# Badger Ordnance News

Spring 2023

**Badger History Group Inc.**
**POB 113**
**Prairie du Sac WI 53578**

**Affiliate of the**
**Wisconsin Historical Society**

**Member of Sauk Prairie Area**
**Chamber of Commerce**

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**MUSEUM OPEN**

**TUESDAY- SATURDAY 10:00-4:00**
**MASKS AND SOCIAL DISTANCING OPTIONAL**

**Museum off US Hwy 12**
**Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area**
**(SPSRA is the property of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources)**

*The mission of the Badger History Group, Inc. is to collect, preserve and share the histories of the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant and the Sauk prairie. We help each other learn from the past, engage with the present, and guide our shared future..*

## Board of Directors

Orie Eilertson, Merrimac
Verlyn Mueller, Prairie du Sac
Michael Mossman, Leland
Sandy Stiemke, Sauk City
Heather Sonntag, Madison
Dan Halling, Prairie du Sac
Frank Wolf, Mazomanie

Newsletter Editor
Michael Goc

# Lecture Series Continues

## March 9, 2023, 7:00 PM
## At the museum and on Zoom

# Verlyn Mueller

*Who Were Those People Who Lived Here Before March 1, 1942?*

Verlyn Mueller is the President and Archivist of the Badger History Group. A native of Prairie du Sac, he worked at BAAP for 26 years and has been a leading force in BHG since its founding. March 1, 1942 was the date on which the Sauk Prairie landowners had to vacate their land. Verlyn will tell what prairie life was like before the century-old farm community met an abrupt end.

# Lectures Continue

**Lectures are on the second Thursday of each month at 7:00-8:00 PM at the Museum and on Zoom**

**March 9, 2023**
**Verlyn Mueller**
*Who Were Those People Who Lived Here Before March 1, 1942?*

**April 13, 2023**
**Dan Halling**
*Badger's Champion Trees*
A retired history teacher at Sauk Prairie and a BHG board member, Dan will talk about his quest to locate and measure the largest trees at Badger. He will answer the who, what, when, where, why, and how questions about this project and show some examples of the exceptional trees on the property. The picture shows his assistant, Charlie, posing next to **the large Norway Spruce in the Thoelke Cemetery**. The tree is growing over the grave of little Maria Gasser who died at age five in 1873.

**May 11, 2023**
**Michael Goc**
*From Swords to Ploughshares, The 1970s at BAAP*

Your editor,will talk about a decade of change at Badger. At the start of the '70s the plant was in full production mode, churning out more propellant than ever. By the end of the '70s, the plant was idle and about 1,700 acres were being leased to the new USDA Dairy Forage Research Station. A few other things happened along the way and we will cover many of them**. The photo is from the 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now*.**

**Badger And The History Guy**
The History Guy is a youtube series where a fast-talking historian does a good job of compressing big subjects into short videos. He covered Badger's beginnings in about 14 minutes. BHG Member Joel Green initiated the effort and Verlyn Mueller shared our archives. View it at: https://youtu.be/P42NeumZcpw.

**The Badger Lands?** (from our new website)
We use the terms "Badger", "Badger Lands" or "Badger Army Ammunition Plant lands" to refer to the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant (aka Badger Ordnance Works) and the Sauk prairie land on which the plant was built and eventually deconstructed—to distinguish the land and its inhabitants from the relatively short, approximately 70-year occupancy by the ammunition plant itself. These terms acknowledge the site's ancient history, which includes its geological formation, the tenures and forced removals of indigenous communities and the Euro-American farm community, and the central role of the ammunition plant, its decommissioning, and subsequent mitigation, recovery, and reuse. We try always to recognize the interrelationships among these various "Badger" histories and their connections with broader geographic, historical, cultural, and environmental perspectives.

# From the Archivist

**Verlyn Mueller**

In our last newsletter I wrote about an artifact we had recently received. This time I am writing about two artifacts we have on display.

In **the color photo** you see an object against the side of the cabinet with a round part at the top and a square hole below. That is a handle for a ceramic valve like the one beside it. The grooves in two sides of the valve are for the bolts that clamp the valve between pipe flanges. The ceramic valve is very hard and not porous so it is good for use with Nitroglycerin (NG). This is a photo of a display in the museum. The center part of the valve is raised up because I don't have spacers under the valve to allow room for the center part of the valve to extend below the valve bottom as normal. This also allows visitors to get some idea of what the inside of the valve looks like. The handle in this photo is for a larger valve than the one here.

In **the photo at left** you see Gerald Dempsey, NG Operator, with his hand on a valve handle like the one in the display. Gerald is demonstrating how he would drain Spent Acid or NG from the Separator tank to his right. This photo was taken in the NG Nitrating & Separating House (where Nitroglycerin was made) and I think this is a posed photo. I reach that conclusion for two reasons: 1. Safety concerns restrict who can be in the building when NG is being produced; 2. I think most people would prefer to stay away from NG, far away, and the plant photographers were no different. You will notice two vertical dark areas in the side of that white tank. Those are sight glasses so the operator can see the interface between the Spent acid and the NG so he knows when to close the valve and switch to the right tank for the rest of the process. If you would like to get a better look at the valve or have questions come see me at the Museum.

## New Website On The Way

One of the action items to come out of our strategic planning process was a new website. Mike Mossman, Heather Sonntag and your editor volunteered to work on it. After a slow but steady start, we picked up the pace in December and January. We consulted with Nellie Schmitz of *Next Level Creative* in Baraboo and Amy Pierquet of *waterfront graphicdesign* in Lodi on design. Our committee supplied content—text and photos—and Amy worked on design for an eight-page site that is just a beginning. The goal is a website that presents the "Badger Lands" story clearly and concisely in a few pages and will eventually expand into a much larger resource. We'll keep you posted.

# The Sunflower Ordnance Works/Ammunition Plant

You are about to read a familiar story. It begins in April 1942, when the citizens of Johnson County, Kansas received news that the United States Army was about to acquire 10,700 acres of land about thirty miles southwest of Kansas City to build an ordnance "works." Operated by Hercules Powder Co., it would produce smokeless nitrocellulose propellant for small arms, artillery and eventually, rockets.

One-hundred and fifty family farms were taken. An idle railroad line was revived. A new Sunflower Village provided housing for workers recruited nationwide. A network of buses spread throughout the area to bring workers to and from. Many other workers carpooled in the own vehicles. A construction blitz employing as many as 24,000 people surveyed, designed, laid tracks, erected fencing, graded roads, poured concrete, framed walls, installed roofing, ran pipes for chemicals, water, steam and pressure systems, plus miles of electrical wiring. The first propellant was shipped out in about one year.

Named for the "Sunflower State," it was and is proclaimed to be the "world's largest smokeless powder plant."

Production began in March 1943, with three smokeless lines, later expanded to eight lines by the end of the war. Local newspapers reported as many as 12,000 production workers on the job by the end of '43, but retaining people was a problem. The site was inconveniently distant from population centers and many workers quit after a few months.

To make up the shortfall, Hercules launched a campaign to recruit women, pointing out that they could earn higher wages at Sunflower than nearly anywhere else. So many responded that, by the end of the war, women made of sixty per cent of the work force.

Late in 1942, Sunflower's manager received orders to design and construct a facility to produce propellant for rockets. He was dispatched to Great Britain to learn the process. He returned with four British engineers. They stopped at the Radford, Virginia Ordnance Works, the grandmother of all World War II powder plants, to set up a pilot rocket line. The Radford template was then transferred to Sunflower. By August 1943, the F-Line was completed and rocket propellant production began.

By the end of '43 Hercules received orders to build a rocket line at Badger. Sunflower's British template was used, including a new F-Line, and Badger became known as Sunflower's sister rocket works.

Not long after rocket production began Sunflower was visited by military officers from the Soviet Union. The Red Army used clusters of rocket launchers in combat and was the acknowledged master of the tactic. Sunflower tailored its propellant to meet Soviet specs and quantities were shipped across the Atlantic.

When World War II ended, the Army retained possession of Sunflower. The plant was reactivated for the Korean and Vietnam Wars. It was decommissioned about the same time as Badger but the transition to civilian life has not been as smooth. The Army is still cleaning up the site and still controls most of the acreage.

In 1990, an entrepreneur had a idea for the site. He wanted to create the Wonderful **World of Oz theme park as depicted** here. However, Sunflower was still in Kansas, and Johnson County officials refused to permit the theme park.

Like Badger, Sunflower remains part of the military-industrial history of the United States. It is also a reminder that the Badger story is not the only one to be told.