey doing the cooking. Some parts are hilarious.

The early finances, consisting of \$27, were quickly exhausted, but the resourceful trio found several surprising and innovative ways of working and entertaining. The hilarious and surprising account of the trip will be explained by Earl Wichern when he speaks on October 6 at 6 P.M. There are remarkable experiences, and great friends were made along the way, all of which he will describe in detail. (Later: he did, and the book is a good read.)

As singers the boys had a fair repertoire. On many occasions they picked up a little needed cash by singing, whether it be a dance hall or, on one occasion, on a local radio station along the way. Maybe Earl will sing "The skunk he leads a lonely life" for us! I recommend you go, and get there early.

What: Earl Wichern speaks on the remarkable adventure on bikes to New York in 1949.

Where: Sauk Historical Society, 531 Fourth Avenue.

When: October 6 at 6 P.M.