

Fifty Progressive Yeas in Baraboo

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This is story number 505 in our stories, Tales of Earlier Days. It is also the second of a three or four part series on Baraboo, past, present, and future. In the first article, we described Baraboo as it appeared some fifty years ago, a moderately prosperous but rather undistinguished small city whose former glory lay in the circus industry was now long gone.

Compared to today, there were relatively few amenities to distinguish it from similar small cities and certainly not enough then for it to be named Americas fourth best small city (Smithsonian Magazine, July, 2013).

There was a roller-coaster economic history behind Baraboo, how the four dams in the little nineteenth century settlement provided a precarious start on an economy. The coming of the railroad in 1871 made real progress and real prosperity possible. Then an unlikely industry, the circus, gave even more life to the growing community.

Unfortunately those two industries had tapered off shortly after the turn of the century as the railroad industry started its downward slide and the circus industry suddenly left in 1918. The resulting doldrums had lasted for two decades. The economy was temporarily revived by the heady days of the Badger Ordnance plant, only to suffer the reality of a postwar letdown.

Then a determined group of local citizens persuaded new industries to locate in Baraboo, reviving the city with jobs and slow but sure population growth. By 1961 Baraboo was still a small city, but one with a glorious past and a renewed promise for the future.

Those new industries were the key to progress. With the new high school and new hospital up and running, progress continued as the aged nineteenth century city hall and jail were each replaced. Early in the 1960's a large addition to the 1905 Courthouse was added (including a "penthouse" jail. Who realized that that by 1994 a really large West Square county building would be added across the street on Broadway, as well as another even more commodious jail? The County was growing too!

New on the East Side were the Darrow grocery and the beginning of what are now several businesses on highway 33 within the city limits. South Boulevard was pretty much out in the country in 1961, but now thrives and will soon be the main entrance to the city from the latest bypass. The city's satellite, West Baraboo, has tripled in population since 1962, when only the Ritz Restaurant and a few other structures stood at the intersection. It had no stop light! How did we manage—surely it was a four-way stop?



Tom Michele Photo

By the 1990's Downtown Baraboo presented vastly expanded Sauk County governmental facilities yet retained the "Norman Rockwell" appearance of its commercial buildings surrounding and adjacent to the Courthouse Square. Population had doubled in less than 50 years.

Although Baraboo nearly doubled in square mileage in from 1961 to 2013, more things of significance were happening. Prominent was the development of an actual University of Wisconsin satellite campus, which has now served the community some 45 years. New on the scene were such quality attractions as the International Crane Foundation, the Aldo Leopold Center, and Mid-states Railway, all with a close association with Baraboo.

Devils Lake, which had been a major water recreational feature near to Baraboo slowly evolved from a water amusement park to a truly natural park area, especially with the banning of motors on the lake. This put an end to water skiing, an unpopular rule but for the best of everyone. Now this major Midwestern Lake and Park draws nearly two million visitors each year.

One of the most significant developments, just in its infancy in 1961, has been the spectacular growth of the Circus World and its museum, now the greatest repository of circus memorabilia in the world. Here the city's rich circus history comes alive thanks to a largely local effort. Performers from around the world now add to Baraboo's past circus glory. The city also is home to the International Clown Museum. Coming soon is the opening of the magnificent Al. Ringling home to the public.

Presiding over all of these changes has been the spectacular Al. Ringling Theatre. Its restoration is a current challenge which the local population must meet to save this historic landmark in the evolving motion picture industry. Other new quality attractions include the nearby Mid-continent railroad, the Leopold Center, the expanded Zoo, the wild animal refuge, and Baraboo's nearly three mile Riverwalk. The new History Center is a superb addition also.

Looming over all the plethora of changes has been the closing, re-opening, and now the decommissioning of the Badger Ordnance Plant. As we write, there is dispute over use of a part of its vast acreage for certain recreational purposes. It was Badger that awakened Baraboo from its doldrums of the Great Depression, an awakening seized upon after the war by local enthusiasts for bringing the city alive.

This article has tried to recount the highlights of Baraboo's evolvement from a struggling small town to a "fourth best in the nation" small city with studied growth. Not only has the city acreage doubled, but so has the population, not even including the quite large number of citizens who live outside the city limits but still call Baraboo home. Lying between two ancient mountain ranges, Baraboo is occasionally called the Gem City, like an emerald set in the middle of a canoe-shaped valley.

It has been this writer's fortune to observe with pleasure this transformation from a village recovering from both Depression and a wartime roller-coaster economy to a remarkable prize-winning small city. The next article will attempt to envision what is surely a shining future for Baraboo. All in all, it was an especially progressive 50 years. But Baraboo can do better if it retains a progressive attitude.