

# Baraboo Seeks Help in 1975 Tales of Earlier Days By Bob Dewel

How'd you like to live in a city with nearly 14% unemployment, located in a state with just 8% unemployment? The hourly wage ranges from \$2.30 to 3.50 per hour---for those who had jobs. When asked the principal industries of the area, the number one answer was War (yes, war) followed by tourism!

A city survey then found 365 substandard housing units, with only 103 capable of rehabilitation. Organized housing for the less fortunate did not exist. A nearby industry that once employed 5400 workers 6 years ago had now phased down to 300 employees.

If that weren't enough, your little city is in need of multiple bridge repairs and replacements, many intersections need stop lights, and the sewage plant demands reconstruction. The streets are a disgrace, and parking for cars is sorely needed. A few domiciles don't even have sanitary sewer service.

## Baraboo in 1975

The city, of course, was Baraboo in 1975, just 35 years ago! We know this for we have obtained the application for federal assistance made then for the construction of the Donahue Terrace.

The State and Federal governments wisely required a full city survey before approving the funds, to be sure the city was unable to finance the project itself.

Most pages listed short-term objectives, such as Donahue Terrace, obtaining land for industrial use, and water, sewer and bridge replacements or additions. Our one traffic signal was not enough---we now have 10, including two in West Baraboo. How did we ever navigate without them?

Those were just the short-term projects, and the projected cost was half a million 1975 dollars! They did not include building Donahue Terrace, just acquiring the land, plus land for Industry. Some \$210,000 was also requested just for the sewer renovations. It would be a start.

It was noted that local code requirements on low income housing were lax, and should be enforced. Talk about statistics! Baraboo had 2001 owner-occupied homes, and 944 rentals, with the total population estimated at 7781.

In the previous 5 years only 99 homes and 57 rental units had been constructed---helpful but not overwhelming. Incidentally a low-moderate income in 1975 was considered to be valued at a median of \$10,328.

The above is a condensation of the application for housing assistance initiated then by the Kiwanis Club, approved by the City Council, and approved also by Mayor Madalon. It illustrates how private groups can, with government participation, produce improvements in a community if properly documented.

## Industries and Demographics

Actually, there is an earlier document, prepared in 1973 when the

city assessment was beginning. The statistics are daunting, but some are of interest: Despite the needs listed above, it was near to impossible to buy or rent a dwelling place in the low to medium price range. A few homes even lacked running water, some without private baths or a kitchen sink.

Fifteen major industries were listed. Now, in 2010, seven are gone—count them: Badger, Eagle Signal, Industrial Coils, Northern Engineering, Snowwhite, Soiltest, and Almet. Baraboo in 1975 was different in another way: there were 6 groceries, 13 clothing stores, outdone in numbers by 16 gas stations. Count them up today!

Here's a surprise. When asked what the market was for local products, guess what the answer was: WAR (Badger), followed by Tourism and agriculture. The average wage for the unskilled was \$92, semi-skilled \$116, and skilled \$140 per week.

Attached to this report was a public assistance report, authored in part by Geri Schoenoff and Mrs. Frank Scherschell, in line with the statistics listed above. Baraboo was still recovering from its roller coast history of the previous 60 years.

#### Depression and Prosperity

As mentioned in previous articles, Baraboo was a high-flying city on the move until 1918. The ongoing loss of the railroad division point, plus the sale of the Gollmar Circus and the departure of the Ringing Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus, had left the town reeling, with significant loss of population as a result. Within ten years, the still recovering city was, like all others the world over, struck by the agony of the Great Depression.

Like a roller coaster, however, the stratospheric rise of employment at

the new Ammunition Plant must have been a huge high for the citizens. With World War II projected to last a decade or so, the city prospered, but a gradual decline in the plant operations brought the city to the status described above in 1975. A bright spot was the Industrial Expansion Corporation, treated previously in four articles in my books.

#### Lessons Learned

So what can be learned from this: In housing, at least it took individual initiative plus cooperation among state and federal governments to meet a need not being met by local industry. It should also be noted that the industrial makeup of a city does not remain static---note the above loss of seven significant industries. Happily, some new ones have taken their place, while older ones have expanded.

In the big picture of federal and state money used to benefit its citizens, the Donahue Terrace project was hardly a blip on government radar screens, yet extra care was made to determine if the project was worth taxpayer money.

We love to rant and rave about "red tape" but this is the way it should be. Thanks to citizen initiative and government aid, Baraboo got Donahue Terrace followed by the Corson Square complex and a city commission to operate the service. Hundreds of our less fortunate persons have benefited, as befits a great nation.