

# Most Photographed Buildings in Baraboo

## Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

What is the most photographed structure in Downtown Baraboo? The Courthouse? The Methodist or Presbyterian Churches? The West Square building? How about the colonial style School District Headquarters on Oak and Second Avenue, built as a post office?

Our vote for most photographed structure is for the theater, but until 1937 it would have had to share that honor with a decrepit building next door, decrepit but with a history going back to the beginning of the city.

Notice the photo accompanying this article. The familiar and majestic theatre façade looms in a stately fashion over its curious and somewhat derelict neighbor to the east, a seemingly cobbled together frame structure requiring five or six steps up to enter the store. The two buildings present sort of a "beauty and the beast" arrangement.

Actually, Al. Ringling tried before 1915 to purchase the building and its neighbor to the east, no doubt offering far more than they were worth. Had he succeeded, there would be a classic façade there with two or three bays, all matching the present façade of the theater. Too bad they would not sell.

Some canny businessman apparently saw an advantage to his

location next to a busy and prestigious building, and refused to sell. The eyesore remained until Mid-April, 1937 when Al's nephew Henry Ringling Jr. purchased and demolished it.

In a short time the present building was built. It remained in Ringling family hands until its purchase a few years ago by the ART Friends. Today that structure serves as the very welcome new entrance and ticket and popcorn counter for the theater.

### A Significant History

In its day, the old building, or a portion of it, was a most imposing structure on the courthouse square, even though it was only 14 feet wide, and perhaps a little bit deeper. It was likened to a big wooden delivery box, and was first built on probably the NW corner of the square. Impressive because there were virtually no other buildings in what we now call Downtown Baraboo at that time.

It was first built in 1848 as temporary Courthouse; the year after Baraboo was selected as the county seat. The square probably existed then only on paper in the records of surveyor William Canfield. The building's significance was that it helped confirm Baraboo as the county seat, a prize hotly contested by nearby Reedsburg.

When a more substantial courthouse was built, it is said that this little structure was moved to a point at or near its more permanent location on Fourth Avenue. Tradition has it that it served as a jail for a time, and that Baraboo's irascible first settler, Abe Wood, was an early occupant. The dirt floor did not seem to be an obstacle, and Abe simply dug his way out. It also was a bar later on.

Despite the time-worn look of the façade, a brick annex to the rear was



Note the contrast between the grandiose theater façade and the 19<sup>th</sup> century frame structure. A small hillock was not removed, making the awkward steps up necessary. Henry Ringling II finally bought and removed the bldg.

Like many downtown buildings, it has had varied occupants. It was an abstract office, Cheek (Arthur) and Selleck., the structure then being purchased in 1919 by W.R. Schultz. He remained there until the time of the sale to Ringling.

added at one time, and the old structure served variously as a tavern, abstract office, barber shop, and combination safe shop, which accounts for the many small safes still extant in the city.

The curious steps have an explanation. The original landscape of downtown Baraboo included a hillock in the area of this building and the theatre, with a rise of some six feet or so. The small building was simply hauled there, and when the street was leveled and a sidewalk was put in later, steps were necessary. Note that you go up steps today to enter the Square Tavern, a remnant of the former hillock.

To build his theater, Al. Ringing bought and demolished the ancient Wisconsin House hotel and had that land leveled to the sidewalk level. When construction began, the land was actually excavated even more to allow for the sloping seating in the auditorium of the theatre.

#### A New Building

There is reason to speculate that Henry Ringling Jr. had designs on the next building beyond this to the east also. At this time, 1937, he was planning a second theater to keep out competition, and an adjacent operation would be convenient. If so, that purchase fell through, and next year his Julian Theatre rose nearby on Broadway. The old building next east on Fourth Avenue still remains, though remodeled, with white pillars.

At least seven businesses have occupied the new building which Henry Ringling erected. It now serves, in a way, Al. Ringling's original plan, for last year an opening was made to the classic Italian lobby. Unspoiled during the Ringling family ownership, the 1953 Milwaukee owners had installed a ticket and popcorn counter sitting well toward

the center of the foyer like a big sore thumb.

Those services now been moved into the annex, which also provides room for receptions and business offices besides the ticket sales and refreshment. Restoration is nearing completion in the foyer. We think Al. would approve.