

Dreaming of Badger: The Inside Story

An update on the future of the much-storied
Badger Army Ammunition Plant in Sauk Prairie.

BY CURT MEINE AND MIKE MOSSMAN

View from the Nitrator House. Nitroglycerin produced here trickled down the rubber-lined wooden trough along the walkway, to be used in the manufacture of ball powder and rocket propellant.

Photo by Greg Conniff

SINCE 1997, THE FATE OF THE DECOMMISSIONED Badger Army Ammunition Plant has preoccupied concerned citizens and elected officials in Sauk County and beyond. As noted in a special feature package in the fall 2000 edition of the *Wisconsin Academy Review*, the unique characteristics of the Badger lands provide "special opportunities to integrate place, culture, nature, and history." Sitting at the base of the Baraboo Hills, along the lower Wisconsin River, and in the basin of the former Sauk Prairie, the plant is layered deep in geological, ecological, Native American, Euro-American, agricultural, military, and industrial history. Its 7,354 acres contain much of Wisconsin's experience as a place and a people. The drama of Badger's reuse, still unfolding, adds yet another layer to this much-storied land.

Most Wisconsin citizens, if they know Badger at all, know it only as a vast passing landscape of dilapidated infrastructure along U.S. Highway 12 between

Baraboo and Madison. Even nearby residents of Sauk Prairie, many of whom farmed Badger soils or worked Badger machines in past decades, have been

separated—physically and metaphorically—by Badger's perimeter chain-link fence. Now a new exhibit, "Inside the Fence: Reclaiming History at the Badger Army Ammunition Plant," offers viewers a chance to pass through the fence and see Badger through the lenses of some of Wisconsin's most accomplished photographers. Organized by the Badger History Group, "Inside the Fence" has been four years in the making, and draws upon not only original images but the Badger Plant's own extensive photo archives as well. Now on display at the River Arts Center in Prairie du Sac, the exhibit will move this summer to the Wisconsin Historical Society Museum in Madison, where it will be accompanied by several public presentations on Badger's history and future. The Badger History Group has also sponsored a newly published, in-depth history of the site, from its prairie origins through the Vietnam era, written by Wisconsin's Michael Goc and entitled *Powder, People*

and Place: Badger Ordnance Works and the Sauk Prairie (New Past Press, Inc.).

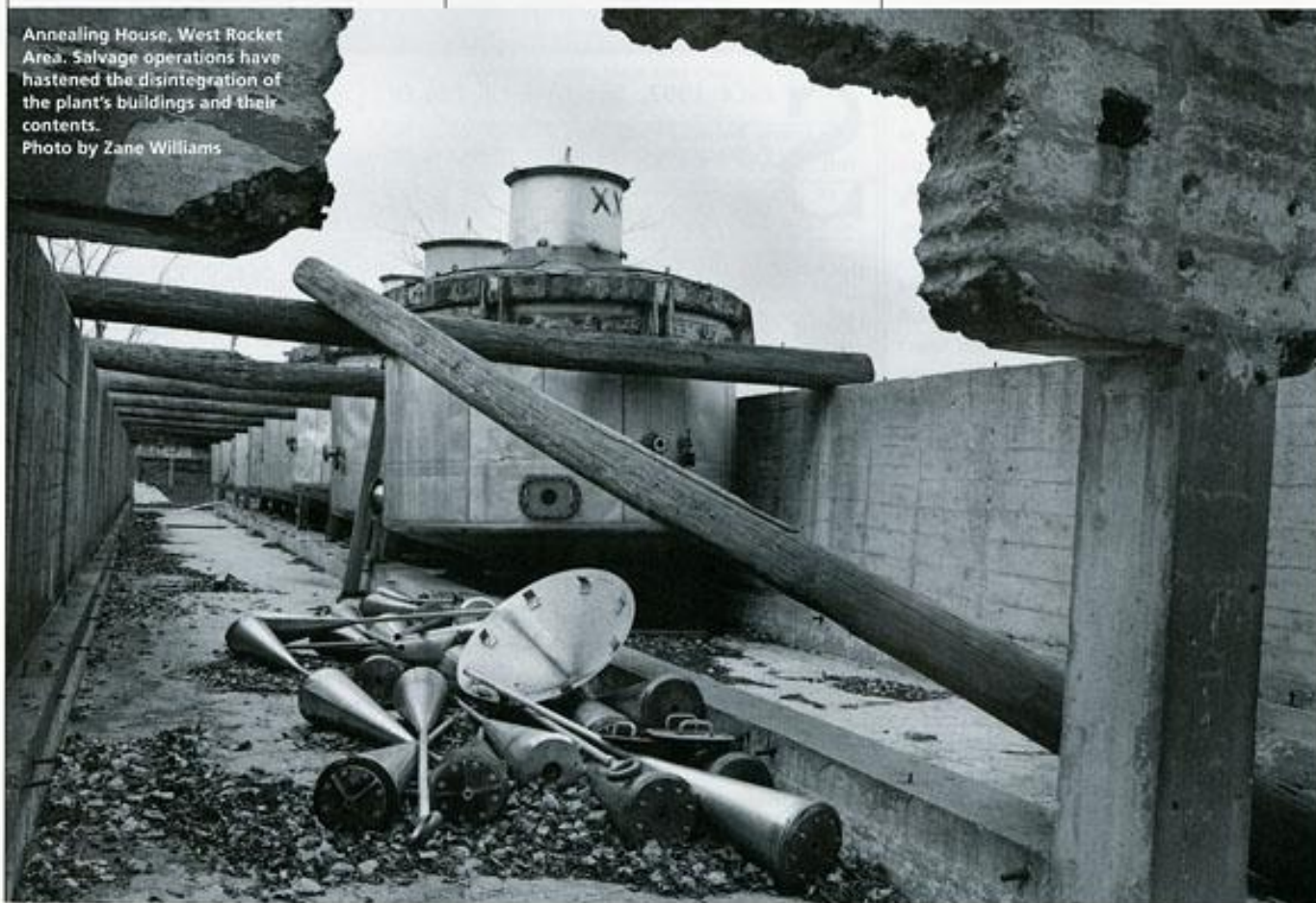
The exhibit and book exemplify the critical role that cultural expression has assumed in reimagining Badger and working through the complex politics of its reuse. The potential for creative reuse has stimulated a predictably intense community discussion. But that discussion has occurred not only in official meetings, but also on stage, in schoolrooms and lecture halls, in gallery spaces, along trails, in prairie fields, under oak canopies, on terminal moraines. As contentious as the debate over Badger's future has sometimes been, it has been moderated through a grassroots commitment to telling Badger's stories from the inside out.

So what has happened in that debate, and what does Badger's future look like?

In the summer of 2000, Sauk County, with assistance from the office of Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin, established a 21-member Badger Reuse

Committee (BRC) and charged it with the task of coming to consensus. Over a period of nine months, through a series of 17 public committee meetings and numerous other working group meetings, the diverse voices of the BRC crafted a final report that outlines a future for Badger built on its unique qualities. The report, and the consensus it represents, rests on a set of clearly defined shared values, including the importance of keeping the Badger property whole; assurance of complete and timely environmental cleanup; the potential of Badger for education, research, recreation, and ecological restoration; and the desire to reuse Badger in a manner that reconciles past conflicts. The Sauk County Board of Supervisors formally endorsed the BRC's plan in May 2001. The plan has since garnered support as well from a broad spectrum of local governments; businesses; and community, faith-based, environmental, and conservation organizations.

Annealing House, West Rocket Area. Salvage operations have hastened the disintegration of the plant's buildings and their contents.
Photo by Zane Williams



Yet no one party to the consensus has sole authority or even responsibility to adhere to the BRC plan. Carrying forward the vision for a new Badger has depended on old-fashioned virtues: trust, patience, flexibility, and perseverance. The task of implementation has fallen to the Badger Intergovernmental Group (BIG), which includes representatives from the five levels of government involved in forging Badger's future: the U.S. federal government, the Ho-Chunk tribal government, the state of Wisconsin, Sauk County, and the two affected local townships (Merrimac and Sumpter). Meeting since September 2001, the BIG parties have labored to work out a general land-use plan, a land-ownership "footprint," a joint memorandum of understanding, and the outline of a collaborative management board—all in keeping with the values and elements of the BRC plan. The efforts of the BIG, if successful, will result in an unprecedented agreement to balance varied institutional needs with community interests, while realizing Badger's special opportunities. As of this writing, the BIG representatives continue to consult with one another, and with other Badger stakeholders, to work out details.

So what may we expect of Badger's next incarnation? As of this writing, in June 2002, it appears that the Badger lands eventually will be transferred, in roughly equal measure, to the Ho-Chunk Nation (through the U.S. Bureau of

Indian Affairs); the U.S. Department of Agriculture (which operates its Dairy Forage Research Center on a portion of the property); and the state of Wisconsin. These entities, serving together with community representatives on a management board, will work toward harmonizing varied uses of the land: protection and restoration of the site's natural communities and important cultural features; promotion of sustainable agriculture through ongoing research and demonstration; development of low-impact recreational opportunities such as hiking, biking, and wildlife viewing; and realization of Badger's unparalleled educational opportunities. Cleanup and remediation of Badger's contaminated sites and groundwater will continue to be the responsibility of the U.S. Army and is likely to continue for at least another decade. Although much of Badger's existing infrastructure will need to be removed, there is already an active program (organized by the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory in Madison) to examine the potential for deconstruction and reuse of the building materials, on site and off. The best of the buildings can be maintained and converted to support future uses, including establishment of an administrative, educational, and interpretive center. In all of these efforts, the involvement of the local communities will be encouraged—and required.

The exhibit "Inside the Fence: Reclaiming History at the Badger Army Ammunition Plant" is on display through June 29 at the River Arts Center at the Sauk Prairie High School. Display hours are 3–6 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays, and from noon to 4 p.m. on Saturdays. It will be displayed at the Wisconsin Historical Society Museum in Madison from July 13 to October 12. For more information, call 608/264-6555.

Badger has a long history as contested territory, as a place where forces originating far beyond its production lines, its fence lines, and its Sauk Prairie setting have often placed its inhabitants in conflict with one another. Through the conversion process of the last few years, the many players now on the scene at Badger are seeking to turn a new page and write a new story—not by ignoring that history, but by reclaiming it and transforming it. As they prepare to receive the Badger lands into their stewardship, we stand on the verge of a unique achievement. Badger may again serve as a local, state, national, and tribal resource, and as an example of people overcoming inherited tensions to pursue a common cause.

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*For more information about Michael Goc's book, **Powder, People and Place: Badger Ordnance Works and the Sauk Prairie**, call 608/356-1001.*



Finishing Area, C-Line Smokeless Powder. Nature reclaims an escape chute and heavily barricaded production building. Photo by David Heberlein