# Badger Ordnance News

AUTUMN 2021

Badger History Group Inc.
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Affiliate of the
Wisconsin Historical Society

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

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**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 Haling, Prairie du Sac
Frank Wolf, Mazomanie

**Newsletter Editor**
**Michael Goc**


## MUSEUM OPEN AGAIN

**TUESDAY- SATURDAY 10:00-4:00**
**MASKS AND SOCIAL DISTANCING REQUIRED**
**HAND SANITIZER AVAILABLE**
**NO MORE THAN SEVEN VISITORS AT A TIME**

# Speakers Return!

**November 11, 2021, 7:00 pm**
**At the Museum and via Zoom**

***Nitroglycerin Manufacturing and the Deadly World War II Explosion***

**Frank Wolf**

It would be hard to find someone who knows more about the manufacturing process at BAAP than our board member, Frank Wolf. He has fifty-five years experience in the work, nearly all of it at Badger. As a community historian he also brings a sense of place to add to his engineering expertise. He will bring both to the program when he talks about nitroglycerin and the accident that killed four workers in July 1945.

# Our Good Digital Idea

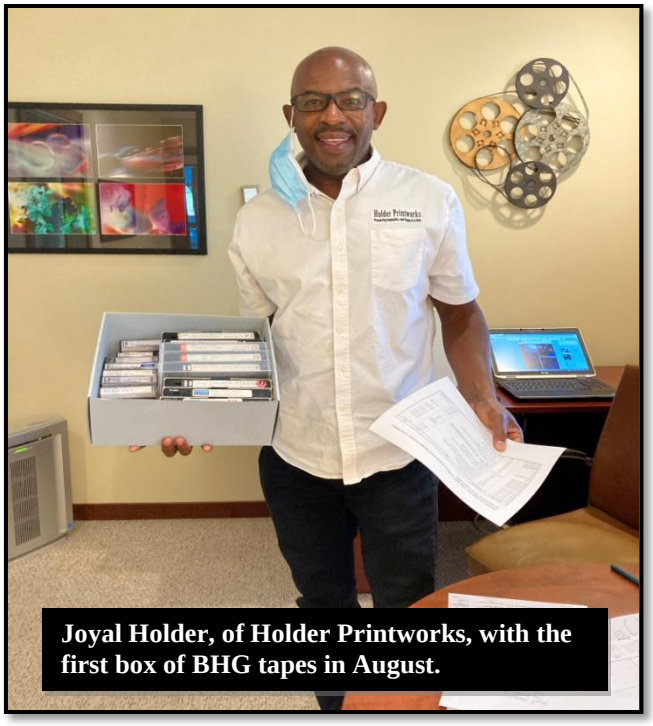
Heather Sonntag

In July, the Sauk County Extension Education, Arts and Culture Committee awarded a “Good Idea” grant to BHG to digitize interviews recorded by BHG founders with former BAAP employees, evicted farmers, and residents of Badger Village, and by Dave Erickson for his documentary films. These audio-visual materials--VHS and Hi8 tapes--are considered archivally “at-risk” given their magnetic format. They are prone to deteriorate around twenty years from the original recording date.

It was my job to facilitate the project. The first batch of tapes was transferred in August to Holder Printworks (HP) which specializes in digitization services in Madison. By mid-October, HP completed 25GB of digital files from 17 tapes. A second batch of a dozen tapes will round out the grant, amounting to approximately a quarter of BHG’s tape collection.

In addition, a new Covid Relief grant will pay to digitize most of the remaining tapes. The good news from the “Good Idea” grant project: nearly all recordings are in good to excellent condition for digitization with clear audio and visual quality.

All will eventually be accessible through our website, so that the public can witness scenes such as Walter Reusch sitting in the foundation of his former home recalling life on the prairie prior to 1942; foreman Art Meschefske describing the manufacture of nitroglycerin and the explosion that killed four of his friends; Mary Spears telling her family about how she came to make the "Rusty" drawings on production line walls; Gov Dreyfus recounting the life of post-war GI-Bill student families at Badger Village. Until then, how about a viewing party with popcorn at the Museum of Badger Army Ammunition?



Joyal Holder, of Holder Printworks, with the first box of BHG tapes in August.

## Upcoming Programs

**December 9, 2021, 7:00 pm**

***The Sauk Prairie Cemetery***

Local historian and board member Orie Eilertson will reveal the link between BAAP and the "cemetery on the curve" where many Prairie families laid their loved ones to rest.

**January 13, 2022, 7:00 pm**

***The Civil War Diary of Sgt. Orin M. Jameson***

BHG director Heather Sonntag will talk about Orin Jameson, son of Sauk prairie pioneer Albert Jameson, who kept a field diary during his service with the 17th Wisconsin Infantry in the Civil War. Electronically accessible, it conveys Orin’s daily observations as a Union infantryman--bivouac, boredom and battle in the south--as well as his love for his home and family. It is a soldier's story and a farmer's story of a life in the Baraboo Hills and Sauk Prairie.

# From the Archivist

**Verlyn Mueller**

It is not unusual to have someone call the museum phone or my cell phone or come into the museum and say "I have … and would you like it." If it is related to the BOW/BAAP I say yes. Some recent arrivals include an unusual pump impellor and mixer agitators.

Let me start with the pump impellor. To use a highly technical term, that "twisty thing" in the photo at right is called a "Screw Pump". That is not the shape we are accustomed to seeing in a pump impellor. You see it again in the photo below right sticking down in the metal frame. If this installation were complete, you would see the pump housing instead of the impellor and the pipe at right edge of the photo would be connected to the pump.

This pump was used to transfer the mix of Nitrocellulose (NC) and Nitroglycerin (NG) from the Pre-Mix House where they were mixed to the Final Mix House where other ingredients were added and the material now called Paste, was bagged for transfer to the Rocket Production Area. The NC and NG are the explosive ingredients of Rocket Propellant.

Also, in the photo above, you see what looks like a boat propeller. Actually, that is the agitator from one of the ingredient mixers in the powder Plant. These items were purchased from one of the many surplus items sales during the decommissioning process and the buyer's collection is now being down-sized. The sale offerings normally did not identify where an item was used in the plant, so we will have to do some investigating to learn what mixers used this size agitator.

These items were delivered to us at the Badger Steam and Gas Engine Show in August following a phone call offering them and of course I said yes. I am working on setting up a display to show these items and tell the story.

I will end this piece with an update on the repair projects (Wish List) in the last newsletter. By time you read this the flag pole parts will be ordered and we have someone with the right equipment lined up to install the new parts. I've talked to someone to help re-do the area around the base of the flag pole and we are looking into the correct materials for the emergency exit doors. The weather is reaching the point where some of this work will need to wait till next spring or summer. Stay tuned.

# Six Weeks In Autumn Eighty Years Ago

On Wednesday, **October 29,** 1941, U.S. Representative William H. Stevenson announced the "Construction of a $65 million powder and acid works...at Merrimac on the Wisconsin River in Sauk County." .

The news set off a flurry of excitement in Merrimac, although Postmaster Harry Johnson declared, "Don't you believe it. Must be Merrimac, Mass."

Visible evidence appeared the following week when an airplane appeared in the sky over the Sauk Prairie. Starting at King's Corner, the plane flew a grid pattern between Hwy 12 and the Wisconsin River. The photos made that day were dispatched to the Army and to the Hercules Powder Co. in Wilmington, Delaware.

On **November 9** President Roosevelt signed the order creating the Badger Ordnance Works. On **November 10,** the Army sent a letter of intent to hire Hercules to design, build and equip the plant based on the facility it was operating at Radford, Virginia.

Hercules then sent an engineer named H.N. Wendle to look over the ground. He reported that "the eastern portion is rough and uneven....but in traveling west....the topography is ideal...almost perfect." Wendle's report sealed the fate of the Sauk Prairie.

On **November 18,** about 100 landowners packed the Sumpter town hall for a meeting with University Extension Supervisor Emil Jorgenson. He was facilitating their efforts to resist the plant. The phone rang. On the line was Sumpter town chair Garth Premo. He was in Iowa with Christ Huber, Glen and Harry Kindschi. They had met with farmers there who had lost 19,000 acres to the Iowa Ordnance Plant. Premo reported that the Army appraisers had given high valuations to the farms. So high that that Army later reneged and reduced them by half . The resulting controversy set the stage for what happened later on the Sauk Prairie. The Army set an amount it would pay and its appraisers were to fit their valuations into it.

On **November 24**, the Army opened an office in Baraboo for the Federal Land Bank appraisers who would soon be visiting landowners.

In and around Sauk County, business people wanted the "powder plant." Baraboo's Clark Williamson and John Lange went to Joliet, Illinois to learn about the 36,600 acre Elwood Ordnance Plant/Kankakee Ordnance Works. They found that "businessmen... of Joliet are well satisfied."

The Prairie farmers did not want it. Dominated by rural supervisors, the Sauk County Board voted 27-11 to oppose the plant.

The meeting where Premo called from Iowa ended by approving the text of a telegram to be sent to the Wisconsin Congressional delegation and national farm organizations. It opposed the siting of the plant on "a large area of the best farming land...in the county, state or nation."

Senator Robert La Follette responded by saying he had persuaded the Army to recheck its findings and look at other sites.

On **November 28**, the Wisconsin Farm Bureau met in Madison, with Swain Mather, John Litscher and Emma Kindschi attending. The Bureau then telegraphed the War Department, saying, "It is criminal to destroy such a garden of Eden."

Survey and appraisal work continued, with the extension of the railroad from Prairie du Sac staked out.

On **December 3,** the *Baraboo News-Republic* quoted Democratic Party leader Thomas King, "I can assure you that the plant is set for the Merrimac vicinity."

On **December 5**, Major Wayne Hauck, who had supervised the construction of the 10,600 acre Indiana Ordnance Works, arrived in Baraboo. He told the press that he was to "report to Merrimac and await further instructions."

On **December 7,** the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Opposition to siting the powder plant on the prairie disappeared.