

World War II Ends, Baraboo Survives

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Remember your first (and perhaps only) roller coaster ride? It didn't seem too bad as the coaster ascended slowly, and the view was great. This was followed by the heart-pounding exhilaration of the rapid descent, as you quickly gained speed. Once that was over, the next descent from a peak seemed a little easier. Once back on the ground, though, you were a little shaky and disoriented.

This article contends that there is a similarity between this amusement park ride, and the population records and history of Baraboo in the first half of the Twentieth Century. At the turn of that century, 1900, the city outlook was like that of the first ascent on the coaster---slow and steady, and a beautiful outlook. Baraboo was on a roll.

The Early 29th Century High

Baraboo was a leading railroad town in those days, an important division point on the Northwestern Line. This meant good jobs, population growth, and prosperity for the young city and throughout the county after the railroad came in 1871.

Moreover, five of the young Ringling boys had a major national circus operation headquartered in the city, and soon were to own the great Barnum Circus as well. Their Gollmar cousins also had a major attraction in their circus, and another set of cousin, the Moellers, were builders of circus and other wagons on a national basis. The Island Woolen Mill was the largest mill west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Things looked great as Baraboo ascended to its "roller coaster" peak. This era is perhaps symbolized by two downtown charitable additions to the city. One is the clock tower on top of the Courthouse. The other is the elegant and palatial Al. Ringling Theatre (1915), nationally recognized yet today as first of the great ornate theatres built for the new silent motion picture industry. Imagine the pride of Baraboo's citizens on those times.

The Doldrums

Few were alarmed when the Gollmar operation sold out in 1916, but the shocker was the failure of the Ringling operation to return in the fall of 1918. Astute observers also noted the gradual but now alarming transfer of the railroad's Division operations to Madison. Baraboo suffered a critical "roller coaster" descent from the peak. Population fell from 6324 in 1910 to 5536 in 1920. It would be 30 years before it regained the 1910 population count.

Sure, like the roller coaster there were occasional peaks, but the woolen mill and some McArthur operations paled in comparison to the "good old days". We have called the two intervening decades from 1920 to 1940 Baraboo's "Doldrum Days" in a previous article. Small

companies came and went, but there was only a gain of nine persons in the population statistics between 1920 and 1930.

In a way, like the slowing of the roller coaster, the Great Depression seemed to epitomize the descent from the glory days of the early decades of the century. There were bright spots. The area remained attractive with its closeness to Devils Lake, the social center of the town in many ways. The massive hills and forests of the Baraboo Range attracted people, and the population by 1940 was 6415. It had finally crept past its previous high of 6324 back in 1910.

The Powder Plant

The looming possibility of a world war and the sudden announcement of construction of a major explosive plant were somewhat like the departure from the roller coaster, a little dizzying and dis-orienting. The initial and continuing impact of the ammunition plant on the local economy and job market is another story, but can be well imagined when one reads of 8000 to 10,000 jobs, employing workers not only from Baraboo but from up to 50 miles around.

No population statistics are available for the short period from 1940 to 1946, but by 1950 some 750 persons had elected to move to or remain in Baraboo, now with a population of 7264. Astute Baraboo business men resolved that there should be no return to the doldrums of 1920-40. We wrote extensively a few years ago on their highly successful efforts to establish or bring in significant industries and kept the industrial climate of the city attractive.

There was state and national recognition of their success. Some progressive city councils provided the impetus to replace the aging City Hall and County Jail plus several school buildings. UW Baraboo/Sauk County was a welcome addition. Talk about confidence—the community leaders also went to Washington to try and have the proposed Air Force Academy built on the de-commissioned Badger Ammo grounds! They failed, but the enthusiasm remained.

Industry Today

The history of industrial development, with both its successes and pitfalls, seems to be a lesson re-learned by every generation. Highly successful local firms were brought in during the effort, such as Industrial Coils, NECO, and Eagle Signal. They served for a generation or two but were eventually lost as the national industrial climate changed. Flambeau, Sysco, and Donnelly remain as major employers, plus others too numerous to mention.

Fortunately, local business, civic, and government leaders learned well from the example of their predecessors of the late 1940's. Local industries have either expanded or filled in vacancies as they occurred. Like virtually every area of the country today, Baraboo is now in sort of an alert holding pattern during the current economic slowdown.

The citizens of 1900-1910 would be surprised but pleased to know that the local population not only recovered from the 1920 doldrums but has swelled to 12,048. The roller coaster ride of the first half of the Twentieth Century is long gone and surely will never be repeated.

The beauty of Baraboo, with its circus and theatre, zoo and Intl Crane Foundation, plus the UW Campus, and Devils Lake are too attractive for a population loss. The pain of today's

unemployment and our reluctance to pay as we go for our wars and benefits will pass. But no more roller coaster rides!

Optional sidebar: Census Statistics from Goc, "Many a fine harvest"

Baraboo only. County statistics run parallel to these figures

1870-----1528
 1880-----3266
 1890-----4605.
 1900-----5751
 1910-----6324
 1920-----5538
 1930-----5545
 1940-----6415
 1950-----7264
 1960-----7660
 1970-----7931
 1980-----8081
 1990-----9215
 2000-----11,500
 2012-----12,098



An early sketch of the old City Hall, Fourth Street and Ash. Like this building, several old red brick structures were removed around mid-century, including an ancient jail and some school buildings.