



Confluence

Where Past Meets Present

Volume 31 Issue 4

BELOIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

July/August, 2022

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BELOIT'S SOAPBOX DERBY

Millions of people have witnessed or taken part in soapbox derby races that began in the 1930s in Dayton, Ohio. Boys ages 11-15, were allowed to compete in their communities throughout the country for a chance to race in the national championship (now held in Akron). Girls could not race until the 1970s. The 1950s and 60s were the heyday for the sport when it was sponsored by Chevrolet and TV and movie stars made appearances.

Roller skate wheels were attached to orange crates, discarded lumber or soapboxes during the early racing years. Later, participants were required to buy the official kit which contained the wheels and two axles. Many companies sponsored racers by paying for the kit. In return, the company name was painted on both sides of the car.

The source of power was gravity, so races were held on hills with an elevated starting ramp built by the public works employees. In Beloit, the hill at the south end of Park Ave. was used. Later, the race was moved to the hill at the east end of Liberty Ave. The weight limit for the car plus driver was 250 pounds, so it was advantageous to get as close to the weight as possible. Adding steel, lead etc. to the car was strictly forbidden, so boys often used a lot of bolts or other heavy materials in the construction of the car.

The cars were brought to the Bud Weiser Chevrolet dealership on a Friday in early June. The race was held that Saturday with each racer wearing his helmet and official T-shirt. Following the race, all drivers attended a banquet at the Beloit Country Club where prizes were awarded. Many Beloiters have fond memories of these races. Pages 4-5 give more information about the derby items in our collection.

(Some information was taken from *Growing Up in Beloit* by Robert Burdick)



The **Federal Emergency Relief Act of May 12, 1933**, implemented President Roosevelt's first major initiative to combat the economic and social effects of the Great Depression. It gave manual labor jobs to millions of predominately unskilled workers. This stone map of Wisconsin located at the municipal golf course west of the clubhouse, was constructed with painstaking care as to size and accuracy through this act. The steps lead to picnic grounds located on a small knoll. The workers also planted 2,100 trees and 10,000 shrubs. Labor and funds for many additional projects for the golf course/natatorium area were provided by CWA (Civil Works Administration) and WPA (Works Progress Administration) which replaced FERA in 1935. These programs were in effect during the late 30s and early 40s.

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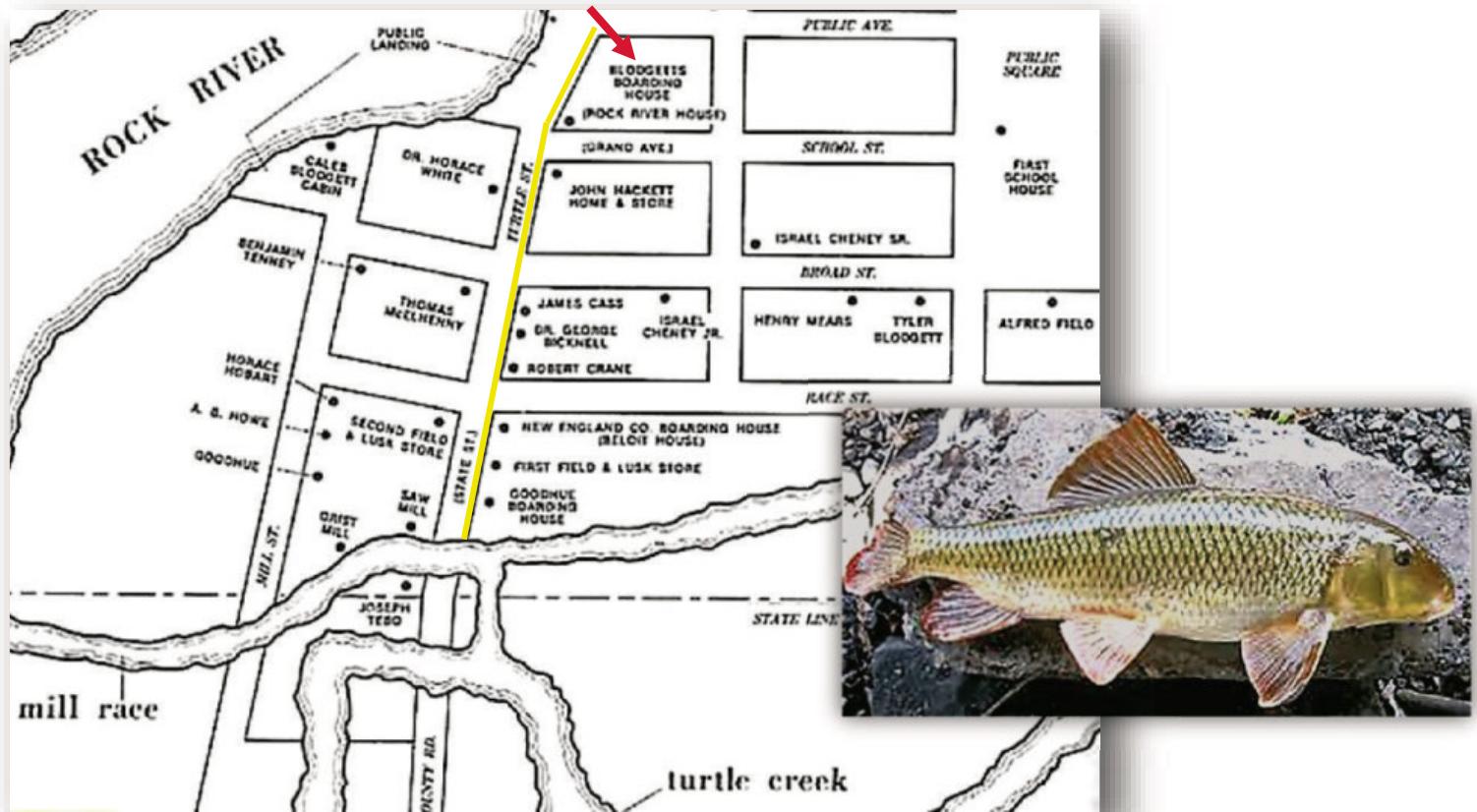

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Recently we found a letter-size envelope labeled in pencil "Beloit's First Fish Dinner". The envelope contained two sheets of paper filled with penciled notes. There were a few complete sentences, but the contents seemed to be more for chronology and key points to be used by the author in telling a story or giving a short speech. No author is indicated nor are any sources provided. However, parts of this story are referenced in Ellery Crane's *History of the Settlement of Beloit* and William Fiske Brown's *History of Rock County Wisconsin, A New History.... Vol. 1, (1908)*. (Thanks to Tom Larsen for this information). The following is a transcription of these notes in complete sentences to make it easier for the reader.

Beloit's First Fish Dinner

In the winter of 1836, the members of the New England Emigration Company dug a race from Turtle Creek at the head of Broad Street along a line now followed by the Chicago Milwaukee and St Paul Railroad switch tracks. They built a flume as part of the mill race and started to build a mill. They let the water in to try to see if it worked. Around April 1, 1837, the frost went out of the ground and the banks of the race crumpled flooding Turtle Street (State Street today) to the Blodgett residence on the riverbank. The flume was closed. The next morning, they found it blocked with fish. The fish were Red Horse, a coarse fish weighing from two to four pounds. Food had been scarce. They had to walk to Stephen Mack's Trading Post four miles for tea, coffee and sugar. They had no milk or butter. One barrel of pork hauled from Rockford cost \$31 (over \$700 today). It was found to be half brine and other barrels were spoiled and not fit for food. Thus, the catch of Red Horse was hailed with joy. Every family in "Turtle" had fish dinners. Caleb Blodgett then closed the flume regularly to trap more fish. The Ho Chunk Indians taught the villagers how to spear the fish and dry them which enabled them to be kept much longer.



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History Detectives - by Donna Langford

Historians' work involves the investigation of the past by analyzing many different types of materials to get as complete an understanding of the past as possible. This investigation process makes connections similar to the way detectives fit different clues together. The collections at the Beloit Historical Society contain a wide variety of material types such as three-dimensional artifacts, photographs, video, scrapbooks and documents. Each of these material types have clues to share that connect with other materials to provide a richer understanding of history.

When researching a topic for an exhibit or an educational program, society staff looks at a variety of materials and makes connections. The Soap Box Derby Tournaments serve as an example of how different materials work together to tell a story.



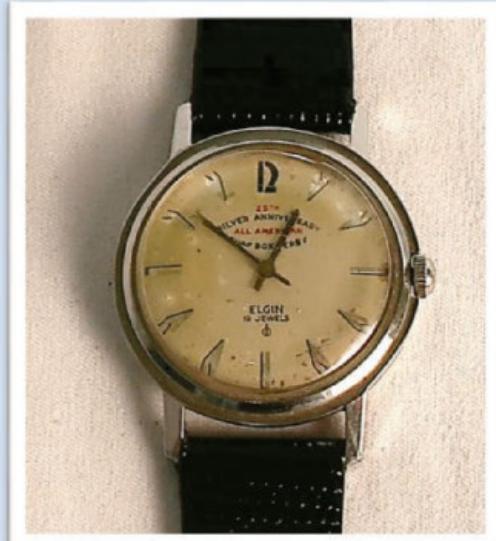
The Soap Box Derby Tournaments engaged thousands of youth in the Beloit area during the first half of the 20th century. The local competitions were a part of national championships encouraging young people to reach for high goals.

Photographs such as this 1955 derby race provide information on speed. Video provides additional information through movement and live action of how the race starts, the sound and reactions of the crowd.

Scrapbooks provide pieces of information selected by the maker of the scrapbook. They tend to contain different information on each page and a variety of materials such as newspaper clippings, photographs, greeting cards, letters and other types of documents.



Newspaper articles provide information that can be connected to three-dimensional objects such as a watch that was a prize to race winners. The watch itself provides further information through the name and date (David Jacobsen Soap Box Derby Champion 1962) engraved on the back and imprinted on the watch face is "25th Silver Anniversary All American Soap Box Derby".



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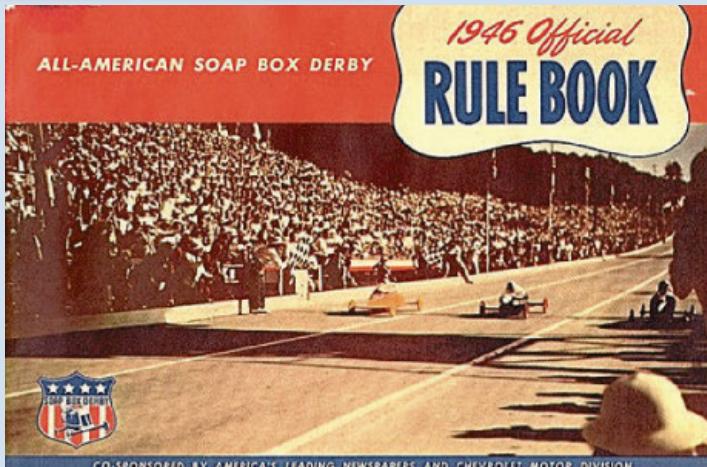
History Detectives Continued

5

Racers in local contests had to follow national rules and the boys were required to make their own cars. A photograph of a car kit being boxed also shows a rule book. Looking closely at the picture, the rule book was recognized as one within the society's collections.



Historic documents such as a soap box derby driver's license and weight tags recorded costs of car construction and weights as well as the driver name which shows the same person participated for multiple years.



Learning from historic materials is a process of making connections and the application of critical thinking and analysis to recognize relationships and gain a better understanding of history.

TAKE A GUESS

Beloit Historical Society is located on the former site of Lincoln Junior High School. Before the school was built, what was the field sometimes used for?

Word of mouth traveled quickly in the surrounding neighborhoods when bands of gypsies would take over the field with their horse-drawn wagons with box-like structures for living. Colors ran from blue to gold with splashes of red and orange, with fancy designs emblematic of their homeland and possibly their particular tribes. They camped in the south and wended their way north to the Midwest arriving in Illinois and Wisconsin in May.

Out of fearfulness, parents cautioned their children not to stray from home. Children watched from a distance as they found them as fascinating as they were colorful and exotic. The men wore clothing typical of southern European countries and the women always dressed in flowing skirts of many hues and had headdresses similar to veils. They wore a variety of jewelry including large earrings.

Gypsies immigrated to the United States from southern and eastern Europe in the later 1800s. The men were horse-traders in this burgeoning agricultural land. That demand for draft horses dropped after the conclusion of the First World War when the country began using motor vehicles and equipment. The men also were tradesmen and repaired and re-tinned industrial equipment. The women were fortune tellers and sold jewelry.

The City of Beloit passed a law that prohibited gypsies from camping inside the city limits. They then set up camp close to the city on Madison Road and Prairie Road in South Beloit. The wanderers eventually disappeared, but when they were here, they added excitement and color to the summertime.

(Excerpts taken from a Beloit Daily News article by Bill Behling)

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OUR "WATER WITCH"

Is it possible to imagine life without fire services in a modern world? Who would we call in times of great need? This was the reality for many Beloit residents. Prior to the 1850's, Beloit's system of firefighting relied on "fire wells" placed every hundred yards along State Street. While this system helped, it did not prevent the large-scale fire that burned down the store of E. D. Murray on April 6, 1854. This fire became the driver that would push Beloit into establishing its first official firefighting service.

In November of 1855, A.J. Battin, a former New York firefighter, assembled a team of volunteers and purchased the "Water Witch" using funds gained through "popular subscription". The "Water Witch" was able to tap into the fire wells that were already established along State Street. In an old myth, a witch was able to locate water underground using a magical metal rod. Thus, the name "Water Witch" was given to Beloit's very first fire engine.

To operate the pump, the chief of the company would tap his hat on the metal parts of the engine so hand pumping could be done on a regular cadence. In his other hand, he held a trumpet that orders could be called through. The trumpet eventually became synonymous with fire departments and would later be re-imagined as trophies for Rock County fire fighting competitions. Fire companies from Beloit won in 1857 and in 1879. Both winning trophies are housed in the Lincoln Center collection.

Over the next few decades, the "Water Witch" company dealt with the effects of the Civil War. According to the 1890 Fire Committee Chairman, W.O. Hansen, "This company ["Water Witch Co #1], owing to dissension among members - disbanded." The "Water Witch" was then sold to the Village of Pearl City, Illinois. In 1912, it was bought back from Pearl City by W.O. Hansen for the Beloit Fire Department.

Though its condition was good, it was no longer the ideal form of firefighting technology and was retired to be used at events and parades until it was donated to the Historical Society where it is proudly on display today.



Water Witch postcard



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Inductees left to right: Mike Borgerding, Harley Whitt (father) accepting on Chris Whitt's behalf, Mike Hodges, Jim Steiner, Lenette (Range) Holden and Andy Trice - Haskell-Barkin Lifetime Achievement Award
(Photo courtesy of the Beloit Daily News)

The Sports Hall of fame was founded following the death of Edward Louis "Ted" Perring in 1985 at the age of 57. Perring left a bequest of \$5,000 to the historical society to honor athletes in the Beloit area. The society director Evelyn Wehrle asked board member Jerry Elliott to form a committee. Elliott served as chairman of the Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremony from 1986 until his death in 2012. In the 35-year history of the Hall of fame, more than 185 outstanding local athletes and coaches have been enshrined. The 2022 induction dinner took place at the Rotary River Center on June 14 with 127 attendees.

ANDY TRICE, Haskell-Barkin Lifetime Achievement Award

Beloved veteran football coach Andy Trice became the head coach at South Beloit High School in 1977 and rebuilt a team with low numbers. By 1982, the Sobos were a powerhouse in the then-Trailblazer Conference and qualified for the IHSA playoffs. Trice's 40-plus year coaching career has included roles as a line coach at Beloit Memorial as a High School, Beloit College and finally Hononegah High school. Athletes long remember that one coach who had the greatest impact on their athletic career as well as their personal life. For hundreds of high school and college football players in the Stateline area - that coach is Andy Trice.

MIKE BORGERDING, the Beloit Catholic 1974 graduate was a multi-sport athlete for the Crusaders, at running back on the football team and guard in basketball. He truly excelled in track and field, leading the Crusaders to a pair of WISAA state titles. In 1972, he set a meet record in the 440-yard dash (50.3 seconds). The following year, he was named the Most Outstanding Athlete at state as the Crusaders repeated as champions.

MICHAEL HODGES, helped lead the Purple Knights basketball team as one of the top teams in Wisconsin. With Hodges on the roster, the Knights earned a trip to the state tournament his junior season and were ranked no. 2 in the state his senior year. Hodges was first-team All-Big Eight both his junior and senior seasons. Hodges earned a scholarship from NCAA Division 1 University of Richmond. As a senior starter in 1994, he led Richmond in scoring and rebounding and was named All-Conference.

LENETTE (RANGE) HOLDEN, a member of South Beloit's Class of 1981, Range teamed with Stacey Neal and Eva Robinson to win a SHARK Conference basketball title. All three were named All Conference that season. In three years, the trio would compile a 54-13 record, win two regional titles, one undisputed SHARK Conference championship and two co-championships.

JIM STEINER, while Beloit Turner's varsity football team went 0-10 in 1981, the freshmen team was undefeated with Steiner as one of the standouts. He would become a mainstay in Coach Ed Gavigan's turnaround of the Trojans' program. His junior year of 1982, Steiner was a first team All-Area linebacker. As a senior he earned All-Area Player of the Year, first team All-RVC and second team All-State. He was also a starter on the Turner baseball team and went on to play college football at UW-La Crosse, where the Eagles played in three NCAA Division-III national championships, winning one.

CHRIS WHITT, a 1990 graduate, Whitt ranks among the all-time best football players for Beloit Memorial High School. As a junior, he was named first team All-Big Eight and as a senior, he was Big Eight Player of the Year and first team All-State. Whitt qualified for the state track meet in the shot put and was also a two-time All-Area wrestler at 189 pounds, winning a Big Eight title as a senior and finishing sixth at state.

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A WARM WELCOME TO OUR NEW ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT JESSE HERSCHER

I am the new Administrative Assistant with the Beloit Historical Society. I recently moved to Beloit from Chicago, where I attended Northeastern Illinois University and graduated cum laude with a degree in history. While history is my greatest passion, music is an irreplaceable part of my life. I have won awards at the collegiate level in both jazz bass and piano. After living in Beloit for just a few months, it has become apparent to me how passionate this town's residents are for their home. It brings me great joy to aid in the preservation and accessibility of Beloit's unique history.

(Please note that Jesse wrote the article on page 6. Thank you, Jesse!)

BHS RECEIVES GRANT FOR ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE

The Beloit Historical Society was awarded a \$5000 grant for repairs on the one-room schoolhouse located on the Hanchett-Bartlett property. The **Wisconsin Blackhawk Chapter #223 of the International Questers Organization** applied for the grant on behalf of the society. The Questers Club is an organization with the mission to keep history alive by supporting preservation, restoration and education. They work as local chapters within a larger organization to fundraise and identify projects to fulfill their mission within their chapter communities.

The schoolhouse project is seen as a significant historic example representing local education in our region from when it was built in 1850 and in use until the 1920s. This recently received grant will repair the west door, its threshold and siding on the west wall. About \$21,000 is estimated to completely repair the schoolhouse which includes the support beam under the floor and other foundation repairs. Additional funding will be sought to completely restore what is needed to ensure the future of this school house.

In April 1970, the Beloit Historical Society made a resolution stating that a "pioneer schoolhouse" would be placed on the Hanchett- Bartlett Homestead located at 2149 St. Lawrence Ave. in Beloit, Wisconsin to honor the contributions of **Miss Daisy W. Chapin** to the education of children in Beloit. The one-room school house, built in 1850 on Colley Road, served students in the first through eighth grades until the 1920s. **Ron Dougan** who was a student and later a teacher at the school, moved the building across the field to his farm, donating it for use at the Beloit Historical Society in 1970 when it was restored. In the early twentieth century, there were about 6200 one-room schoolhouses in Wisconsin. They provided education to all of the students within a rural community, preparing them for high-school. With the use of busing in the 1930s, transportation was easier and the one-room schoolhouses stopped being used. Over time many of these school houses were lost to nature and decay. The Chapin one-room schoolhouse owned by the Beloit Historical Society is intact, preserving an important part of American educational history.



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Message from Executive Director, Donna Langford



With the start of summer, we welcome Jesse Herscher, our new Administrative Assistant. We also greet new interns; Kiersten, Paige, and Katie. Volunteer Kelsey joins the group to learn about collections management with the cataloging of new donations to the collections. The summer promises to pass quickly as it is full of orientation and training for the new staff, interns and six new volunteers.

We are working to provide new exhibits at the Lincoln Center with their unveiling during **Heritage Days, September 9 – 12th**. Details about Heritage Days activities at BHS will be posted to our Facebook page <http://facebook.com/beloithistory> and on our website <http://beloithistory.org>.

Have a fun and safe summer!

Donna Langford



In Memory

We were saddened to hear of the death of former BHS member **Elizabeth Merchant** on May 26. She came to Beloit in 1959 with her husband George. They lived here for 48 years raising their children and volunteering in the community. She returned to her hometown of Rothchild in 2007 after the death of her husband.

BHS has received a memorial in her name from **Jeff and Susan Johnson**.

Annual Meeting May 20, 2022

This year's annual meeting took place on Friday, May 20, at Lincoln Center. Warm food was provided by *Mary's Place* of South Beloit. The meatballs were a particularly big hit.

Guests were present in person for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic, though zoom was available to those who could not attend physically.

Board President Rick Dexter called the meeting to order, and with Executive Director Donna Langford, discussed the past year's finances and strategies. Following Rick's discussion, was a presentation on the historical method given by Donna. It covered the diverse and fascinating history of Beloit's marble tournaments and soap box derby races, while highlighting the "detective" like process used by historians and museum professionals as featured in this *Confluence* on pages 4 & 5. This prompted a great discussion about the past and how it is interpreted. Some amazing personal stories were also shared by our members who were involved in the soap box derby years ago.



Welcome New Members

Lynn Blair-Rasmussen

Elizabeth Brewer

Judy Steinbach

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WELCOME SUMMER INTERNS

**Kiersten Faldet**

I'm the full-time WAICU intern for BHS this summer of 2022. I'm an upcoming Junior at Beloit College majoring in Anthropology and minoring in Museum Studies. I work as an archives assistant for the Beloit College Archives during the school term. I first became interested in the summer internship position because it would provide an excellent

opportunity for hands-on exploration of collections management. Through my time here at Beloit Historical Society, I hope to familiarize myself with the procedure and methods of the institution while also becoming more familiar with the history of the Beloit community. I've enjoyed the time that I've spent working at BHS so far, and I look forward to all of the things I'll learn during my time here.

**Paige Clark**

I am an intern for the Beloit Historical Society this summer. I am a rising senior at Beloit College. I am a history and anthropology major as well as a French minor. I will be working on several projects for the Beloit Historical society, ranging from cataloging inventory to data entry to grant writing. I am so excited to work with the Beloit

Historical society and advocate for its mission of pride in a tight-knit, diverse community.

Note: A third intern, Katie Kraemer, joined us recently. A picture and bio will appear in the next issue of Confluence.

TRIVIA TEASER

Question: What was the greatest number of dance halls Beloit had at one time?

When the original Goodwin Opera House was built, it had a large dance hall on the 3rd floor. It was not open to the public but was made available to the more exclusive set of that period. Invitations were issued by management. Tickets were \$1 for the dance halls. Through the years there were others. These included: Eagle, Hancheet, K.P. Hall, Smiley's, Odd Fellows, Modern Woodman, Fenlon's, Columbian, K of C, Cosmo, Union, McVey and Goodwin.

Answer: At one time Beloit could boast of ten dance halls. The room asking for dances from the men went around the room up to 24 dances. The men fished a program of up to 24 dances. Each guest was dance from 9 pm until 2 am. Each guest was issued by management. Tickets were \$1 for the dance halls. Through the years there were others. These included: Eagle, Hancheet, K.P. Hall, Smiley's, Odd Fellows, Modern Woodman, Fenlon's, Columbian, K of C, Cosmo, Union, McVey and Goodwin.

DID YOU KNOW?

Indoor plumbing began to be installed in Beloit in 1886. In order to promote the idea of using indoor plumbing as a source for water, **Beloit Water Works** installed faucets at all homes asking residents to use them to secure drinking water for a time.

In 1890 the first bathtub was installed in the city. It was made of tin with a wooden bottom, painted blue inside and trimmed with black, blue and gilt stipes.

Some indoor plumbing involved installing a large galvanized tub in the attic which was filled with a water pump, permitting the water to flush and feed the faucets in the home by gravity. Waste water was allowed to run into a buried cistern, outhouse or privy well.

It was after 1900 that home owners adopted pipes and indoor plumbing to any extent.

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SOAPBOX DERBY CAR

The Soapbox Derby was a popular event in Beloit for many years. This car is part of our collection of items about the races.

See the front page and the article on pages 4 and 5 to relive memories of those fun days.



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