

# The Railroad Bridges at Merrimack

## *Tales of Earlier Days*

By Bob Dewel

In the mid-Nineteenth Century, a railroad was essential to the success of any frontier village, or even county. Sauk County promoters saw with concern that two seemingly insurmountable natural objects discouraged a railroad through the center of the county—the formidable Baraboo Bluffs, and the wide and marshy Wisconsin River at Merrimack.

Surveyors determined that the bluffs could be breached via the Devils Lake break, though there was a steep grade up from the Wisconsin River. As for the wide and marshy Wisconsin river area, promoters envied the high but very short bridge already existing over the narrow but deep river at Kilbourn (now W. Dells). Such was not their fortune, however in the broad sandy stretches of the lower Wisconsin, and a bridge had to be planned.

It would be a long bridge, a third of a mile, not impossible but expensive. Encouraged by the sale of bonds in the Baraboo and Reedsburg areas beyond, bonds known to be valueless, work began in 1871. Though a double-decker bridge with a lower road for wagons and coaches was considered, political and financial interests prevented this, preserving the existing but awkward ferry service of the day for stage and wagon crossings.

The internet devotes several articles to the Merrimack Bridge, and the material is largely photographic, with views ranging from the earliest days up to the present. It is great to find so many photos, but there is a shortage of information on its construction and maintenance unless one consults Char Olson's informative book "Merrimack". Now spelled without the terminal k, the village contains over 400 citizens, with city limits exceeding well into the countryside and a rich history of ferryboat service.

Additional information and history can be found in a fine book "The Wisconsin River", authored by Richard D. Durbin (Spring Free Press). Durbin reports that the entire rail line from Madison to Baraboo only took four months to build. This includes both the Merrimack Bridge and the Devils Lake blasting required to produce the rail bed on east edge of the lake.

Timbers arrived via the Wisconsin River from above Kilbourn (now Dells). Foundation stone came from Pack Waukee via the Fox, though facing stone was obtained from near the local Parfrey's Glen area. The rail bed was more than 40 feet over the water level, the river being without the Prairie du Sac dam at that time.

The Merrimack location, now spelled Merrimac, had already existed for some twenty five years as the northwest landing point for ferries crossing the Wisconsin River. Even without the present dam, the river was a crossing of consequence to the traveler or stage coach driver. He crossed on the ice in winter when it was cold enough, but not without occasional dunking's when the ice was thin.

We have already written of the historical arrival in Baraboo of the first engine later in 1871. The event drew a crowd of many thousand, some of whom had considerable money "invested" in the enterprise. After extension to Sparta and beyond, Baraboo became a valued terminal for receiving and shipping goods, as had been desired by the investors.

For decades Baraboo was not only a railroad town, but an important Division Point on the line. As many as ten passenger trains a day once passed through the city, most stopping. The little village of the 1850's rapidly grew in population and stature. The presence of suitable rail lines made it possible for the Gollmar and Ringling circus operations to center in Baraboo, as well as the Woolen and McArthur Mills.

In the Twentieth Century, though greatly diminished from its busy days around the turn of the century, the railroad remains a key factor in the industrial life of Baraboo and Reedsburg. Essential to its operations is the bridge at Merrimac, so solidly built in the previous century. Like most bridges, there have been extensive repairs and reconstruction.

Those wily investors in "worthless" bonds mentioned in the first article knew what they were doing. Theirs was a gift, a gift of progress. The Baraboo of today owes them recognition. We already have a rapidly growing museum, the "Lake States Railway Historical Association", existing in cramped quarters on Water Street. How about a railroad research center in Baraboo's once grand railroad station, itself a museum piece?

#### A County without a Railroad:

