

A Hospital in Ochsner Park? In 1911?

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

In 1911 Dr. Albert Ochsner, a former Sauk County resident, made a generous challenge to the citizens of Baraboo. He said he would donate a house and not just a few, but several acres of land to Baraboo on the condition that the citizens and/or city government would raise \$50,000 and construct a hospital on the site.

The land he proposed was historic, for the city's first settler, Abe Wood, not only built the first dam in the Baraboo River from this property. He also built the first human habitation in the area, a small cabin. Its outline could still be seen on the ground where it stood. We now know the acreage as Ochsner Park—more on its creation in a moment.

So who was Dr. Ochsner? The family was well known in the Honey Creek area, where the original Swiss Immigrants had raised a family of Old World style achievers. All had enjoyed success, several such as Albert having achieved medical skill and an element of fame—The Dr's Mayo came for Albert's funeral in 1925, for example. He was buried in the Freethinkers Cemetery in Honey Creek

As for the immigrant parents, in 1883 they had built a grand home, designed by Albert Clas, on a hilltop in what we know now of Ochsner Park, where it still stands today. Father Henry Ochsner had passed on in 1889, and his wife in 1891. Importantly, the property consisted of as many as 12 acres then. Ochsner and the remaining members of the family no longer wanted the property in 1911.

Moreover, Ochsner's hospital plan was not self-serving—he had no intention of leaving his lucrative medical practice for a precarious living in Wisconsin. The city had never had a hospital, though local doctors sometimes operated a one-doctor and one-nurse short term confinement. Ochsner's offer included some furnishing for the proposed hospital, with various medical instruments.

The need for a hospital was undeniable, but the \$50,000 contingency appeared insurmountable in those days. Rare was the worker or merchant able to come even close to \$1 a day in wages or earnings. In today's dollars, the requirement might have approached a million dollars or so.

A thousand dollar donation then would compare to \$30,000 or more today. Baraboo was thriving, but for unknown reasons only \$15,000 was pledged and the offer was withdrawn. After being held for well over a decade, the money was given to another hospital promotion, which became St. Mary's-Ringling hospital, precursor to St. Clare today.

In a few years, Dr. Ochsner offered to donate his share of the property to the city if it would purchase the other four shares from other family members. This time wiser city

fathers appropriated the funds, and the riverfront frontage became an outstanding city park.

Abe Wood's homestead and many additional acres now belong to all of us, with its riverwalk, zoo, modern picnic shelters and playground equipment. Even the band shell, donated in 1923 or 1924 by Herman Grotophorst, still gets occasional use. The red brick Ochsner family home, designed by Alfred Clas in 1883, still stands proudly on the park hill, monitoring its furry charges in the zoo. On a still night one surely can hear the rippling rapids as the river hurries by, just as Abe Wood heard them in 1840.

Progress in a small city is largely dependent on action by its citizens, usually initiated by interested persons rather than in a rarely progressive city council. Baraboo's history is replete with successful enhancements initiated by citizen groups.

Dr. Ochsner's hospital proposal was a rare failure. It would be eleven years before another group of interested citizens would cautiously bring a hospital to the city. Dr. Ochsner would surely be pleased with that facility today.

With its back up against the wolf and bear pens, the former Ochsner

Homestead still is occupied at the Ochsner Park and zoo



Dewel Photo