

Ad Hoc Group spurs Recreation in 1931

Tales of Other Days

By Bob Dewel

It is only an old yellow newspaper clipping. Thankfully, someone has written "1931" on the top, or this article could not be written. (Moral: always date and identify a newspaper clipping. Historians and genealogists will thank you, even in decades to come.)

The 1931 clipping is significant, for its ramifications exist today to the benefit of Baraboo and its area residents. Titled "Baraboo Community Recreation Center", it records in some detail an ad hoc meeting of community leaders. A Sub-headline reads "Go on record in favor of Organization", followed by "Mass meeting at High School. Strengthens Plans for Recreational Center".

We have only rare and vague references or clippings over the 20 year which followed, and can trace only poorly the progress of those early efforts leading to the extensive recreational programs offered to area citizens by the City today. Also to be discussed is the Barateen Program, which is well remembered.

As so often happens in small cities, things get done by self-appointed committees, an American phenomenon noted in the early 1800's by the French historian and traveler Alexis De Tocqueville. Whereas city councils are often swayed by the slightest breeze of opposition, a determined gathering of partisans can popularize a comprehensive private or municipal service.

Indeed there are dozens of entities in Baraboo which came out of ad hoc committees, even including the Circus World itself, the Al. Ringling Theatre Friends, the ice skating rink, Thunderbird Lanes, and dozens of other amenities. Interested committees are formed, only later to be supported or encouraged by the governmental bodies. Indeed the location of the Northwestern Railroad in Baraboo in 1871 was the result of a concerned citizen committee.

So it was in 1931: an old, small, and exhausted YMCA on the NW corner of Ash and Second Street no longer met the recreational demands of the population. Headed by such familiar leaders of the time as E.F. Dithmar, S.R. Richardson, and W.O. Evenson, an ad hoc committee was created.

Named the Baraboo Recreation Development Committee, it proposed a plan "to appoint a recreational director and carry through the recreation program." The idea of a paid director must have been pretty daring in those Depression years!

Support quickly followed from civic groups including the YMCA, the Boy Scouts, and School Superintendent Harold Kingsford. He emphasized however, that the recreational program should equally include adults of all ages. Moreover, it was not a program restricted to promoting school athletics teams, but rather a city-wide program for everyone.

Mayor Prothero offered support but no city money at this point. Beyond that, for the next twenty years we have only a couple undated clippings which shed little light on recreational progress. Apparently the program set in motions by those men of vision had met with success, however, for a "ditto" copy tells of a play and talent contest in 1950. Another 1950 clipping tells of a visit from Waukesha promoters planning a similar program in that city. The program set in motion in 1931 was gaining attention.

This subject, a report on the growth of recreation programs in the city, is too big topic for one article. The next article will consider the growth of the programs, from Barateen to today's ample city recreation program and facilities under the direction of Tim O'Keefe for many years, and now manned by Mike Hardy and Rick Luther.



The commodious upper level of the Berkley Chevrolet garage served as the Community Center. It was in use much of every day by civic groups, and evenings by social groups and the Barateen operation. No longer extant, it was located on Third Avenue between Broadway and Birch, now a West Square Bldg. parking lot.