

on Wisconsin Icons



When You Say “Wisconsin,” What Do You Say?

By Joseph Kapler, Jr.

In January 2001 I left my job in Michigan to take a new position at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Staff from the Public Museum of Grand Rapids and I got together for a party where I was to receive astute career advice and a farewell gift before I ventured forth to the great state of Wisconsin. After some nice words from colleagues, it was time to open the large, wrapped present on the table before me. My curiosity increased as I made my way through layers of wrapping. What could this be? A new briefcase? A scholarly book? Some token of the Wolverine state?

Not quite. I pulled the gift out of the package and found myself holding a bright, spongy cheese-head hat. “You’re moving to Wisconsin, so we wanted to get you something you would need!” And with that, we all raised a glass to toast the Badger State. Or is it

the Dairy State? Can it be both? Does it matter?

The questions raised at my farewell party remained with me during the move, and when I arrived at the Society, one of my first projects offered a chance to try to answer them. I was asked to put together an exhibit examining the symbols, or icons, representative of the state. The

exhibit, called *Icon Wisconsin*, would be a great way to investigate Wisconsin identity, or perhaps to determine if such a thing even exists. Research done for the exhibit, along with exhibit visitors’ comments, would inform the planning for the Society’s proposed new history center. I looked forward to the prospect of discovering underlying truths about my new home state and the extent to which its official and unofficial symbols reflect them. I was also curious about the origins of my new hat.





Though I wasn't born in Wisconsin, I am not a total outsider. I grew up just across the Mississippi River in Dubuque, Iowa, in the heart of the old lead region. The history of that state's origins that I learned in school was the same history taught to kids in Wisconsin—fur traders, lead miners, and Indians. In Dubuque we could pick up Madison radio and television stations. The local paper had a "Tri States" section that reported the daily news from Wisconsin and Illinois. Our family spent great vacations at Governor Dodge State Park and Keyes Lake in Florence County, and, of course, we also made the obligatory trip to the Dells. Visiting my cousins in the Milwaukee area was always a treat, and I became a Brewers fan at an early age—before the World Series trip of 1982. Later, in the 1990s, I lived in Milwaukee for two years while attending graduate school at Marquette University. I even attended a Packer game at Lambeau Field last fall. My perspective, then, is influenced by an informed understanding of Wisconsin, yet at the same time I am somewhat removed from the subject matter—not a bad position, I contend, for examining a state's symbols.

Distance and objectivity are important for such an endeavor, because symbols are often rooted in perception and emotion. If you gather ten people and ask them what comes to mind when they hear the word *Wisconsin*, you are apt to get varied responses depending upon a multitude of factors, such as whether they are Wisconsin residents, lifelong Wisconsinites, transplants, rural or urban, or from a

particular region of the state. One way to begin our query into the cultural identity of Wisconsin is to start at the surface. So, when you say "Wisconsin," just what do you say?



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Organizations such as the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, the University of Wisconsin, and the Milk Marketing Board have promoted the consumption of milk as an issue of health and well-being. The Wisconsin legislature designated milk the official state beverage in 1987.



WMH Archives, WHI(X3)30358

Though California has now surpassed Wisconsin as the nation's top milk producing state, Wisconsin iconography will always include bucolic scenes such as this one featuring dairy cows on top of a hill in Crawford County.

Wisconsin, like all states, has a list of official state symbols, designated so by the state legislature. If you attended elementary school in the state, you probably learned that the wood violet is the official state flower and the sugar maple is the official state tree. You might even have had to memorize the distinction between the state rock, granite, and the state mineral, galena. Although these official symbols have a story to tell and are important to the makeup of our state, they are likely not the

most forceful concepts that come to mind when even a lifelong resident thinks about Wisconsin. Other images and ideas that have evolved from our culture and history to reach iconic status are more likely to come to the fore. Bowling, polka, and the Friday night fish fry are arguably more identifiable and more revealing of the true nature of the state than the American water spaniel (state dog) or the trilobite (state fossil). These are aspects of Wisconsin culture that have bubbled up from the regional folk culture and have been perpetuated by the mass, popular culture.

Wisconsin will likely always be known as the land of bright red dairy barns, tall silos, and spotted Holsteins grazing in a nearby pasture.

Most often, the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about Wisconsin is dairy. Wisconsin is known as “America’s Dairyland,” and our license plates have been telling everyone that since 1940. Our official symbols bolster this idea: milk is the official beverage, and six breeds of purebred dairy cows constitute the official state domesticated animal. Unquestionably, the dairy industry has been an integral part of our history, and Wisconsin has served as an industry leader. Today Wisconsin produces about 15 percent of the nation’s milk, 25 percent of the butter, and 30 percent of the cheese. In 1993 California surpassed Wisconsin in actual milk production. Yet the Golden State will probably not offer much competition on the symbolic level. Wisconsin will likely always be known as the land of bright red dairy barns, tall silos, and spotted Holsteins grazing in a nearby pasture. (California will be known as the land of palm trees, fast cars, and glamorous movie stars.)

At about the same time California surpassed Wisconsin in milk production, Wisconsin overtook Massachusetts as the leading cranberry-growing state. Today Wisconsin grows over half of the nation’s cranberries, a larger market share than for milk, cheese, or butter. Yet I don’t foresee Wisconsin becoming “America’s Cranberryland” anytime soon, even if it should

someday designate the cranberry as the official state berry as the Old Bay State did in 1994.

Some monikers, like “America’s Dairyland,” capture the imagination of the public and are a perennial staple for license plates, though business and government officials may wish for a designation that does a better job of acknowledging the state’s diversified economic base. States like Indiana, however, have searched in vain to find a motto, no matter how official, that catches on with the public, as signified in a series of license plate tag lines that include, “Wander Indiana,” “Amber Waves of Grain,” and “Crossroads of America.” For better or worse, Wisconsin is identified primarily with dairy, a designation that brings us to the dubious nickname “cheesehead.”

Growing up in Iowa I remember referring to anybody with Wisconsin license plates as a cheesehead. Perhaps it was in part because the plates were bright yellow, and the comparison was just too obvious. Recently the term has become virtually synonymous with *Wisconsinite* due in large part to the presence of the aforementioned cheesehead hat. The origin of the cheesehead hat is an interesting one that involves taking a derogatory name applied by residents of other states and turning it on its head, so to speak.

Ralph Bruno, a southside Milwaukee resident and rabid Wisconsin sports fan, had heard the taunts of “cheesehead” from opponents’ fans long enough and decided to do something about it. As a lark, Bruno fashioned a cheese wedge-shaped hat out of his mother’s sofa cushion, painted it, and proudly wore it to a Milwaukee Brewers game against the Chicago White Sox in 1987. By the end of the game, fans flocked to Bruno inquiring about the chunk of cheese on his head. “I just wanted to take something negative and turn it into a positive,” Bruno recalls. “The cheesehead was a way to show my pride in Wisconsin and at

the same time have some fun with an insult.” Today Bruno is the president of Foamation, Inc., the company that brings you the famous foam cheesehead hat and other fine cheese-related products for every occasion.

The rise of the cheesehead hat to national stature did not take long—much to the dismay of many residents who would rather see the state recognized for its tradition of progressive reforms or its extremely low unemployment rate. Shrewd product development and marketing, however, coupled with people’s willingness to wear the hat almost anywhere, especially Packer games, pushed it into the national consciousness. The Packers’ success during the 1990s brought increased national television coverage. Every Sunday football fans across the country saw more and more Packer fans, home or away, donning the distinctive cheesehead hats. Even if only fifty fans out of sixty thousand wore a cheesehead, the television cameras were sure to find them. In 1997 and 1998 the Packers made it all the way to the Super Bowl, with its accompanying media overkill. Millions around the world observed Packer fans wearing cheeseheads. It is somewhat ironic that Packer fans wear cheese on their heads. What does cheese have to do with the Green Bay Packers? The team began in



Courtesy of Ralph Bruno

Ralph Bruno of Milwaukee created the first foam cheesehead hat® in 1987.

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1919 as the Acme Packers, a company team of the Acme Packing Company—meatpackers. Shouldn’t Packer fans sport sausages or bratwursts on their heads?

Rick March, of the Wisconsin Arts Board, has observed and studied Wisconsin culture for years. He was instrumental in the planning and development of Wisconsin’s sesquicentennial events both here and in Washington, D.C. March believes that Wisconsinites may have thicker skin than others. “People here seem to have the ability to embrace a stereotype by turning it around as if to say, ‘we’re going to wear these



WHS Archives, WHi (Weiland) 1, Jim Weiland photo

At Lambeau Field, Green Bay, a Packer fan celebrates the Super Bowl XXXI victory. The Packers defeated the New England Patriots 35 to 21 at the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans on January 26, 1997.

hats and we're not going to worry about what you think,' even if it is somewhat tongue-in-cheek."

There is some historical precedent for this attitude. Wisconsin is also known unofficially as the Badger State, but did you ever wonder why? Conventional wisdom states that the early nineteenth-century lead miners, in the area of the lead region that would eventually become Wisconsin, lived and mined in crude hillside dugouts that resembled the habitat of actual badgers. Thus the settlers became known as "badgers," just as settlers in other regions became known as wolverines, hoosiers, and gophers. But recent research casts doubt on this explanation for the term. Karel D. Bicha, in an article for the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, demonstrated that what little remains of the written record does not adequately prove that large numbers of early miners actually dwelled in crude hillside dugouts. Nevertheless, wrote Bicha, "Within two decades of its creation, the expression had become divested of its specific association with both miners and the lead region. By the mid-1840s it made no difference whether the badger tradition was rooted in past reality or possessed no more inherent sub-

stance than the legend of William Tell. It was synonymous with Wisconsin and its people—all of its people."

Regardless of the historical accuracy of its origins, this identification of Wisconsin inhabitants with badgers is not exactly flattering. Badgers are built low to the ground with small heads and bulbous bodies, and they're known for being mean spirited. This reality does not necessarily lend itself to an image that portrays strength and pride. Wisconsinites did not let this affect them, however, and gladly adopted the badger.

Today the most famous badger of all is quite a different creature. By the early 1900s the University of Wisconsin was using the badger as mascot. For a time the image of Paul Bunyan served as a school mascot as well. Over the years the badger mascot evolved significantly. The university even had actual badgers as mascots until 1947. Throughout the 1940s, various images of badgers were used to represent the university and its athletic teams. In 1949 the school mascot took on a new, more powerful form and was given a name. "Bucky" Badger now proudly stands upright, puffs out his barrel chest,

and pleases fans with his large, animated face. The standard depiction of Bucky was first drawn in 1940 as a possible decal design. It had to compete with other badger images, and it eventually won out. Though Bucky is not the most accurate representation of a badger, he is by far the most visible.

Wisconsinites take great pride in Badger sporting events, especially football. University of Wisconsin fans are known for their loyalty and for tailgating. The tailgate party is not just an extraneous event; it is an essential part of game day no matter the circumstances. Early kickoff time? Start the party earlier. Nasty weather? Just wear more team garb. Any real tailgater knows that weather is never a deterrent to the tailgate party. Green Bay Packer fans take the tailgate party to an even higher level. Packer pregame festivities are filled with ritual and theater. Participants wear elaborate costumes and either host large tailgate parties or travel between parties. Zealous fans are part of every sports team, but the scene around Lambeau Field on game days exemplifies an intense relationship between community and team. In an era of cynicism toward the big money of professional sports, there is something genuine about the small-town, approachable feel of the team. Being the only publicly owned team, where training camp takes place in town and children bring their bicycles for players to ride, strengthens the bond.

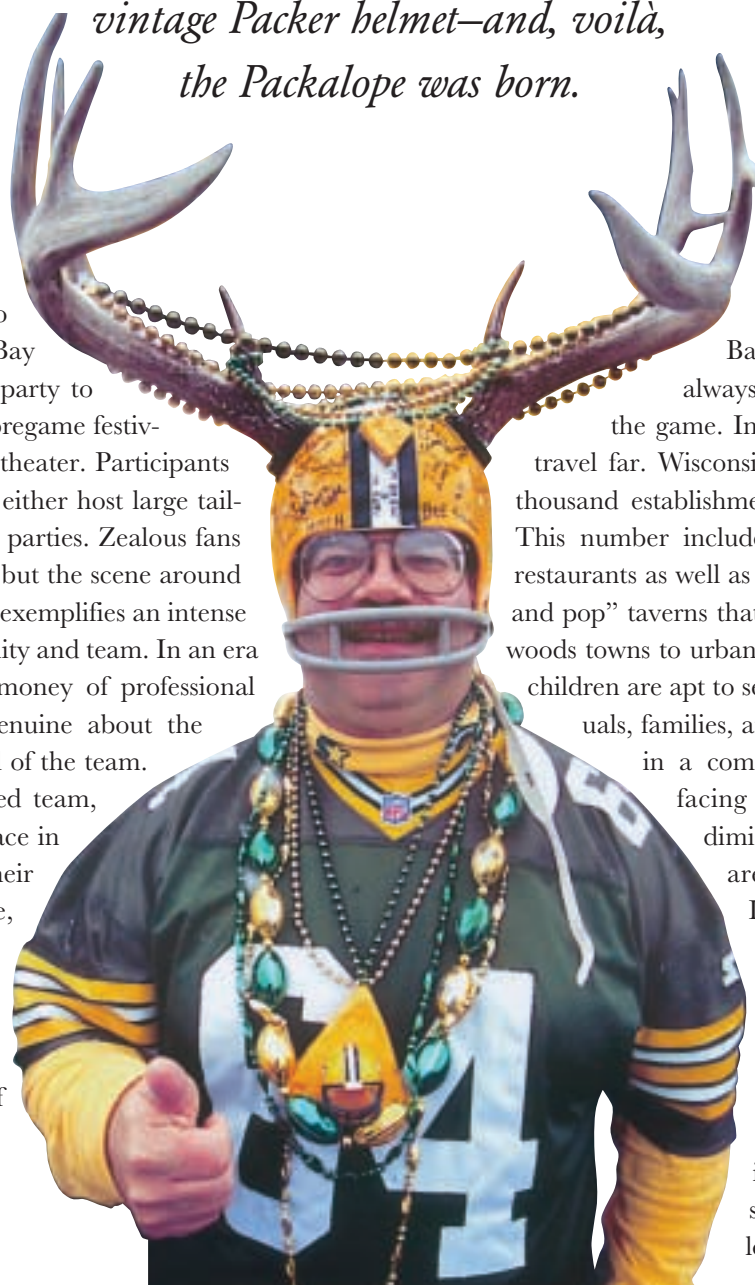
Some longtime fans express their passion by taking on the identity of a “superfan.” Larry Primeau, of

De Pere, created the now famous Packalope. In 1990 Primeau merged two popular symbols of Wisconsin, the Packers and the whitetail deer (the official state wildlife animal)

by attaching a real pair of whitetail antlers to a 1960s vintage Packer helmet—and, voilà, the Packalope was born. Interestingly, as the Packers’ play improved, Primeau felt the need to upgrade his costume as well. He acquired a much larger set of antlers for a new helmet and attached a miniature cheesehead to the helmet front—an interesting collision of Wisconsin symbols: Packers, deer, and cheese. Besides football games, the Packalope attends charity fundraisers throughout the state.

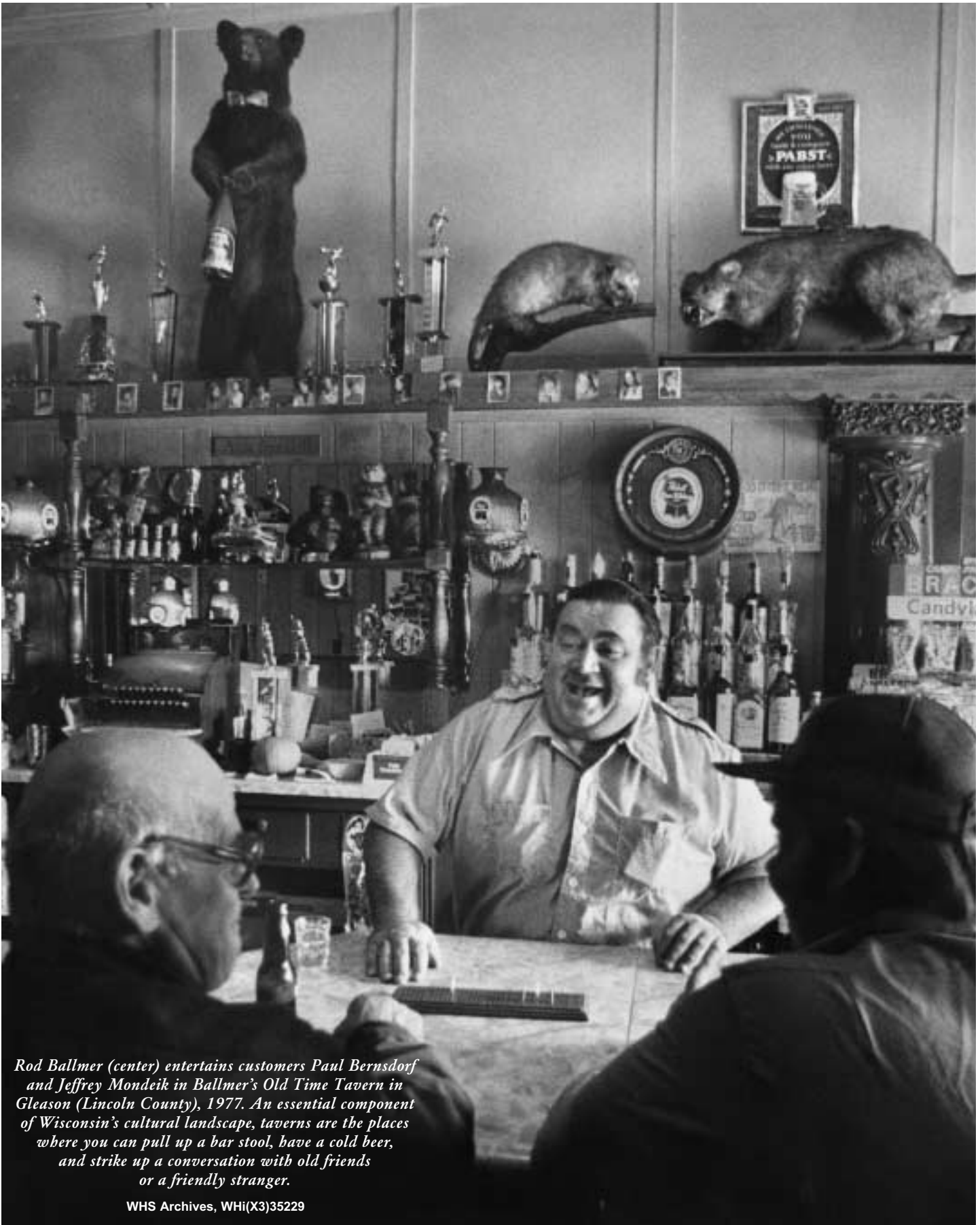
If you don’t have tickets to a Badger or Packer game, you can always go to a nearby tavern to catch the game. In Wisconsin you won’t have to travel far. Wisconsin currently has over fourteen thousand establishments licensed to serve alcohol. This number includes the chain sports bars and restaurants as well as a significant number of “mom and pop” taverns that exist everywhere from northwoods towns to urban neighborhoods. Here owners’ children are apt to serve you and you’ll see individuals, families, and groups of friends coexisting in a comfortable atmosphere. Though facing increased competition and diminishing in numbers, taverns are still strong. The Tavern League of Wisconsin, founded in 1934, is the largest member organization of its kind, with over 4,400 members across the state, and it works to maintain the tavern as an essential part of the hospitality industry. The outdoor tavern sign, with its colorful beer logos, is just as symbolic of the

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The Packalope, Larry Primeau of De Pere, is the Ultimate Packer Fan.

Courtesy of Larry Primeau



Rod Ballmer (center) entertains customers Paul Bernsdorf and Jeffrey Mondeik in Ballmer's Old Time Tavern in Gleason (Lincoln County), 1977. An essential component of Wisconsin's cultural landscape, taverns are the places where you can pull up a bar stool, have a cold beer, and strike up a conversation with old friends or a friendly stranger.

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Wisconsin landscape as the rustic dairy barn and tall silo.

Inside the tavern you will also find beer. On tap or in a bottle, beer and its brewing and consumption have been integral to Wisconsin's history. The first known brewery was built in 1835 in Mineral Point. A year later another brewery opened in Elk Grove in Lafayette County. Brewing came to Milwaukee in 1840 when Richard Owens opened the Milwaukee Brewery, more often referred to as "Owens's Brewery." By the Civil War, Wisconsin was home to over 160 breweries serving towns and cities throughout the state. Local brewing continued well into the twentieth century. The Effinger Brewery in Baraboo operated until 1966, and the Walter Brewing Company of Eau Claire lasted nearly a century, until 1985. Events such as Prohibition (1920 to 1933) along with changes in the industry and marketplace rendered the hometown brewery virtually extinct. Today only a few major breweries operate, but there has been a substantial increase in microbrewed beers. What has not changed is Wisconsin's thirst for beer. Whether it's a church picnic, family reunion, or town festival, the beer will flow. A 1999 study by the Beer Institute, a trade association for the malt beverage industry, reported that Wisconsin ranks third in the nation in per capita beer consumption, behind only Nevada and New Hampshire.

If it's a Friday night, then your favorite tavern may also be serving up a fish fry. Year round, restaurants, churches, community halls, and local taverns all gear up to serve fish, potato pancakes, and rye bread. Several factors have contributed to the presence and popularity of Wisconsin fish fries. Lake Michi-



gan teemed with yellow lake perch before numbers diminished; Wisconsin was settled with a large numbers of Catholics who observed meatless Fridays; taverns served up fish as a free lunch in order to get more customers, thus establishing a tradition. Serb Hall in South Milwaukee has been home to one of the more famous fish fries for thirty-five years. On a regular Friday night, Serb Hall serves more than two thousand fish dinners,



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Workers at the Mitchell Brewery, La Crosse, take a break to be photographed in the 1880s.

and on Good Friday that number reaches five thousand! Cod, an ocean fish, is now the fish of choice for fish fries, and Wisconsin is the largest market for cod suppliers.

One bitterly cold and snowy Friday night while I was living in Milwaukee in 1995, I was set to go with my relatives in

Waukesha to a fish fry. It was so cold that we reconsidered traveling, but we reasoned that if we went, there would likely be no wait time. We bundled up, piled into the car, and headed to a local supper club only to find the parking lot full and the wait well over an hour. We tried another restaurant, but it was the same story. To my amazement, this continued for over an hour until we finally found a place with a short wait. No matter how bad the weather, the Friday night fish fry will go on.

Another famous Wisconsin cultural icon is the bratwurst. Coming from the strong German American influence in Wisconsin, the brat is for the most part present anytime two or more Wisconsinites get together and there is outdoor cooking involved. Since 1953 Sheboygan has hosted a Bratwurst Day festival where millions have come together to celebrate the brat. Sheboygan County, with its heavy German settlement, has had a long tradition of community “brat fries.” According to Alan Pape of Wisconsin’s Ethnic Settlement Trail, Inc., church picnics in Sheboygan began featuring brat fries in the 1930s. Later, community groups served up tasty brats for fundraising events. Though not an official state symbol, the brat has reached a lofty status. In 1997 the Wisconsin state senate, with the assembly concurring, pro-

claimed in Senate Joint Resolution #20 that “the flavorful, delicious Sheboygan double bratwurst on a hard roll, with the works . . . is declared the ultimate state sandwich” and called on citizens of Wisconsin and other states to enjoy this culinary, ethnic delight. Not to be outdone by the folks in She-



Ronald Johnson of Mount Sterling poses with the Cheddar cheese that won him the title of world champion cheese maker at the 1958 Cheese Makers Association contest. Today almost all of the specialty cheeses made in America come from the Monroe area.

WHS Archives, WHi(X3)44832

boygan, the Sentry Stores of Madison have hosted their own “World’s Largest Brat Fest” held every Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends where thousands of brats are served up to hungry participants. How many states can claim two massive fests celebrating the brat?

Is the fact that we can actually ask the above question necessarily a good thing? Whether you proudly wear a cheesehead or despise the very sight of one, you have to come to terms with the idea that such popular icons exist because of some degree of relevance to our cultural identity. However, at the same time symbols paint with a broad brush that becomes increasingly less discriminating in proportion to their level of popular appeal. Mass perception affects how those across the country see Wis-

consin, which, in turn, can have an effect on our economy. What may be good for some sectors of the economy, says the tourism industry, may be harmful to others. Those charged with attracting new employees or businesses to Wisconsin often have to fight an image problem that is not necessarily conducive to economic growth. Marsha Lindsay, of the Madison marketing firm Lindsay, Stone, and Briggs, quoted by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in October 2000, noted that Wisconsin has a brand that others have already defined for us, “a situation that makes it difficult to attract new business to Wisconsin.” Referring to Packer fans, Lindsay wondered: “If you are a high-tech business from somewhere else, do you see in the stands the kind of people you want to hire?” Symbols exaggerate and mislead.



To learn more about the icons of Wisconsin, visit the Wisconsin Historical Museum's exhibit *Icon Wisconsin*. See numerous artifacts and images on display. Then, judge for yourself whether these items reflect Wisconsin culture and identity.

You can participate directly by giving us your ideas and opinions at the exhibit's computer interactive station or by submitting your thoughts and comments. We will use the information collected as we develop future exhibits and programs.

Wisconsin Historical Museum

30 North Carroll Street

Madison, WI 53703

(608) 264-6555

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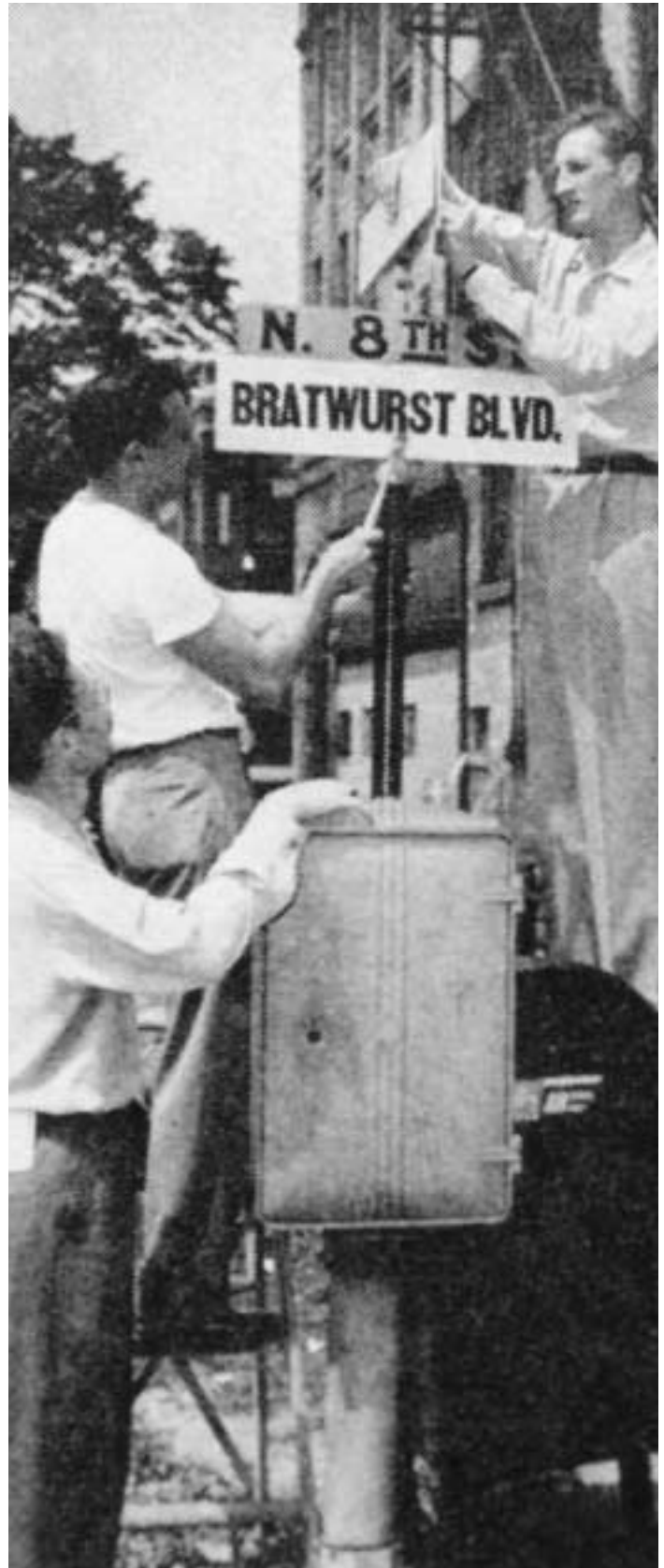
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Not all in the stands are rabid fans projecting a not-so-svelte image. Even those who are can more often than not pass the high-tech business test. The Packalope, for example, is a mechanical engineer for the Kimberly Clark Corporation.

Do we need to change our official and unofficial symbols in order to present a new and different image? Who, then, would be the cultural judge and jury? Must symbols match contemporary reality? The largest symbols on the official state crest are a sailor and a miner. These hardly reflect the current culture of the state. Should those be replaced with dairy farmer and a logger, or a deer hunter and a brewer? How about the cranberry grower and the biotechnician? Why not embrace those things that give Wisconsin a distinct “flavor”? The tourism industry capitalizes on these cultural symbols. Look at what is sold in tourist shops, vacation destinations, and airports. Visitors don't travel to Wisconsin by the millions in search of corporate office parks and high tech laboratories.

But symbols are by no means comprehensive. They often reflect the dominant culture. In Wisconsin, that is primarily still German American and Yankee American. Bowling, polka, beer brewing, and the brat all are rooted in German/European–American culture. The Yankees brought their knowledge of dairy to Wisconsin. But today the demographic makeup of Wisconsin includes many more than those of European or German-American descent. Wisconsin enjoys a rich ethnic and cultural mix, but aspects of those cultures are far from reaching symbolic status. The exhibit *Icon Wisconsin* is just a first step in the Society's



Mead Public Library, Sheboygan

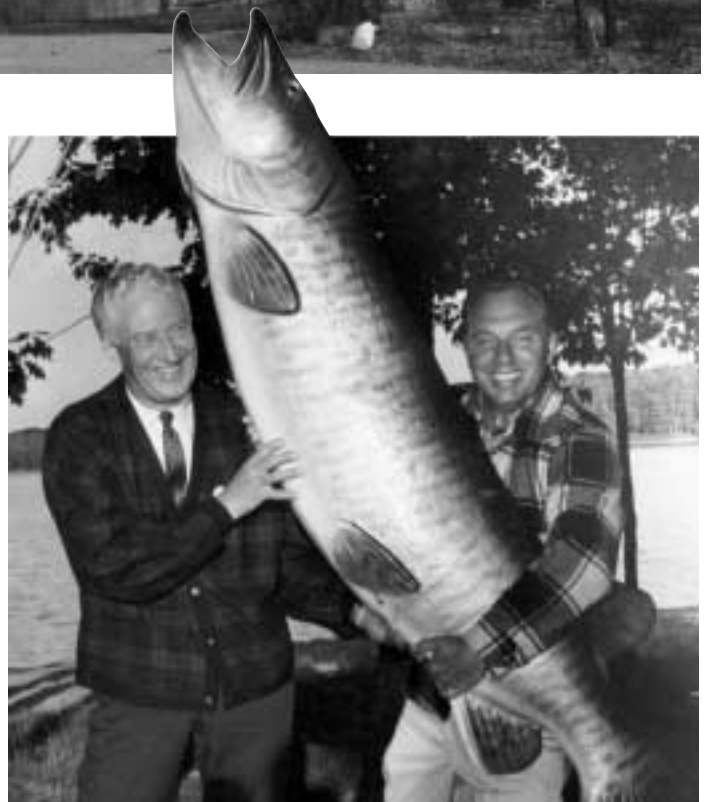
Getting ready for the bratwurst celebration in Sheboygan in the summer of 1953, officials change the name of 8th Street to Bratwurst Boulevard.



Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin—La Crosse

Top: A lost icon. Once dubbed the “World’s Largest Six Pack,” the storage tanks at La Crosse’s G. Heileman Brewing Company have been repainted and no longer bear the Old Style logo.

Right: Governor Warren P. Knowles and broadcaster Earl Gillespie horse around with one big muskie. Though Wisconsin’s rivers, lakes, and streams are home to many species of fish, the muskellunge (“muskie”) became the official state fish in 1955.



WHS Archives, PH 3719-105

The Author



Joseph Kapler, Jr., joined the Wisconsin Historical Museum staff as curator of domestic life in January 2001. He holds a bachelor of arts degree in history from Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa, and masters degrees from Marquette University and Eastern Illinois University. The souvenir cheesehead hat he received as a farewell gift now graces his otherwise dull basement office and served as inspiration for this article.

exploration of Wisconsin's cultural identity. Reader and visitor response is important and valued as we prepare for the future. The development of exhibits and programs will be in partnership with the many diverse audiences we serve, and we intend to present history that is inclusive of the varied groups that now call the state home.

So what do we say when we say "Wisconsin"? In what way do our cultural symbols and icons *represent* Wisconsin? There are at least a few conclusions we can draw. Many of the popular symbols are celebratory and communal in nature. Wisconsinites come together and share in each other's company for many reasons: euchre at the tavern, hunting at the deer camp, bowling at the local alley, polka at the church festival, tailgating before the big game. We support our teams and tailgate together, win or lose. We are fond of our numerous taverns and supper clubs, where there is a genuine sense of hospitality and comfort. Wisconsinites take pride in those things associated with them even if they are not so glamorous. We took a derogatory moniker and wear it on our heads, and we made a ground-hugging animal stand up and take on all comers, especially those pesky gophers! So now it's time to pull up a bar stool, put on our thinking hats—or maybe our cheesehead hats—and take time to reflect on the nature and identity of Wisconsin, the badger state. Or is it the dairy state? ❧

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According to the Milwaukee Journal of January 30, 1987, Bertha Eichelberger bowled in five leagues every week.

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