

Baraboo Fifty Years Ago--Part One of a Series

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This is story number 504 (that we know of) from our 16 year series of articles. Most if not all of our historical tales have been published in the News-Republic over the years, and are also available in four volumes. Having been an observer of the Baraboo scene for over fifty years, perhaps it is time for a little perspective.

Change in a city or a village is surprisingly significant in fifty years. Witness the change in LaRue from the boom days of the late 1800's to the early twentieth century. There once were row houses for iron minors, plus rooming houses, general stores, and at least one hotel. Yet today La Rue sports little more than a picturesque tavern.

Change would be expected in Baraboo, and indeed there have been a most remarkable series of changes to be outlined in the next article. Today we will confine our remarks, however, to Baraboo as it existed 50 years ago, in the very early 1960's.

It's not that Baraboo lacked the potential for change then. The close proximity of Devils Lake alone guaranteed that the town would always remain. That magnificent work of nature, and the geological history of our area going back some two billion years, guaranteed that man would find comfortable habitation here.

Baraboo had a history of business and industrial doldrums in the thirties and forties. By 1960 it was stirring with the early fruits of industrialization, as nurtured by the Baraboo Economic Corporation and its efforts to bring jobs to the economy. Already, in 1960, they had shown signs of progress, enticing a few industries to start up. That early success would mushroom in the succeeding decades, it was hoped.

So, the potential was there--a business climate ready to embrace competitive business and industry, and a population which liked living in Baraboo providing there were jobs.

Baraboo in 19 61

Baraboo's main claim to fame then was the Ringling and Gollmar Circuses, but they had moved away over 50 years ago, leaving little evidence. Someone said Baraboo was trying to get a local museum of the circus started, and even had purchased a single old Ringling building.

The other distinguishing feature of the city was the Al. Ringling Theatre, recognized nationally in many circles as the first in the nation of a palatial theatre for viewing the motion pictures, silent screens at first, and then with talking screens. As a full fledged playhouse, it also featured a vast number of stage performances from Broadway on their way to Minneapolis venues.

However, change was in the air. Perhaps it was best exemplified by town boosters such as John Lange and Ted Mandt, among others. Their Industrial Expansion Corporation had already shown some success, and the decade of the 60's would fulfill their goal of jobs and population growth. But even those avid town boosters could not visualize the changes in the 52 years which ensued, as will be noted in the next article..

True, the town was getting a new hospital and a new High School—ground had already been broken in 1961. But several old red brick Nineteenth Century public structures remained, such as the jail and the City Hall. In many ways the town fitted the stereotype of small town America, with all its advantages and also all of its unfulfilled needs. It was the seat of a prosperous county in a prosperous state, but just a one stoplight town (Broadway and Fourth).

The Business Climate

Baraboo's merchants offered a wide variety of choices, with at least six ladies stores and three for the men. Gas stations were everywhere, as were neighborhood groceries. Restaurants abounded, headed by Devi Bara, Boyd's Ritz, Farm Kitchen, and the two cafes in the Warre Hotel (soon to burn). Only one pizza place existed (Delmo's), as well as the still dependable Alpine.

Health-wise four druggists and six physicians, as well as only five dentists (15 or more now) served the community. Politically, the World War I generation still ruled, with an impatient WWII group waiting in the wings ready to burst onto the city stage. Much of the county mirrored Baraboo situation, just awakening from a post-war snooze. Like the city, the potential for growth was there, and showing signs of its awakening.

Such was Baraboo in the early 1960's, good but not a candidate for Fourth Best in the Nation, as the Smithsonian Magazine declared fifty years later in June of 2013.

Next article: In a sparkling half-century of change, Baraboo more than doubles in population, expands its amenities, and merits the Smithsonian designation.

~~~~~A 1950's aerial view of a much smaller city:

