

Genteel Baraboo and the Bloody South

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It was a happy time, those halcyon days at the turn of the century. Except for the Spanish American War skirmishes, the country had been at peace since the Civil War, and could not imagine the upcoming World War One. Sauk County was thriving, especially its County Seat, Baraboo.

It was a front porch time, neighborly and thriving on small town values. People had time, time to keep scrapbooks, time to write. We are fortunate in having a multiple page reminiscences of those days by Marjorie (Fisher) Stekl, supplied by her daughter, Marjorie Fancher of Columbus, Ohio.

Part of it is fortuitous, since the Fisher home on 11th was close, almost neighbors, to Alf.T. and Della Ringling's three story frame home, later to become a hospital. A three story mansion, it contained not only an elevator, surely the first in Baraboo, but also a pipe organ. The latter was later donated to St. Joseph Church and served until recently.

The Ringling son Richard was privately tutored, but occasionally drove his pony and cart to the Fisher home with rides for Marjorie Fisher. Alf. T. and Della had not yet adopted a daughter, Marjorie. In later years she was the wife (for a time) of Jacob Javits, later a prominent and influential Senator from New York.

Almost as close was the Charley Ringling home, known today as the Yellow Ringling house (it was probably white in those days) on Eighth and Ash.

Associated with the home was a two story garage, with servants quarters above and the family Pierce Arrow auto and the pony in the lower half. Also on the grounds was a smaller home for the Mrs. Edith Ringling's Mother.. All buildings are still extant.

Charley and Edith Ringling had two children, Robert and Hester, but the latter was much younger and did not figure in the doings of Marjorie Fisher and Robert Ringling. Not to be outdone by cousin Richard, Robert also had a pony and cart, and frequently gave Marjorie extended rides in the cart, principally to Lyons, now West Baraboo. She also was often a guest at the Ringling home on Devils Lake, now gone.

The arrival of Fall meant not only the return of school, but the return of the circus for the winter. Many of the families maintained homes in Baraboo then, but single men were housed in the Ringling hotel, still on Water Street today.

Marjorie reports that many of the bachelor men " were pretty rough, and the area became known as "the Bloody South, since there was so much fighting." The building has long since been repaired and remodeled into apartments now.

She states that the circus had a sort of caste system. "The Equestrians and Tight Rope performers were the VIP's, followed by the animal trainers and performers. Below them were the workmen, and rarely did members of the three systems associate with one another."

Except for Richard, the Ringling children attended Baraboo public schools. Not until Hester graduated in 1911 did Charley sell his Eighth Street home to brother Henry, and move to

Evanston Illinois. It was at this time that family relationships increased between the Fisher family and the family of Ida (Ringling) North and her children. Ida was the only girl among the seven Ringling boys.

Here we learn, new to this writer, that North had a grown daughter, Lila, by a previous marriage. We've written in the past how Ida defied her family by eloping with North. Shunning is said to have occurred, but Ida was received back into the family later when she named her first son John Ringling North.

Ida's son John and his brother, Henry Ringling North, later defied the rest of the family and managed to obtain control of the circus in the 1930's, but that is another story. They had a sister, Salome Julia, of whom little is known. to this writer.

Ida North was widowed early, and moved into the Al. Ringling home mansion for a few years while the boys and Julia finished school, eventually moving to Florida. The empty home, only a decade old, was set to be torn down in the mid 1920's to save on taxes, since even Lou (Mrs. Al.) did not want it. The wrecking crew was actually in town. Last minute efforts by local leaders saved the mansion, and it is now occupied by the Elks Club.

When Marjorie Fisher married Clausen Stekl in about 1919 in the family home on 11th Street, it was Ida Ringling North who played the wedding march as Marjorie entered the very room in which she was born, to be married.

As a young married couple the Stekls became friends now with Henry Ringling II and his wife, the former Jean Fowler. Henry's first son was, of course, named Henry Ringling III, and he died in 1962 when his Triumph auto

went into the ditch on County A. Marjorie say his nickname was Hank.

His sister Salome, well known locally until her rather recent death, was the same age as one of the Stekl girls. Salome married an Englishman who was killed in a plane crash. It is believed that the yellow house is still owned by her two children. Marjorie writes that Kate, was born on New Years Day, and Charles, was born on the Fourth of July!

Marjorie (Fisher) Stekl thus had a lifetime friendship with many of the Ringling family. Her memoirs will be placed in both the Stekl and Ringling files at the Sauk County Historical Society. for those who wish to view them further.

Thanks go to her daughter, Marjorie Fancher, for sending a written copy. Paper remembers and preserves the written word, but Facebook and the digital media are an unlikely source for a future historians.

Charles Ringling's carriage. That is probably Edith in the rear seat

