

Al. Ringling Home once Slated for Demolition Tales of Earlier Days By Bob Dewel

Most everyone knows that the Elks Club owns a magnificent stone edifice on Broadway in Baraboo, and most people know that it once was the home of Al. Ringling. Al. was the moving force in starting and operating the Ringling Circus. He was world renowned at the time, yet loyal to his adopted home town, Baraboo, and its citizens.

Built in 1905-06, the home appeared like it would stand there forever. No one could imagine that hardly 20 years later, in 1927, wreckers would arrive in town prepared to raze the imposing home, finest in Sauk County. They planned to use its impressive Lake Superior brownstone facade and other fittings on a fraternity house Madison, it was said!

The News-Republic headlined the proposal on the center front page, accurately reporting the actual presence of the Findorf Co. wreckers in town. The current owner, Al's sister Ida North, was moving to Florida and did not want to keep the house and pay the taxes. The News-Republic spoke of it both as a

memorial to Al. and a gift denoting his love for Baraboo.

Original construction costs were said to be \$35,000 to \$50,000, the stable alone being \$8000 more. A hastily arranged offer of \$15,000 was turned down. This was on October 24, 1927, with the house only 21 years old, but a monster to heat and maintain. On the 27th the paper reported that the Chamber of Commerce, headed by Kingsford, had obtained a temporary suspension agreement with Ida North, the owner.

A price of \$30,000 was set, and Ida offered to pay \$10,000 of that if the property was to be used for civic purposes. Even the spacious red stone stable, "large as a house", was not to be spared. The red stone was duplicated in Ashland WI on the railway station, with a similar style. That station burned in 2001, but was to be restored

The paper speculated that possible owners of the house could be the American Legion and the Historical Society as joint owners. The Chamber under President Kingsford was working on saving the structure as was the Kiwanis Club, little more than 4 years old at the time. Judge James Hill, banker Herman Grotophorst, merchant W.T. Marriott, and Mayor Andro, were the Kiwanis committee, with F.E. Shults as Chairman.

There were other local connections, for the 1906 structure was built by George and Carl Isenberg, Baraboo contractors of note. In the early 1920's Charlie Ringling contracted Isenberg to spend two years constructing his even more palatial home in Florida, employing some Baraboo men in each case.

Despite the local sentiment to purchase it, Ida North remained the owner until 1936. One can speculate that



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Residence of Mr. Al. Ringling.



FORMER AL RINGLING HOME

Photo Courtesy of James Adams

taxes were made less burdensome. At any rate, the local Elks club purchased it, reportedly at a price of \$15,000 on Sept. 30, 1936. The paper described it as a showplace of Baraboo and of interest to tourists, remarking that it was ideally suited to the needs of a lodge, and perhaps of use as a community center.

The change was a stimulus for membership in the Elks, which finally attained a membership said to be over 1000. This was essential if the building, having sat empty for many years, was to be renovated.

The Elks can be congratulated for the care given the historic structure for the past 70 years, with ongoing repair and redecoration to this day. The large hall with stage was erected later, serving other community organizations and private entertainers. By the way, all bathrooms were by Schadde, a firm still existing today.

Despite the period style of the exterior, the interior presents a mix of styles. The vestibule is English, with marble and tile accents. The reception room is French, a la Louis XIV, but with a Mexican marble fireplace.. The dining room, now a lounge, was Gothic, with lion heads guarding the fireplace on each side. The billiard room on the main floor is Dutch, and the basement had a 50x30 ballroom.

On the upper level are four bedrooms, each said to have a bath. It was in that part of the building that John and Henry North once coaxed a pony up the stairs. This proved easier than getting the pony to return down the steps. A few years later a friend of the boys told me that they used to escape from the second floor windows somehow and go downtown after bedtime..

Later, as men, John headed the Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey

Circus, the Greatest Show on Earth. Like their uncle, John Ringling, the boys rarely frequented Baraboo after joining the circus operation. John Ringling's only contribution to Baraboo was a new Barton organ in what for a time was his theatre, the Al. Ringling, in 1928.

Charlie Ringling left his mark on the city only indirectly, selling his yellow home on 8th Street to his brother Henry. That home remains in the hands of Ringling descendants. Alf. T's wife Della gave their home to start a hospital, and the pipe organ went to the Catholic Church.

The razzle-dazzle of the circus, once abundant in Baraboo, was revived with the Circus World Museum's advent 50 years ago in 1959. Now we have the world's largest source of circus memorabilia and documents, as well as the world's largest collection of wagons, around 200!

Sarasota, FL only has a few wagons and a more limited document section of circus lore. Despite these differences, the Baraboo institution is rarely acknowledged in Sarasota. Perhaps they realize that Baraboo has a better claim to be Circus City USA!