

Badger History Group, Inc. (BHG)

Recommendations for the Master Plan for the proposed “Sauk Prairie Recreation Area.”
Adopted by the Board of Directors, May 22, 2012.

Introduction

Casualties of War

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These are the names of the ten workers who died in accidental explosions while producing munitions for the defense of the United States at the Badger Ordnance Works/Army Ammunition Plant. In addition, at least twenty more workers died in accidents while working on construction, materials handling or security.

Their sacrifices and the labor of the estimated 60,000 others who worked at Badger from 1942 until 1998 make the property soon to be included in the “Sauk Prairie Recreation Area” unique in the true sense of the term. That is, **one of a kind**.

The Badger property was part of the defense establishment of the United States for over sixty years. It played a key role in the American victory in World War II and in the decades-long Cold War against communism that followed. Badger supplied munitions for American and Allied troops fighting in Korea in the early 1950s. In ten years of operation in the 1960s and 1970s, Badger was America’s largest and most important producer of munitions for American troops fighting in Southeast Asia. Badger continued to be an important part of America’s defense against communism. Not until the demise of the Soviet Union and the overthrow of communist governments in eastern Europe did America’s defense strategists feel safe enough to decommission Badger. These are facts of history and cannot be ignored in any future planning.

The property has a distinctive geological and geographic history. It is historically significant to the Ho-Chunk people and the American farming community that displaced them. It is unique—one of a kind—because of the “powder plant.”

The Badger Re-Use Plan, adopted by Sauk County Board in 2003 and to which the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is signatory, is intended to serve as a mandate for planning on the Badger property. It has numerous statements calling for the preservation of the history of the property from geologic times to decommissioning, including landscape features and historically significant buildings. It also makes repeated statements calling for the creation of educational

facilities and programs, and for the establishment of memorials to the Ho Chunk, the displaced farmers, and the munitions workers. It is easy to cite chapter and verse from the Re-Use Plan and find declarations of support for all the proposals listed below. In the interest of keeping this statement as brief as possible, we have chosen not to do so. At the same time, let us reiterate that every point on this list meets the stated values and goals of the Re-Use Plan.

Recommendations

Mission Statement

The mission statement of the “Sauk Prairie Recreation Area” should include, as one of its leading points, a commitment to preserving and sharing the history of the property. This is compatible with the educational role of “a recreation area” as defined in state statute.

Name

Because of the unique status bestowed on the property as part of the defense establishment of the United States, the name of the property should be “The Sauk Prairie/Badger Ordnance Recreation Area.” Badger Ordnance Works was the original name of the facility.

(Let it be noted that the Badger plant has been resident in “Sauk” County longer than the Sauk Indians were. Refugees of fur-trade warfare, the Sauk migrated to Wisconsin first from Michigan then from Iowa and settled on the edge of the prairie that bears their name in the 1740s. Still pursued by their enemies, the Sauk started to leave the area in the 1760s and, by the 1780s, the site of their village was abandoned. The powder plant possesses as legitimate a claim to the name of the recreation area as the Sauk, and certainly the right to share it.)

Visitor/Heritage Center

In keeping with the recreation area’s commitment to education, a visitor/heritage center should be in the master plan. It should include space for educational programs, meetings, a theater for video programs, space for historical displays and offices for WDNR staff and volunteer organizations. This is not merely a history museum. It is a multi-use structure. As models for this center, we recommend the visitor centers at the Midewin National Tall Grass Prairie in Illinois and the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin.

Memorials

Space should be set aside, accessible to all, within the borders of the recreation area for the following memorials:

The Farmer’s Memorial was erected off Highway 12 by family members and has been maintained by members of the families who sacrificed their farms in defense of the United States in 1942.

The “Symbol of Strength” Munitions Workers Memorial is a stone and plaque currently in the parking lot off Highway 12. It should be preserved and, in time, replaced by a larger monument to those who gave their lives for their country at Badger and those who worked for its defense.

Ho-Chunk Removal Memorial. There is no memorial to this sad chapter of American history in Wisconsin. The Ho-Chunk people were seized and forcibly exiled from Wisconsin many times between 1840 and 1870. The recreation area is a suitable place for such a memorial. This is not just a

matter for the Ho-Chunk. Their removal, and return, is part of the heritage of all Americans, especially in Wisconsin, and specifically in Sauk County, where the man who led the Ho-Chunk back to their homes is buried.

Cemetery Access

With the final status of the transfer of land to the Ho-Chunk unresolved, access to the Pioneer Cemetery, the Thielke Cemetery, and the plot containing the Miller family stones is in the hands of the WDNR. Access for all to the cemeteries must be maintained. It should be noted that at some time in the future, the Miller plot is likely to be examined to determine if it is truly a grave site. If not, the stones may be moved to the Pioneer Cemetery and retained as memorials to the children they commemorate.

The Railway Trail

The rail right of way bisecting the property is destined to become a recreational trail. The Master Plan should include provisions for the erection of informational signs or kiosks along the route. They should utilize up-to-date technology and present the history of the property from geological time to decommissioning. The story of the ancient seas that covered the property, the glacial period, the woodland and grassland regimes that followed, and the first evidences of human habitation should be portrayed. The native American years, the settlement and farm community, the powder plant years, the clean up process, the efforts of environmental activists, and the grassland restoration era that followed can all be displayed with traditional signage or in the latest digital form.

Digital Trails

Significant historic sites can be located and identified with GPS markers. These might include geological and geographic features, important Indian sites, pioneer farmsteads, sites where powder workers died, production sites and more. The markers can be incorporated into web-based/smartphone applications. Photos from the BHG archives can be added, along with identifying text. When completed this system would constitute a virtual historical museum of the property.

Family Farm Markers

Many descendants of the farmers who gave up their homes in 1942 maintain a strong attachment to their former family farms. Many of them would be happy to fund the erection of a permanent as possible marker at their homesteads. This proposal is similar to the state park program that allows citizens to place memorial benches to loved ones in parks at their own expense. In fact, the markers might take the form of benches to be used by hikers on the Digital Trails.

Funding

To implement any of the above recommendations will require funding. We recognize that, in the current fiscal climate, WDNR cannot do it alone. Therefore, the master plan should include provisions for the formation of partnerships between the public and private sector to fund the projects and programs we advocate. We also pledge to help build these partnerships to help realize our mutual goals.

Conclusion

We conclude where we began. The property to be occupied by the “Sauk Prairie Recreation Area” is unique because of the role it played in the defense of the United States and the sacrifices made by the men and women who worked there. Their legacy must be preserved as part of the Master Plan.