

Swimming Pool Softened Hard Times Tales of Earlier Days By Bob Dewel

There were shrill cries of "socialism" in 1937 from the conservatives of that day. A WPA workman waiting for a gravel truck did not dare lean on his shovel or he might be pictured in the paper as lazy. President Roosevelt was mimicked and castigated by his opponents for a "waste" of federal funds.

Calmer voices in Baraboo, however, noticed that something good was happening at the "Y" near what were then the city limits of Baraboo. Men perhaps long out of work were at last bringing home a paycheck, and the city was getting a new and valued resource.

If you looked around, you saw that stone retaining walls were appearing at the courthouse, on Eighth Avenue, at Ochsner Park, and elsewhere to control erosion and enhance the property. It was all a part of the New Deal WPA public works program, often in conjunction with the CCC boys at Devils Lake. Work proceeded for much of two years.

Opening Day

The most noticeable example was, of course, the Baraboo swimming pool. Today we call it stimulus, pay for jobs for the common good. It is a good bet that some local men can see their great grandchildren playing today in the same pool they enjoyed or even worked on as young men for a paycheck in those Depression Days.

Thanks to an alert Rick Luther, we have not only the date of dedication,

but the extensive public celebration at the time. Rick found some clippings in the bottom of a file drawer at the city Parks and Recreation Dept. advertising it, and what a weekend it was. Sunday July 3, 1938 at 1:30 brought a speech by Mayor Hornung, and a band concert. Actually it was 91 degrees that day, good day for a swim.

That's not all. The Engford Family show was there, with vaudeville and aerialists, a musical revue, and a flying trapeze act. There would be both a husband calling and a hog calling contest (yes they are different) along with a potato race on bicycles. This was not explained. The Boy Scouts sold programs as a fund raiser.

The Parade

If those events didn't call to you, how about a sack race, a three-legged race, or a Tug-o-war between the Eagles and the V.F.W.? Evenings bought water fights on both Saturday and Monday, not to mention the "Big Parade" on Monday, July 4.

The cost of the project was \$100,000, but the city share was only \$18,000, the WPA (federal government) assuming the rest of the cost. It is said that 30 men were employed in the project, perhaps more. Stimulus!

On opening day, at 91 degrees, some 1026 bathers enjoyed relief from the heat under the supervision of Don Vethe, John Dippel, a McGee, and Mrs. Sam Bisch. Marlene Kosin was matron, and Wm. Dippel basket manager of the 90 foot bathhouse.

Statistics

This was not a small pool, being 180 by 75 feet in dimension. The deep water was in the middle, with each end being shallow. A diving tower and lifeguard towers would be installed also, the News-Republic projected in 1937.

Both the tower and bathhouse would be of local Baraboo sandstone from the P.A. Wood quarry on the edge of the city, providing employment for 20 men at the quarry. Stimulus!

The Depression had been especially bad for Baraboo, suffering from the loss of two large industries, the railroad Division Point and the Circuses. Any employment was good news.

The newspaper reported at length on the lighting plans, featuring flood lights and lights "built in the walls under the water line—great lights which resemble nothing so much as portholes in a ship, from which light will be thrown up under the water so that all parts of the pool are lighted, a safety feature much to be desired."

Renovation

In 1994 the pool and area underwent extensive renovation and upkeep, including a handicapped ramp, water heater, splash pool for infants, and family dressing rooms. Wayne Maffei spoke at the dedication, noting that Baraboo's Alma Waite fund provided \$40,000 toward the improvements.

Alma's blockbuster gift to the city has in most cases been well supervised, as it was in this case. We feel she would be well pleased at the expenditure of some proceeds from her fund for this means of public entertainment.

