

Settlers wanted Railroad, Railroad wants Money

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

In a large country such as the United States, transportation has always been an essential service. Colonists in the Eighteenth century inherited a totally road-less wilderness, but made do with foot travel, riding a horse, or even in a stage coach as rudimentary trails were developed.

This lasted well into the Nineteenth century, but rail travel quickly revolutionized the modes of travel. Then the Twentieth century saw the advent of automobile. Now, in the Twenty-first century, we have significant travel by air, supplementing the railroad, automobile and truck. Sadly, we allowed our rail system, especially passenger service, to deteriorate following its stellar service in WWII.

Sauk County has participated in all four of these modes of travel, our first visitors arriving by horse. Later settlers employed horses and the stage coach. By the middle of the Nineteenth Century, however, it was obvious that most of Sauk County had a transportation problem...

The rapidly expanding national rail system was passing Sauk County by, with only very short stretches around Spring Green and Kilbourn even touching Sauk County soil. The vast interior of Sauk County only had rough passages over primitive roads to reach those rail terminals. Grain and other bounty of the soil and of the hands of men needed a closer outlet to the world.

Earlier articles in this series detailed how Baraboo and Reedsburg citizens and township leaders had financially bonded themselves with worthless bonds to induce railroad financiers to enter the county. Crossing the Wisconsin River would be at Merrimack and provide service diagonally to the Northwest. Those early articles may be seen in our three previous volumes at county libraries and Historical Societies.

The railroad financiers had good reason to be cautious about entering Sauk County. The rugged terrain of the Baraboo Bluffs prevented passage except by tunnel, with only one exception—the modest break in the bluffs at Devils Lake. Even this passage was a challenge, as a rather steep grade would be required.

The crest at Devils Lake would be the highest in Sauk County, with the tracks actually descending as they made their way to Baraboo. The water level at Devils Lake is higher than the courthouse in downtown Baraboo.

It was only after considerable persuasion, (largely financial) from the local Baraboo Airline Company (yes, Airline) that the Chicago and Northwestern line agreed to attempt construction. As mentioned, virtually all citizens and industrialists and municipalities had to bond themselves, it being widely known that the bonds were but an inducement to the railroad, and would never be redeemed.

The village of Baraboo alone had to come up with \$70,000 in 1860 dollars, multimillions in today's value, which it did cheerfully. So great was the desire and need for rail service that the citizenry voted 347 to 3 for the bonding, with full knowledge that the bonds would never be redeemed.

More of this critical improvement in the fortunes of the County is told in detail in our "Sauk County and Baraboo", Volume I, pages 229 to 240 along with reports on the auspicious arrival of the first engine. All libraries and historical societies in the county were given all three volumes in 2009, thanks to a grant from the Sauk County Arts and Culture Extension Committee. A fourth volume is anticipated this spring,

Besides the bluffs, there was another obstacle to entering Sauk County, one which gave the Railroad pause to reconsider the project. This was the need to cross the turbulent and untamed Wisconsin River at Merrimack.

Not only would the river require a significant railroad bridge, but almost immediately it would begin the challenging rise from the river valley to the Devils Lake Gap in the Baraboo Bluffs. An article will follow detailing the significant bridge construction necessary to bring Nineteenth Century travel and shipping to Sauk County.

