

Badger Village, The Great Housing Experiment

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Throughout World War II the Badger Ordnance Works, nestled between lush farmland and the striking beauty of the Baraboo Bluffs, would spew smoke into the sky as it churned out ammunition to be used in the war. However, at the end of the War the University was in a panic. There was a colossal shortage of housing. In a bold maneuver, the University constructed emergency housing throughout Madison. One community sprang up in the army barrack style dormitories which housed the factory workers. The community was dubbed Badger Village, and many of the Law School's finest students called it home.

In 1946 the war ended. Due to the G.I. Bill, which paid the veteran's books, tuition, and \$90 a month, many servicemen returned to college when they arrived back in the United States. Before the war, there were approximately 500 married male students at the University of Wisconsin. By 1948 that number had grown to 3,833, and in 1947, of the 23,000 students attending school, 11,000 of them were veterans.

In an attempt to accommodate more students, the University constructed housing facilities throughout the city. At Truax Field, 1,100 single vets and 96 couples moved into temporary housing. The University also created trailer parks and cabin camps to house students. At the University Avenue Cabin Camp, vets occupied 17 cabins, 24 trailers, and 4 makeshift houses. Another 100 veterans lived at Hill Farms Trailer Park. Even the playing fields at Camp Randall were commandeered, and 191 couples moved into trailer homes there. Despite this extra lodging, there was still a need for more housing. As a last resort, the University opened The Badger Village housing project about 35 miles from campus.

Judge John Reynolds ('48):

"I lived there for one year during my second year in law school. At the time, I thought that the conditions there were lovely; everything is relative. We didn't have any children so we had two rooms in the apartment. We had a kitchen, a kitchen table, and a stove. We had a living room where we would sleep.



Dormitory Building

I went to China in 1976, and the peasant's homes in China reminded me of the apartments in Badger Village. The apartments, however, were very pleasant. I did not feel deprived at all. They were decorated attractively. The students decorated the apartments as they wanted to, and some apartments were decorated very cleverly. In fact, they were pretty cheerful. After being in the army for four years, it was like living in the army barracks, except you had a wife.

The walls were very thin though. Even though I mentioned that we didn't have any children, we did have a neighbor who had a baby. We could hear it every time it cried.

We had communal showers; one was for boys and one was for girls. Then some clever students decided that it was unfriendly to have separate showers, and they took the signs off of the doors so that the girls and boys could shower together.

There was a strong sense of community at Badger Village. We were all students that were anxious to finish school. There were so many of us that if we all voted in the township elections, we could elect whomever we wanted.

The main inconvenience was riding the bus [to Madison]. It wasn't that bad; in fact, I always enjoyed the bus because it gave us time to read our cases before class. I had many companions on the bus like Lee Dreyfus, Nat Heffernan, and John Bossard. The best thing about Badger Village was the friendships that I made there. I maintained those friendships all my life."

The first veteran moved into the shacks known as Badger Village, on December 7, 1945. By 1947 there was a 150 family waiting list for housing. There were two clusters of one story houses which comprised Badger Village. The northern set of houses, known as North Badger, were apartments converted from the barracks-like dormitories, used by the factory workers. Each apartment was equipped with a sink, a stove, an ice box, and cupboards. Most of the apartments were partitioned into two rooms; however, the members of each wing of North Badger were forced to share a bathroom.

The other set of apartments, called South Badger, was a set of row-houses.

These apartments consisted of a living room, kitchenette, bedrooms, and a bathroom. Because the walls were thin and uninsulated, the happenings in a neighbor's apartment could be heard in both adjoining apartments. There were also a few cases of roofs being blown off the shoddy apartments in severe wind storms, as well as many broken pipes due to poor plumbing. It often became so cold in the apartments in the winter that parents had to bundle their children in snowsuits to protect them from the bitter cold and snow that sneaked in from the cracks in the windows.

Harry Franke ('49):

"I remember in our kitchen, we had an ice box not a refrigerator. If you left for a couple of days, you had to make arrangements for someone to get in there before the water overflowed. We thought the apartment was a good deal because the basic equipment was supplied too. There were a couple of army cots and a stove.

Everybody who lived at Badger Village was in the same boat. You had to be a veteran to get into the place, newly married, and some people had kids. In our own building, there were twenty units, we became close knit and got to know everybody. Because you are sharing the same bathroom facilities, you got to know your neighbors. We used to have parties in our barracks. I remember one party in particular. We got a couple of barrels of Fauerbach Beer. It was green, and people were in great distress throughout the rest of the night. From about two until six in the morning, the latrines were very busy. I don't think that the beer was quite ready to be imbibed, but we imbibed it anyway.

The only bad memory was the bitter cold as you walked out to the bus in the morning. They would drop us off at the foot of Bascom Hill and we would walk up to the Law School. The buses ran frequently: about every half hour in the morning. The last bus went back to the village at 9:00 at night.

It was an old yellow school bus, and the ride was pretty bumpy. It wasn't what you would normally think of as going to college. If I sound like I am complaining, I'm not. We felt that we were fortunate to have that opportunity. With the G.I. bill and these accommodations, it was possible for me to go to college."

The cost of an apartment was between \$17.50 and \$29.50. During the period of 1945-1952, 699 families were placed into 451 of the row-houses in South Badger. The remaining families were housed in the 248 apartments that were constructed by converting the ten barracks-style dormitories into apartments.

Because the University was about 35 miles away from Badger Village, students who lived there took buses to classes each day. The buses ran at several times and cost twenty-five cents.

Each day the men would get on the bus, often before daylight, and huddle together in order to battle the bone chilling winter air. When the weather was warm, the men would chat about school, sports, or memories from the war. Some men would catch up on their studies, others would play cards, and others would sleep. One could often tell when the buses were returning from campus because there was often a blackout in the village. Most of the students used hot plates to cook their meals. When the buses returned at night, each family turned on their hot plate for dinner and blew the fuses, often waiting up to an hour for the lights to return.

Paul Myerson ('48):

"I lived in the village from 1947-1948. We lived in an H type army barracks. I was president of the community for a while. As president, the council and I worked with the University to develop security for the area. We got the University to put in police protection. We had one police car out there. Not that we needed any protection, but it was in case of emergencies. We didn't have telephones in the apartments; there was a community telephone.

The property was built on probably the most fertile soil in the area. We had a community garden because the property had not been farmed or plowed. We got together and hired a farmer to plow the soil. Then we subdivided off, in some democratic process, the farm area. We all grew corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, beets, pickles and the usual things grown in gardens. We all had a great garden.

Everybody out there was a veteran trying to go to college. We were all glad that we had a chance to go to school while living at Badger Village. We used to joke around a lot; we didn't call it Badger Village, we called it Rabbit Village because the population grew so fast.

I still see some people that I knew in Badger Village. I get to see John Reynolds every once and a while. Generally though, I didn't keep any really close friendships. Like everything that happens, we grew apart as I went out of state, and we had less opportunity to stay in touch. But it was fun. There were days that we didn't think we would make it on those ten cent army buses that we took to school in the morning.

Of all the best and worst memories I have about Badger Village, I really remember the distance being a problem. When you wanted to stay at night and work at the Law



Harry Franke



Judge John Reynolds

School, you had to make sure you caught that last bus. Your life was controlled by the first bus in the morning and the last bus at night.

The best memory was living together with all those other kids. We were families, just starting out, who found a place to live which we could afford. Because we were all on a very low budget, we appreciated the opportunity we had from the University, offering us a place where we could afford to live as veterans. That was the key; that's why we were all there.

When they did close Badger Village for good, we were sorry that it closed. It just seemed a shame. It was the housing that made it possible for many of the married students to go to school. It was something that universities should do now: make housing affordable for married students."

Badger Village was more than temporary housing. It was a unique community comprised of families all of similar age with a military background, in pursuit of an education. Many aspects of Badger Village resemble those of a typical town. The village had a community center, post office, primary school, shopping center, barber shop, drug store, police force, a town council, and a branch of the student union. The community center consisted of a large auditorium, two lounges, a dining room, kitchen, and a bar. The bar room was filled with pool tables and card tables. It was decorated with Badgers and Pogo comic strip characters. Many activities went on at the community center. Each week a featured guest speaker would give a lecture, many dances were held there, concerts performed by the University Music School, and plays and variety shows were frequent occurrences at the community center. It was also used for elections for the township.

Although the police protection began when the Sauk County police would swing by Badger Village, the University soon employed a police officer named Paul Genna. In addition to Genna, whose major duties ended up as a chauffeur, taking expectant mothers to hospitals, the members of the village hired six residents to act as constables, including former governor Lee S. Dreyfus.

One of the most important organizations in Badger Village was the town council. The town council, comprised of 29 elected members, not only acted as the city's governing body by implementing a set of rules and regulations, but it also acted as a liaison between the village and the University. It also gave the residents an outlet for any grievances which they might have.

Chief Justice Nathan Heffernan ('48)

"I had one semester of Law School before the war. I started living there in June 1946 and stayed there until January 1948. We lived on the west side and had an absolutely beautiful view of the Baraboo Bluffs. It was probably the most beautiful spot that I have ever lived. We lived in the row-houses of South Badger. We had one room which was a living room, a dining room, and a kitchen. It was just an elongated room that was about sixteen or seventeen feet long and about eight feet wide. There was a separate bathroom which was very tiny, and there was a bedroom.

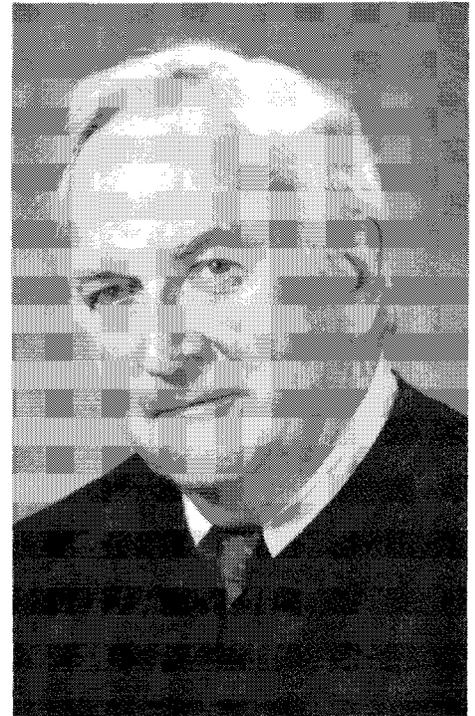
We had no hot water, and in order to get hot water, we would strap electric hot plates to a water tank. If you wanted hot water, you would turn on the hot plates so you could take a shower. The hot plates burned out transformers about once a week. Very often, there were no lights.

The only thing that was furnished for heat was a pot bellied stove. We stoked it with coal from the coal bin in back. It was surprising how well that worked. For cooking, we had a wood stove, which we did not use. We used hot plates for cooking. It was a very interesting and congenial time. Most of us had been in the service where we had tough living, so this didn't seem so bad. We had an ice box instead of a refrigerator. The ice man came with chunks of ice, and the melted ice just drained under the building. There was no basement on them. They were flimsily built; yet, they were far better living than the trailer parks at Camp Randall.

We had a branch of the student union there. They showed movies, and they tried to do the same things as the Memorial Union. We had a law library in which we had the Wisconsin Reports and a number of standard treatises. My wife was teaching school at the Badger School, and in her time off, she would go to the law library and brief cases for me. The student clinic also had a branch out there with a doctor and nurse who were permanently available.

I remember the buses that we took into Madison for class. I remember that they didn't start very well when the temperature was below zero. Sometimes, in order to get them going, they'd have them run all night long. It was at least a half hour trip in to Madison along Highway 12, but I remember those bus rides rather fondly because it gave us a chance to swap war stories, tell stories of our adventures in the preceding four years, and if you wanted to, you could study.

It was an interesting place; we were all veterans; we all had our education interrupted for four years. We had not had a lot of fun in a long time. However, we had a lot of fun and did a lot of hell-raising while we



Justice Nathan Heffernan



John Bosshard

lived there. We were all serious students too. I never really appreciated it until later, but the law school faculty worked very hard. The faculty taught five semesters of classes in eighteen months. As I recall we had a day off for Christmas; I'm not so sure we had a day off for New Year. The break between semesters was at most a week. They really crammed things in; I remember taking four final exams in two days. Everybody wanted to make up for lost time.

I have fond memories of Badger Village. I had just been married, and this was our honeymoon cottage. Because my wife was a school teacher at Badger Village, we were financially well off compared to most people. There was an incredible feeling of camaraderie. Hell, we were all optimistic. We were the guys who won the war. We felt there were other worlds to conquer. There was an air of hope. We had beaten Hirohito and Hitler. We felt we could beat anything. I have no horrible memories of Badger Village. It's all a good memory."

The University ended its affiliation with Badger village on June 30, 1952 after the need for emergency housing had passed. When the Korean War began, the Badger Ordnance Works began belching smoke from its stacks again. The apartments and dormitories were again filled, but this time they were filled with factory workers. The Badger Village was alive again until the war ended. When the Korean War did end, there were many vacancies in the apartments at Badger Village. The children who remained often played in the empty apartments; some kids vandalized and destroyed these dwellings.

Badger Village was soon abandoned by everyone. Grass and weeds grew wildly over the forgotten streets, houses and lawns. Nothing remained in the shops except for a few boxes and papers that no one cared to move. This changed on March 10, 1960, when Badger Village was sold for \$52,500 dollars to local entrepreneurs who cleaned up the area. They planted trees, re-established electrical service, dug a new well, installed a lagoon to take care of sewage disposal, dismantled South Badger, renovated the units of North Badger, and changed the name to Bluffview Courts. The area is now used as a retirement village.

Professor Frank Remington ('49)

"I lived at Badger Village from August 1946 to January 1949. My wife and I had children at the time. It was a good place to raise a family; everybody was the same age. There were a lot of other kids, and there was plenty of things to do. From the family point of view, living at Badger Village was no problem at all.

We lived in the row-houses, and to say they were modest probably exaggerates their value. They had a pot bellied stove, and no hot water, unless you strapped hot plates to the water tank. I guess they would be described as primitive by most people. But having just come out of the service, we thought that they were nice.

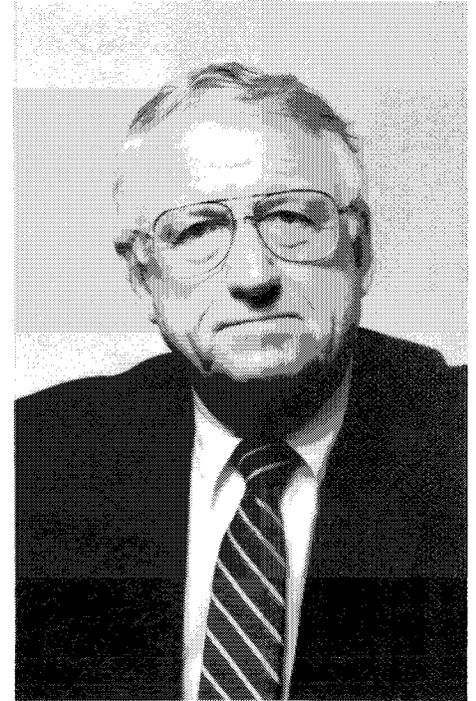
Badger Village was populated entirely by returning veterans. We all received an income under the Veteran Educational Benefit Program. Costs and rent were very low, and the situation was such that you didn't do things like going out for dinner or going out to see a movie. There were a lot of recreational activities such as basketball, softball, and group parties of various kinds at Badger Village. Entertainment wasn't a problem, but everybody was going to school so the time for entertainment was limited. There were other things to do: study for example.

You got to know people fairly well. In those days we had class on Saturdays and went to school twelve months a year. I spent a lot of time with those people on the bus, especially the law students. The people who lived in Badger Village were very compatible. We were all the same age and going to school. Most of the people where I lived had children; so, we had the opportunity to become friends with a broad group of people. That was the high point of living in Badger Village. The worst part was riding the school buses in the dark, often without heat. It was primitive transportation especially in the winter time when the temperature on the bus often fell below freezing.

Also, meals were often interrupted by an outage of electricity. When this happened, you were unable to cook unless you cooked on a coal or wood stove.

Primitive would be the best word for the houses, but they were well kept and pleasing in appearance, in a very modest way. They were not well insulated, and you could often feel the wind blowing inside the house. But like I said, everything is relative, and after being in the army these houses, when compared with a tent, were a lot better."

Badger Village was one of the most unique housing projects in the history of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Badger Village gave those who had been overseas fighting for America a sense of community when they returned. It was more than a housing project. It was a city with features that were found in any city: government, friendship, neighbors, children, police, an A & P food store, and even a bar. If Badger Village and the other housing projects like it did not exist, many of these men would have never been able to afford to raise a family while they went to school. Many of the thousands of veterans would not have been able to get an education.



Professor Frank Remington