

Successful Regatta Drew Crowds

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

June 22 will be an anniversary of sorts, a 129th anniversary no less. As was described in an article earlier this month, thousands of people from the Midwest had converged on Devils Lake on June 20, 1877, for a skull racing event. To the consternation of the committee, however, the day was rainy and blustery, unfit for skull racing on the rough waters of Devils Lake. Therefore it was announced that the races would be postponed to the next day, Thursday June 21, 1877. To add to the executive committee's frustration, the skies cleared nicely later in the day, but it was too late to restart the event.

Thursday the 21st was sunny, however, with a cool breeze, and the "programme" began, with the complete reporting of results in the Republic. It stated that "our streets were crowded with teams and people in countless numbers...excursion trains from the East brought thousands more, variously counted from 5000 to 8000." The Republic noted that "a clear day and a cooling breeze put everybody in good humor, and those that were disappointed the previous day rallied to the scene among the foremost."

The racing course went from near the Cliff House to a marker a mile distant, near the middle of the lake. Curiously the cannon pictured in the last article is not mentioned but must have been used to start the races. The oarsmen represented seven clubs, the Milwaukee Midwest, the Riverdale, the Niles of Michigan Rowing Club, Northwestern Rowing Association, the Minnetonka (Minnesota), the Farragut (Chicago), and of course the Minnewaukan Club of Baraboo. All brought single or double (four-oared) sculls with them.

In the first race the Minnesota rower dropped out "frightened of the rough waters and unable to swim." The other St. Paul rower "stove a hole in his boat" slowing him down. The Niles Michigan rower won, with Tom Thomas of Baraboo a close second, covering the mile in 16:30 minutes. The winner received a prize of \$50, not an insignificant sum in those days, with perhaps the buying power of several hundred dollars today.

The second race was for common boats. The newspaper reports are fuzzy, but the prize was only "two \$5 greenback dollars" as they were called in those days. Only three skulls were involved in the third race, but the Republic reported that "some fine work was done in this race." The newspaper also dutifully reported the number of strokes per mile for each skull, ranging from 14 to 38. There was also a photo finish for this race, the winner completing the race of two miles in 11.32 minutes. The fourth race was for single sculls, represented by Tom Thomas of Baraboo with his homemade butternut boat. One boat was in the lead "until the waves broke in his deck and another boat came in first, with Baraboo's Thomas second."

The final race of the day was for four-oared skulls, with four medals of \$30 each, but only three shells entered. Thomas did well considering that someone had stepped in his boat earlier and "stove a hole in it", requiring emergency repairs. Awards for the day were



The Second Racing day

On Friday "the weather was more propitious, and the water exceedingly quiet," with at least 3600 onlookers in attendance. We will not attempt to describe each race in detail, but note that the first was for double sculls (awards were two \$25 medals), while the next was for common boats, no prize mentioned. Next came four-oared sculls, followed by a 100 yard swimming race with a \$20 medal. Next came a single scull race, and the festivities concluded with a 50 yard tub race, the tubs being "of medium size.

announced from the balcony of the Cliff House, after a few remarks by Captain Cowles. He was accompanied by a committee of young ladies from Chicago, New York, and Baraboo. The latter included such well known Baraboo family names as Marie Gattiker, Della Draper, Ella Pointon, Laura Cowles, Carrie Butler, Ada Ryan, Miss Drown, and also Master Myers, who won the Goose Race.

On Friday “the weather was more propitious, and the water exceedingly quiet”, with at least 3000 onlookers in attendance. We will not attempt to describe each race in detail, but note that the first race was for double skulls (\$25 purse), while the next race was for common boats—no prize was mentioned. Soon came a 100 yard race with a \$25 medal. Next came four-oared sculls, and the festivities concluded with a 50 yard tub race, the tubs being “of a medium size...all but two went to the bottom.” In a curious newspaper ad, Mr. H. L Gray wrote “I want to rent for the regatta, to be delivered to the lake on the afternoon of Jun 21st, 1 dozen full grown geese, for which a liberal price will be given.”

The Republic makes no mention of it, but it is likely that the steamship Minnewaukan had the busiest day of its career on Devils Lake during the races. It replaced the Capitola, which was launched in 1869, and served for five years. General U.S. Grant is said to have been a passenger during its days on the lake. It is said that the boat was used at times “for midnight concerts by musicians playing from the middle of the lake. That musical feature has occasionally been resurrected by Jerry Stich and his musicians, but not at midnight that we know of.

The old newspapers are interesting to read. On the same day as the regatta is a notice to a large number of residents requiring them to install sidewalks on their property. On July 18, 1877 “there will be a school meeting to conclude the matter organizing a high school for the city.” Also announced by the Baraboo Ball Club was “at our first game we will appear in full dress”. A very brief mention was made of the plans of Col. Sumner to build a hotel. It became the landmark Warren Hotel, which burned in 1963, some 80 years later.

As might be expected, Chicago gamblers “reaped a fine harvest during the day”, but were hauled into court that evening and fined \$75. The paper expressed outrage at their presence. I guess we can't say that life was so dull in 1877, with multi-state racing, uniformed baseball players, and midnight serenades on the lake. And yes, a controversy about sidewalks.