

A Tragic Day at Devils Lake

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It was one of those lazy summer days on that fateful afternoon, August 8, 1929. A gentle southern breeze brought some relief from the summer heat, and the men in the barbershop that morning had been cussing and discussing the City Council meeting of the night before. The Council had decided that the stop and go light in the center of Oak and Third could be shut off between midnight and 7 A.M. This created plenty of discussion, pro and con.

Not only that, but the council had been requested by the railroad to install wig-wag warning lights at both the Walnut and Vine railroad crossings. Some men were incensed that the crew removing the Oak Street High Bridge had damaged parts of the McArthur dam, and then someone mentioned that young George Mc Arthur was being married that very day to Janet Foster over in Reedsburg. Such was the news in Baraboo that morning. No one noticed that the stock market was acting strangely, though this was late summer, 1929.

What they also did not know was that a tragic drama was unfolding at Devils Lake, with news that would be remembered by some for many years. An empty rowboat had floated to the North Shore and it contained personal property of both a man and a woman. Investigation revealed that it had been rented by a young Chicago couple, vacationing here on their honeymoon. They had rented a cottage at the lake earlier in the week following their marriage on August 2 or 3, and later had

move to the Rialto Hotel in Baraboo. Now they were missing.

The boat, however, held interesting materials. A man's shirt was found, along with a ladies purse containing \$15, and a ladies coat. Most interesting, however, was an expensive camera, perhaps a wedding gift, the kind with a folding bellows so common in those days. When developed, the celluloid film revealed photos of each of them in the boat, as taken by the other.

The newlyweds were Mr. and Mrs. Jim Patrillo of Chicago, and that afternoon the News-Republic posted an Extra piece on the front page describing the puzzling situation. Puzzling, yet it seemed obvious that people must have drowned in the lake. Sheriff E.C. Mueller and District Attorney F.B. Moss began a search. A dragging operation began along the East bluff, featured in some of the photos. An airplane piloted by Ed Accola of Prairie du Sac was even summoned, to see if bodies could be spotted from the air, but it was without success.

Upon arrival, young Patrillo's Mother stated that neither her son nor the new daughter-in-law could swim, adding to the gloom. The dragging continued, though it was difficult due to wire and other debris under the surface. Even a week after the discovery the operation continued without success, but a break came on the 8th day when the body of Mrs. Patrillo (we are never given her first name) came to the surface clad in a blue dress and with a wrist watch still on her wrist, which stopped at 1:50 o'clock. Jim Patrillo's body surfaced the following day.

Though both bodies showed considerable facial lacerations, it is believed that contact with the sharp rocks was the cause. Nevertheless an inquest was held, and the sheriff reported that there were no fractures or other indication of violence. Also, rumors to the contrary, young Mrs. Patrillo was not expecting to become a mother.

Former Baraboo boy, O.D. Brandenburg, now the editor of the Wisconsin State Journal, then wrote about a Madison drowning in similar circumstances fifteen years previously. Here the couple were engaged, and the story was that when found after their canoe collapsed, they were locked in each others arms in death. Brandenburg says a call for help was heard, but went unheeded.

This is not the first case of drowning in Devils Lake nor, sadly, will it be the last. People now said that the skill of swimming and overcoming the fear of water should be required of every youth, as well as good boating practices. Surely these tragic deaths inspired some people in Baraboo to develop those skills but, in general, life soon renewed as before. Paving of Highway 12 from Baraboo to Lake Delton was high on the discussion list, but little did the locals imagine that in 7 years the highway would no longer pass through Baraboo's business district. The stop light on Oak would not be needed even during the day, and it was later removed.

Everyone was fascinated by the latest conquest of the air by the Graf Zeppelin, and that an airplane had actually flown at 300 miles per hour. California was having forest fires. Locally someone had crashed a Buick into the Mill Race near the pumping station. It had been stripped of license plates and other identification,

In other news that August, a young man was arrested for riding in, but not driving a car while intoxicated. The driver was intoxicated too. Their condition was detected when their car tipped over on Highway 133. Discussion of the tragic Devils Lake deaths soon faded. Such was the news as August played out its shortening days in that long go time of our grandparents.