

Doldrums, Prosperity, Doldrums, and Revival

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

We've told part of this story before, but there is a new twist to it in the discovery of a publication from about 1946. More about this in a moment, but first a review of the doldrums of 1918-1940.

Briefly, at the turn of the 20th Century, Baraboo was one of Wisconsin's more prosperous small cities, thanks to the fortunate interdependence of two industries. The city was a Northwestern Railroad Division Center, and also the home of the Ringling and Gollmar Circuses, with Ringling about to absorb the once dominant Barnum and Bailey operation.

Times were good, but by 1920 the situation was reversed, for two reasons. One, the circus operations of both Gollmar and Ringling had abruptly departed by 1918. Two, the ongoing removal of the railroad Division Point to always-hungry Madison was now accelerated, partly due to the loss of the circus rail operations.

The economic shock to the area is best illustrated by the population changes—from the 1910 census of 6320 citizens to the 1920 census of 5538, a loss of nearly 800 persons. It would be 20 years before the 1910 population level would be reached again. These times can be called the doldrums, when Baraboo and Sauk County suffered more than 20 years of Depression.

An Attempt at Revival

As is often the case, citizens gather when there is a crisis, and sometimes form ad hoc committees to solve a problem without the restrictions of government or business. Such was the case in 1945 at the end of World War II, though we are not given the names of all of the Chamber of Commerce committees.

The new publication referred to in the first paragraph above is apparently an early realization of the dilemma Baraboo faced as the swollen wartime ammunition plant workers left almost overnight. By modern standards it's not much of a booklet—plain brown cover, no color in the entire booklet, pictures black and white and indistinct.

To its credit, the first concern was that the some 720 returning veterans would have jobs to come home to. This is clearly stated in the introduction to the little booklet, of which we have a rare copy. Though the booklet proudly lists eleven industries in the city, only one remains today---Baraboo Concrete.

Several surveys had been made, including one of the returning veterans themselves. When asked if they wanted to return to their old jobs, 312 said yes, but 32 rejected that possibility. Others wanted school and training, but only eight planned to remain in military service.



Downtown Baraboo and Courthouse Square, 1940's

The booklet proudly referred to the good stewardship of government during the veterans' absence, with the county having no indebtedness whatsoever. The city had only \$238,000 of debts, with accumulated surpluses in many departments. It was Baraboo's wartime prosperity.

Great hopes were held with the future of Badger Ordnance, believing it would be immediately vacated. This belief allowed what a UW Professor predicted to be "an unparalleled opportunity to create a diversionary industrial center through the reconversion of Badger to peacetime use."

Little could the Professor and the local group realize that it would be 60 years before parts of the land were even released, and then not for industry but for protected land use. Around 1950 Baraboo sent a delegation to Washington D.C. to promote location of the new Air Force Academy on the Badger property, but to no avail. Now doldrums threatened the city.

Success

It remained for new committees, perhaps with the same members, to realize that Baraboo's future lay with private industries. Men such as Ted Mandt, John Lange, Al Dippel Sr., Jay Henke, W.W. Deppe, Bill Noble, and Clausen Stekl were on one such committee.

Another group, Mandt, Lange, Geo Martiny, Curt Page, Ray Lindgren, and Henry Moeller became the highly successful Industrial Expansion Corporation. John and Murrel Lange's personal benevolence later on is detailed in my recent book, "The Best of Bob".

Various groups began a vigorous campaign to attract new industries, with rousing success for the time. Many industries still remain, though the exodus to Mexico and other foreign low labor cost areas has since claimed a few of those.

The story of Baraboo's miracle post-war revival has been told in many of our earlier articles (pages 881-889, Sauk County and Baraboo, Dewel). Big things have little beginnings sometimes, and the very modest little brown booklet was the very cautious beginning of Baraboo's claim to growth and expansion in the 1950's.

Population more than doubled, as did the workforce in the following decades. New schools and public buildings were complemented by the Circus World, the Crane Foundation, the UW Baraboo-Sauk County campus, and local ownership of the Al. Ringling, among the other significant features of this attractive and progressive community.

The formerly viscous cycle of prosperity and doldrums has been harnessed, thanks to dedicated local citizens who believed in the integrity and future of their local community. The booklet referred to Baraboo as "The Gem City", true not only by its geographical location in the Baraboo valley, but by its amenities and quality of life.