

Ringling-Potter Farm

Alfred Ringling Builds East of Baraboo

Historian Bob Dewel has written at length about "The Ringling-Kelly-Potter-Leopold" Property located east of Baraboo just off Highway "W" and about the owners of the property.

This narrative will address anecdotes about **Howard I. Potter** and his love of the University of Wisconsin. Let us start with Howard's grandfather, Henry Howard Potter,

Henry Howard Potter

Henry Howard Potter was born November 6, 1824 at Hartsville, Onondaga N. Y. He came to Baraboo in 1849, remaining a year as a clerk for Major James A. Maxwell. He then moved to Pennsylvania (where his parents made their home after his birth) and remained there for five years, returning to Baraboo permanently in 1855. It was probable that at this time he filed a claim and homesteaded the property that would eventually be recognized as 626 Potter Street. Potter platted his 251 acre farm which would then be referred to as the Potter Addition

An early path to Manchester was referred to as Potter's Path and Potter's Lane, later to be officially named Potter Street as it ran over and through the Potter property. In May of 1872 Mr. Grubb, one of the owners of the Manchester Waterpower, constructed a bridge over the race at the foot of Potter's Lane and constructed a roadway down the east bank of the race. It was noted in the *Baraboo Republic* that the citizens of Baraboo would then be able to avail themselves of a new drive to Devil's Lake via the roundhouse, H. H. Potter's, past the Manchester Mills and so on to the Lake.

The property bordered the river and was no doubt adjacent to the Maxwell property. In fact, it is possible that the Potter associated himself with the Maxwell's in businesses and property in the village of Manchester.

Henry Potter married Miss Emma Maxwell, eldest daughter of **Major James A. and Susan V. Maxwell**, on October 15, 1856. In conjunction with the marriage the new Maxwell house was opened on Maxwell Street in Baraboo. The wedding took place in the Maxwell barn and the wedding feast was the first dinner to be served in the new home. The newlyweds took up housekeeping on Seventh Avenue, where the Burrington's lived in 1913, while the Potter home was being constructed on Potter Street.

Henry Howard Potter died January 28, 1878 and his funeral which was held at his home on Potter Street, was conducted by the Rev. E. P. Hall of the First M. E. Church. Emma Potter died at her home on Potter Street on or about May 7, 1913.

Survivors of Mrs. Potter were five children, Kate M., Mary Belle, Lyman H., Mrs. Ward Munroe and Mrs. W. C. Richards,

Lyman H. Potter

(Son of Henry Howard Potter and father of Howard I. Potter)

Lyman H. Potter and Hannah Markesan, both of Baraboo, were united in marriage on Wednesday, June 1st. (Year unknown but probably in the mid 1880's).

Lyman Potter died in August of 1932 at the age of 73 at his home on Potter Street (the former Henry Howard Potter home). Potter was employed for many years on the Chicago & Northwestern railroad, as a tin-smith and sheet metal worker, having retired at the age of 70. Lyman Potter's wife died several years prior.

Surviving Lyman and Hannah Potter were seven children; Estella, Alden, Arthur, Frank, Rollins, Boyd and the subject of this narrative.....**Howard I. Potter.**

Ringling-Potter Farm

Howard I. Potter

In his early years, Howard Potter attended grade and high-school school in Baraboo, later attending the University of Wisconsin. He earned his way through the university by selling insurance, graduating in 1916. After graduation, Howard joined the army serving in France during WWI.

Lieutenant Howard I. Potter was cited for bravery when with the 104th Infantry and received the French Croix de Guerre with the gold star (corps citation). The conduct for which the honor was awarded was the taking of a machine gun position. Howard also received citation over the name of General Hale in book form and was cited in general orders. He was expected to be mustered out from Camp Devins, Mass. about May 1, 1918.

Note: During World War I, the *Croix de Guerre* was awarded for bravery to military personnel mentioned in dispatches. Recipients of the *Legion d'Honneur* and *Medaille Militaire* were automatically entitled to the *Croix de Guerre*. For subsequent acts of bravery, the recipient was awarded a bronze palm leaf for Army citations, a gold star for Corps citations, a silver star for Division citations or a bronze star for Brigade and Regimental citations

(Family recollections) When Howard returned from the war...he headed directly for the major office of an Insurance Company (name unknown) in New York and signed a contract to sell group insurance (which was in its infancy then) to railroad employees. Howard then purchased a railroad pass and road the trains east, west, north & south, selling group insurance to the engineers, firemen, conductors, baggage handlers, depot agents, etc. The commission he was earning came to the attention of the Board of Directors of the insurance company he had signed on with. Howard was called back to New York and offered a buyout of his contract which was too good to turn down...Howard was on his way!

Eventually his ability to manage and sell grew into a job as Vice President of *Marsh & McLennan, Ins.-Gen Brokerage House*, one of the largest insurance companies in the United States, with offices in Vancouver, Montreal, Havana and London.

Alfred T. and Richard Ringling

After a business trip to Europe in 1898, **Alfred Ringling** purchased land east of Baraboo and had constructed a home similar to a Chalet that he had visited in Switzerland. In 1919 the house and property was sold to **John Kelly** who was a bother-in-law of Ringling. In 1924 Ringling purchased the property back from Kelly and gave it to his son Richard, who was a boyhood friend of Howard Potter's. **Richard Ringling** was injured in an automobile accident and later died from injuries. In 1934 Richard's widow put the property up for sale.

Howard I Potter continued:

(Family recollections) Howard, knew the land well, having spent many happy days there with his boyhood friend Richard Ringling, and was determined to own it, took a train to Florida and closed a deal with Richard's widow, making him the new owner. The 1930's were rough depression days but Howard always had a plan...there was a lot of fallen timber on his newly purchased land and he sold it, cut it up yourself, haul it away yourself, 50-cents a chord. After the floor of the forest was cleaned up he allowed a certain amount of thinning, in this manner he reclaimed a good amount of the money he had paid for the property.

The data on the land purchase from Aubrey Ringling Gandonyi, which took place in May of 1934, can be found in the Sauk County courthouse records--document 225748, volume 154, page 43

Ringling-Potter Farm

Howard pretty much left the house as he purchased it, maintaining it from the weather, etc. It has been reported that he had added some steel support to the structure. The main rooms were left pretty much the same.

There existed a horse stable just to the north of the main house. Howard remodeled the loft into an office and added a gate-house as well and had a swimming pool constructed complete with diving board. He was very proud that in his mid-70's he could still do a back flip off the board and would always demonstrate his diving talents to his friends and relatives during summer picnics.

Harold Edward "Red" Grange,

Aka "**The Galloping Ghost**",

Many people enjoyed Howard's hospitality; one of his good friends from Chicago was **Red Grange**, who was a college and professional American football player who played for the University of Illinois, the Chicago Bears, and for the short-lived New York Yankees. His signing with the Bears helped legitimize the National Football League. He was a charter member of both the College and Pro-Football Hall of Fame. In 2008, he was named the greatest college football player of all time by ESPN, and in 2011, he was named the Greatest Big Ten Icon by the Big Ten Network.

An event that happened when Grange was staying at Howard's has to be shared. About 2:00 one morning, a knock came at the door. "Who is it" Howard asked. It's me, J.M. (I will not mention his full name although some of you might have an idea) and I have a goat in the back seat of my car I want to sell". Howard yelled back he was not interested, but the caller wanted to get rid of the goat so he offered it up for \$15.00. Grange told Howard, "Buy the damn thing so we can get some sleep". So...Howard ended up paying \$10.00 for it and tied it up to a tree behind the stable/office building. Back to sleep...but not for long! About an hour later, another knock..."who is

it"? "It's the sheriff, I'm looking for a missing goat, has anyone try to sell you a one?" "Yes...it's tied up around back. Help yourself".

Wallace Meyer

Wallace Meyer graduated from the School of Journalism at the University of Wisconsin the same year Howard did and the two were the best of friends. Wallace went on to become the President of *Reincke, Meyer and Finn, Inc.*, an advertising agency on N. Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago and the friendship continued.

Howard talked "Wally" into buying a farm adjacent to the "Ringling-Potter home" so they became neighbors and spent a certain amount of time together when both were in Wisconsin, away from the hustle and bustle of Chicago. Wally had a nice little farm so he hired someone to watch over it and even raised a few animals.

One summer weekend Howard invited "Wally" and other guests over for dinner. Howard had roasted a young pig and all attending agreed that it was delicious (Howard knew how to cook). The one thing that was unknown at the time...Howard had "borrowed" the pig from "Wally"....they later had a good laugh over the event. However...Howard slept with one eye open for a while.

Howard I. Potter Continued...

Howard Potter died September 15, 1968 after a 3-month bout with illness. His will left a 360 acre plot of land including his beloved summer Ringling Home, to the University of Wisconsin. The property would then be known as the *Howard I. Potter Preserve*. The will also provided that his widow, **Virginia Potter**, a former special aid to University of Wisconsin's presidents **E. B. Fred** and **Conrad A. Elvehjem**, could continue to live at and maintain the summer home during her lifetime.

Howard helped make the Circus World Museum in Baraboo a reality by aiding the late **John M. Kelly** in his efforts in meeting

Ringling-Potter Farm

state leaders to explain the proposal. Howard was the president of the University of Wisconsin Foundation from 1945 until 1954. He was also a past-president of the Wisconsin Alumni Association.

Funeral services were held at the St. Camillus Chapel in Durward's Glen, with chimes that Howard had donated earlier in his life, still chiming every hour and half-hour.

In September of 2002 the Potter Chalet came to the end of the road....it was destroyed as a practice burn by the Baraboo Fire Department. It was demolished so the property could be restored as a nature preserve. At the time of the demolition, the 360 acre property was owned by the *Aldo Leopold Foundation*.

In March of 1923, Howard, on a hunting expedition to Whitefish, Montana shot a large Elk. He had the head mounted and it hung in the Baraboo Elk's Lodge hall until it was removed in the 1980's, and possession was given to Howard's nephew, James Alden Potter, of Janesville, formerly of Baraboo.

Ending Notes... (Personal Recollection of author) It should be added that Howard knew how to dry-age beef to perfection. He would hang the carcass in a root cellar and check the mold until the meat was ripe...then cut it up. Personally speaking, there was absolutely no better beef...some would say it was spoiled...but it was just aged!

The author of this article enjoyed knowing Howard Potter, but my favorite memory was playing three-handed Euchre with him and John Kelly one New Year's Eve almost 60 years ago. At that time, I would have much rather have been out on the town...but now I'm glad I wasn't....

.....Joseph W. Ward (2011)



French Croix de Guerre
with gold star (corps citation).