"...We need a roof over our heads"

THE STORY OF THE
La Crosse Housing Authority

written by SUSAN T. HESSEL

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Susan T. Hessel
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First Project of the Housing Authority of the city, conversion of ordnance plant buildings to 74 dwelling units, gets the go-ahead signal with the signing of a use-permit for the area by Secretary of Agriculture Clinton D. Anderson, word of which was received Friday afternoon by Mayor J.J. Verchota, center. Standing are the housing commissioners, J.V. Weisensel, Dr. C.O. Pederson, Mrs. Owen Jackson, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. A.N. Schult and Harry D. Newburg. Work on remodeling of the buildings is expected to begin in a week or 10 days.
I was not an early advocate of public housing. At first I thought it was just a handout that would create life-long dependency. It didn't take me long to change my mind.

Public housing for families is much more than a handout — it is a leg up. It helps people in difficult periods of their lives to stabilize themselves financially so they can move forward and into their own homes.

For many older citizens who have worked hard all their lives and are now on fixed incomes, public housing is an opportunity for them to live safely, comfortably and with dignity.

So important did public housing become in my mind, I not only served on the La Crosse Housing Authority, I helped start the La Crosse County Housing Authority. I am a past chairman of the La Crosse County Housing Authority and today am chairman of the city authority.

The La Crosse Housing Authority Board first considered developing a history about two years ago as we were approaching the 50th anniversary of our founding. Not many people realize the origins of the Housing Authority go back to the end of World War II when La Crosse, like other communities in the country, faced a severe housing shortage as soldiers returned home. Our first projects were designed to help these soldiers who were so eager to return to a normal life once again.

After successfully housing these young families in renovated barracks, the Housing Authority looked to meet the permanent challenge of housing the poor. It was not easy. Some in the community thought the notion of public housing smacked of socialism and was competition with landlords.

There were many battles to gain public support for the various family and senior citizen projects in La Crosse today. The Housing Authority had its share of criticism over the years — some rightfully and some not-so-rightfully in my opinion.

But in the last half century this Housing Authority has housed thousands of people on their way to independence. It also has won many quality awards from the state of Wisconsin and the federal government.

We are proud of this record, particularly because there were obstacles to overcome much like the challenges that the people we serve face in their lives.

This book is dedicated to these residents, past, present and future. May they always have a roof over their heads.

Roland Solberg, Chairman
La Crosse Housing Authority Board of Commissioners
‘...we need a roof over our heads’

"It couldn't happen in La Crosse."

At least that's what a La Crosse newspaper wrote in a photo caption of a family that had taken up temporary residence on a bench in the old courthouse square in post World War II La Crosse. Beleaguered eleven-year-old June Powers held a sign that told the family's story: "Evicted from my home."

Also photographed in the undated newspaper clipping were sister, Joyce, 14, her mother and father, and three-year-old brother, Bernard, held on his father's lap. A second sign rested against the father's leg, giving warning to others still living in homes: "You may be next."

Mrs. Powers spoke for the family: "An American must have the right to live where he works, to have a decent home for his family and to be able to rear his children properly and to give them an education."
Twenty persons in a nine-room house—10 living in six rooms and 10 in three rooms—is evidence of the critical housing situation in La Crosse. The house (left) is the center of interest in eviction proceedings brought by Wilford G. Buchholz, 421 North 11th street, against Roy Artis, 421A North 11th street, at which a justice court jury Friday decided in favor of the latter. Members of the Buchholz household number 10 as do also those of the Artis family. Buchholz is a veteran of World War II and Artis of World War I.

—Robert Race
Decades before the terms "homeless" or "street people" came into the popular jargon, there were people in La Crosse — and throughout the country — who had no place to live. Children were "parceled out" to relatives, sometimes in different cities. Parents stayed wherever they could find a room to rent or with relatives who might already be taking in others.

The search for housing often took months, even years. When found, accommodations were substandard even by early standards. Most pressing was the plight of veterans after World War II. These heroes came home to parades but no places to hang their hats. Eager to resume their lives, they found themselves crowded into homes owned by their in-laws, often staying on the living room couch. Two and three families shared a single house. With such a lack of privacy, it is a wonder America had a baby boom.

Mrs. Norman (Viola) Duffrin was like many who turned to the local newspaper for help. Her letter to the editor of the La Crosse Tribune pleaded for a place to live other than the home of her parents, Irene and John Euler on South 11th Street.

We have lived the last two and a half years with my mother and dad because of the housing shortage. We have six children who range in age from two to 17 years. My mother has two grandsons, ages six and four years, to care for because of the death of their mother in 1943. My brother, an ex-sailor, is at home, too. That means 13 people living in five rooms.

It is very overcrowded. My dad is in ill health and can't work. My folks need their home to themselves and we can't get one. For the sake of our children, we need a roof over our heads.

What can we do? We need a house very much.
The Duffrin family story was not unique. In 1946, the housing shortage was so acute in the city of Minneapolis that Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey (who later became a U.S. Senator, Vice President of the United States and a candidate for President) led a Shelter-A-Vet housing drive designed to open the hearts and homes of residents whose extra rooms were not being used.

The campaign, which included the song "A Place to Hang My Hat," was offered to La Crosse Mayor J.J. Verchota to use in a similar effort. The song, written by veteran Jack La Salle, was a cry for help:

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ want a place to hang my hat; } \\
& \text{Anything would do. }
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{I'm not very choosy, } \\
& \text{A place like this or that would do. }
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Got a great big frown on my face, } \\
& \text{Cause I've got the gal, } \\
& \text{Got the time, but got no place } \\
& \text{To even hang my hat, and call home.}
\end{align*}
\]

It is into this atmosphere that the La Crosse Housing Authority — the sixth in the state — was born in 1946 to solve the problems of veterans, later poor families and later still the elderly. Over a half century, the Authority went from an agency viewed with skepticism at best — even suspected of socialist or communist leanings — to a national leader in public housing with four family projects, seven high rises for the elderly and 150 vouchers for private-sector housing for very low income persons. A half century later, the La Crosse Housing Authority continues to win honor after honor from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and other organizations. It is viewed as a model for similar housing authorities throughout the country.
The Story of the La Crosse Housing Authority

This newspaper clipping demonstrates veteran housing was a problem in many communities.

'Did you know La Crosse has 'homes' like these?'

What were housing conditions in La Crosse in the 1930s?

Two families, one with four members and another with seven, shared an old double boat house containing a combination kitchen, dining room and living room. Six cases of scarlet fever developed in the crowded conditions, forcing the house to be quarantined for four months.
Another family lived in a long room where it was not possible to stand erect except in the very center. Several inches of water stood in the home as a result of high river waters.

A county vehicle pulled up to still another house while the father, who had been out of work, sought a job and the mother sought legal help. Workers in the van loaded up everything the family had, including clothes on the line. At 8 p.m. that night, social agency staff found the family sitting "half clad" on the steps of the building with no place to go and nothing to eat.

These stories and many more were reported in 1938 — the height of the Great Depression — at the annual dinner of the Central Council of Social Agencies, an organization of about a dozen social service agencies in La Crosse. The Rev. A.N. Schuh, director of St. Michael's Orphanage in La Crosse, which later became Catholic Charities, described a year-long study conducted by the council on the housing shortage in La Crosse.

"La Crosse faces an acute housing shortage which is detrimental to the health of the inhabitants and a bad investment of taxpayers' funds," Schuh said.

Correcting those conditions, he argued, should be as important as maintaining a pure water supply, clean streets, parks and playgrounds, policing of the city, and protection of public health through elimination of contagious diseases.

In an article covering the event, the La Crosse Tribune showed pictures of houses cited in the study. Dirt floors and tar-paper houses with no indoor plumbing were breeding grounds for disease in an era before antibiotics.

"Pictures don't lie!" the caption under the pictures said.

"The above scenes are typical of La Crosse's poor-housing districts. People today are living in 'homes' like these in the city. In some of those pictures, and in many others like them, two, three or four families are residing. Some parents, who
would like to see their children grow up in better surroundings, have attempted to make their hovels liveable. Others have given up. Not all of them are unsanitary, but many are. Disease, delinquency, and the destruction of child morale have resulted from homes such as these."

The committee found higher rates of relief assistance, delinquency, tuberculosis and infant mortality in the poorer wards than in the "good wards." One "good" ward had 3,408 people with only four infant mortality cases, 24 relief cases, two delinquencies, and six cases of tuberculosis.

Two other wards, each with less than half the population of the first, compared poorly. One had 1,612 persons with eight infant mortality cases, 93 relief cases, six delinquencies and five cases of TB. The other ward had a population of 1,236 with six infant mortality cases, 107 relief cases, two delinquencies and nine TB cases. This last ward also had a high truancy rate.

"Cases too numerous to cite would fill many a volume to further confirm the need for better housing in La Crosse," said Louise Poehling, director of La Crosse County Department of Outdoor Relief, who spoke at the same meeting.

Another speaker, Zilpha Monroe, Executive Secretary of the Social Service Society, said her agency knew of men "who have of necessity spent days and weeks searching for housing — days that might so well have been spent working to earn the things their families need. There were no houses to which they might be sent. Not only time spent and energy are lost, but sleepless nights and the anxiety experienced form attitudes which must be changed to make desirable citizens."

The council called for development of cheap housing, particularly in the airport addition and west of Copeland Avenue on proposed filled-in land. In addition, it called for condemnation of downtown housing and boat houses as well as other unfit units.
The council's 1938 call to action was not a new one. As early as 1923, a publication of the Social Service Society in La Crosse reported cases of housing unfit for human habitation. "If you were asked by an outsider whether La Crosse has a slum section, what would you say? You'd deny it vigorously, wouldn't you?" the publication said. "Yet were the hovels scattered about La Crosse gathered together, we should have a district far worse than the slums of our great cities."

The society in 1923 wrote passionately about 50 families in La Crosse living in unfit conditions. By the height of the Great Depression, 50 families would have seemed like no problem at all.

Between 1910 and 1920, La Crosse saw growth in commercial and industrial development that was surpassed in the state only by the city of Madison. During that time, the average gain in population in Wisconsin was 25.8 percent, while La Crosse grew 30.2 percent.

La Crosse was no different than other cities during those years. During World War I, there had been little or no housing construction. When the war ended, a nationwide building boom commenced. There were 174,000 new housing starts in 1918 and 405,000 in 1919.

With demand so high immediately after World War I, building material prices skyrocketed 126 percent in just 18 months and total building costs went up 112 percent. With prices up so much, buyers became "timid" and building starts dropped again to 247,000 units in 1920. Higher prices and "carrying charges" — the term then used for mortgages — led to numerous home foreclosures during the late 1920s, despite the general prosperity of the era.

The slump in home building was a major factor in bringing on the stock market crash of 1929. Conditions worsened during the Great Depression and more than a million American families lost their homes between 1929 and 1934.
House prices were way down and a dollar could buy much more, but it was much, much harder to get that buck.

Planning consultant Leonard Smith had said 2,000 new homes would have to be built in the 1930s to meet the demand of a growing city whose population he expected would reach 49,000 by 1940. During the Great Depression the city did not even keep pace with the housing needed to replace units ruled unfit for habitation, and, in 1939, only 72 new homes were built.

Smith's solution in 1938 was to have a planned development in an area of the city where development remains controversial to this day — the La Crosse River Marsh. Smith, who conducted a six-month housing study in 1938, said the 900 to 1,000 acres "were at present of very little value except to the frogs and the mosquitoes."

He argued marsh development would be less costly than building on the outskirts of the city in terms of added fire and police protection, water and sewage and other public utilities. "Before extending the city farther northward or southward, this central marsh area should be filled and developed for homes and industries," he said.

Smith, whose work was commissioned by real estate developer Frank Hoeschler, said building in the marsh would end the city's north/south rivalry. "An important reason for filling this marsh also is seen in the situation it has caused in separating the community into two competing districts, thus fostering misunderstanding and jealousy that have seriously affected the logical and economic growth of the city."

The marsh could hold 3,000 new home sites in about 75 blocks. That would still allow for industrial and commercial development, as well as parks and school playgrounds. No action was taken on Smith's plan.

Although the economic activity of World War II ended the tough economic times, housing construction remained at a standstill. Americans were earning money, but couldn't spend
it on building materials because they were being diverted to the war effort. With few consumer goods for most Americans to purchase during World War II, savings accounts jumped from $6.3 billion in 1940 to more than $37 billion in 1945.

The United States also was a nation in motion. During the war, 30 million people moved from one part of the country to another, sacrificing, scrimping, saving for what they believed would be a better life when the war ended.
The housing "emergency"

When World War II ended in Europe on May 8, 1945, and in the Pacific on August 14, 1945, millions of soldiers returned home. In Wisconsin, alone, there were 332,200 soldiers in the war (and 8,390 deaths).

Each survivor arrived home with hopes, dreams and expectations of picking up where he left off. Unfortunately, survivors came home to nothing like they expected. Sure, many employers gave the veteran back his old job, but where would he and his family live?

War brides were common during World War II. Many met each other and married just before the men went overseas. With little time to get to know each other before hand, starting off married life without a place to live was even more tough. The wife and family may have muddled through living with Mom and Dad during the War, but the returning warriors wanted their own place — any place.

By January 1946, as more veterans were returning to La Crosse, the La Crosse Common Council created the Citizens Emergency Housing Committee to study the housing problem. Headed by Howard Dahl, the committee found 1,300 homes needed for persons in the "ordinary income bracket" with another 300 to 500 housing units needing to be replaced because they were unfit for habitation.

Nationally, the need was for 2.5 million units, according to Robert Lasch, a national housing official. "In undertaking to build more than 2-1/2 million veterans' homes during the next two years by the planned effort of the nation and its communities, we acknowledge the fact that a man's house is not exclusively a private affair," he said in a speech entitled The Housing Challenge: 1946-1956. "Since the effects of bad
housing, or no housing, are a matter of obvious social concern, it is good sense to say that the social concern should begin where inadequate housing begins."

Noting the community spends millions on superhighways so city dwellers can move about, Lasch said “it cannot shun responsibility for the kind of home he moves from and to.”

The origins of the La Crosse Housing Authority go back to January 11, 1946, with Msgr. Alphonse N. Schuh as chair. Other members were Mrs. Stella Trane Jackson, Dr. Carl O. Pederson, Leonard V. Weisensel, Harry D. Newburg, and the Rev. Oscar S. Paulsen. The Authority hired Mrs. Ruth Poeske as secretary for $110 a month (that was quickly raised to $130 a month and, in May 1946, she was awarded one Saturday off each month).

The need for housing was such that both long-term and short-term solutions were necessary. Recognizing the impact of returning soldiers, the city of La Crosse asked that the ordnance buildings used by the Sixth Service Command be turned over to the city for emergency housing. During the war years, the Civilian Conservation Corps land near Ward Avenue between 22nd Street and Losey Boulevard had been converted into a maintenance site for vehicles from Camp McCoy (now called Fort McCoy).

The site was once La Crosse’s first airport, called Salzer Field, and these same grounds also had been used for periodic performances of the Ringling Brothers Circus when it came to town. During the war, quonset huts and wooden barracks were constructed on the big open field for the many workers who kept McCoy’s vehicles running.

With the war’s end, the barracks that housed the ordnance plant workers no longer were needed for the war effort. The city eyed it as buildings that could easily be converted into apartment units for veterans. The city was eager to draft them — and any other buildings — for the post-war housing effort.
The Rev. Schuh, who had been so vocal about housing in the 1930s, became an advocate once again. He understood the challenges poverty created. He also appreciated how important and how basic a need housing was in helping families with financial challenges pull themselves up.

As always, he presented his case to community groups, including the Twentieth Century Club, a group of well-educated and well-off women who often took stands on social issues.

"There is an emergency need for housing the returned veterans. We'll have to house them this winter. The social agencies don't know what to do," Rev. Schuh told club members. "The city's houses are filled. Business expansion has forced people into such living quarters as stores, and the cost to the city is more than if houses were built and rented."

After hearing from Rev. Schuh, the Twentieth Century Club passed a resolution calling for immediate action because "such a situation is a handicap and a disgrace to a city which has a reputation of being a progressive community."
Housing Board Hears Sheriff Discusses Eviction Case With Officials

Critics leveled at Sheriff Stanley C. Olson by the mayor's emergency housing committee Monday for his action in attempting to evict the Robert F. Pitsch family from his home at 930 Cameron Avenue came up for a review Thursday when the committee met with Olson to hear his side of the story.

After hearing the sheriff, the committee decided to check on points that were brought up and to meet again Friday afternoon.

Olson requested that right to appear before the committee stating that he had received adverse publicity based on an incomplete presentation of the facts that led to his action.

George Hall, Trades and Labor council organizer, pointed out that the mayor's committee does not deny the rights of a property owner in obtaining the use of his property but seek to prevent him to do so, but does protest the placing of families in the street when no provisions have been made for their shelter.

The sheriff denied that the writ of restitution obtained by him from Justice Charles B. Varco Saturday to regain possession of his property was served illegally. His showing the paper to Pitsch in Justice court constituted legal service and it was not necessary to read it at the house, he said, adding that the undersheriff had made an attempt to do so and had the defendant's wife refused to listen.

Obtained For Own Use

Olson explained that he had obtained the property at 930 Cameron Avenue for the use of a home and not as rental property, that he had rented it to Pitsch when he became sheriff and that the latter had promised to vacate on 30 days' notice at any time.

His quick action to obtain possession of the premises by evicting the tenants he said was prompted by the threat of the tenant's attorney to appeal to circuit court which might mean a delay until spring.

He further declared that the Pitsch family had been asked to move more than a year ago when Mrs. Olson found the house to be in bad condition and had promised to do so, but that when the tenant went into service, the Olsons did not care to take action.

Makes Other Claims

Other claims made by the sheriff are that the Pitsch family look in several roomers, that at least one was still there when the eviction action was started.
Sheriff tries to evict family

The fear of eviction was a very real one for families in La Crosse after World War II. One of the most dramatic cases involved Sheriff Stanley C. Olson, who was first elected in 1942 after serving in the La Crosse County Traffic Department.

In 1946, during his second and last term in office, he evicted the Robert F. Pitsch family from the home they rented from him at 930 Cameron Street. Dramatically and tragically, most of the Pitsch family's household goods were set out on the boulevard on a Saturday morning before the family's attorney, Hubert J. Schleiter, could get a stay of execution for the conviction.

Olson, who was to leave office the coming January 6, wanted his house back because he would no longer be living in the sheriff's residence. "I wanted to draw the matter to a head for the benefit of other landlords as well as of myself," he said. "People have been crawling all over my neck because we can't get action on evictions. This case shows that I can't do it even for myself."

Undersheriff Robert Henninger and three trustees from the county jail were removing the Pitsch property from the home when Schleiter arrived with the court-ordered stay. The La Crosse Tribune report said the helpers put the materials back and a plumber, who had just disconnected the gas stove, began working to put it back into service. When reporters arrived, the jail trustees disappeared.

The Pitsch family, which included four children, planned to leave as soon as they found another home. "We are as anxious to get out as Olson is to have us do so," Pitsch said.

The family had rented the home for four years. "Pitsch promised me verbally that he would move out on a 30-day
notice,” Olson said. “In August, we told him we would need the place and asked him to move so that we could redecorate and remodel. If we didn’t need to have the house, we wouldn’t have asked them to move.”

Olson invited reporters to come back after the family moved to “observe the damage done by the present tenants.”

Members of the mayor’s Emergency Housing Committee met in special session the next Monday to discuss the sheriff’s action.

“The members of the Mayor’s Emergency Housing Committee of La Crosse have been extremely disturbed and somewhat puzzled on learning of the attempt by our sheriff, Stanley C. Olson, to forcibly evict a World War II veteran and his family of four small children from the house which he owns at 930 Cameron Avenue,” the committee said in a statement. “...In view of the facts that our sheriff’s ‘eviction force’ went to work in a matter of minutes after the writ of restitution was issued, making this the fastest forcible eviction in the history of La Crosse County; that our sheriff saw fit to take prisoners from the La Crosse County Jail to aid in carrying the furniture out of the house; that our sheriff’s son-in-law did not read the writ of restitution to Mrs. Pitsch, as required by law; that our sheriff was quoted as saying that he would not have asked the Pitsches to move if he didn’t need the house, and that our sheriff’s son-in-law and the county jail inmates fled when newspaper reporters and photographers arrived on the scene, it appears that our sheriff was not as much interested in benefiting other landlords as he was in benefiting our sheriff, Stanley C. Olson....We regret that a public official should set this unfortunate example to promote his personal interests.”

The Pitsch family moved out the same day as the attempted eviction. The two oldest children, ages 7-1/2 and 4-1/2, went to live with their grandmother in Chippewa Falls, WI; the two younger children were taken in by friends resulting in eight persons in a five-room house.
Federal approval for housing units

Cases like the Pitsch family only dramatized a need to take action and to take action now to house veterans. When federal approval came by the end of January 1946 for up to 74 dwelling units on the ordnance site, La Crosse architect Carl Schubert quickly prepared the design for the one and two-bedroom units.

Rental applications were available on April 1 that year with preference given in this order:

- veterans who lived in La Crosse prior to the war;
- civilians who lived in La Crosse before the war;
- veterans who moved to La Crosse recently or who wished to move to La Crosse;
- and civilians who wished to move to La Crosse.

Priority then was given to families who were being evicted, families who were separated because of housing problems, and families living in inadequate quarters.

The federal government also approved temporary housing to be located on a site on La Crosse's North Side between the Milwaukee and Burlington railroad tracks and the south boundary of the old Logan High School athletic field and Clinton Street. The city had requested 200 units of housing but was given only 50, a reflection of the demand for temporary housing in cities in equally dire shape across the country.

La Crosse State Teachers College had a parallel housing challenge. The GI bill of rights gave veterans opportunities to go back to college, but universities and colleges had to scramble to find places for these students to live.

One newspaper article in early 1946 said the same veterans who waited in line during wartime for chow, clothes, shots
and salutes were now waiting in line again for education. An Associated Press survey found 1.5 million veterans would be interested in going to college, but thousands of students were turned away across the country because of scarcities of textbooks, teachers and housing. Most schools simply told would-be students: “First find a place to live.”

Clyde B. Smith, who represented La Crosse State Teachers College on the Citizens Emergency Housing Committee, said most people did not understand the problem. “There is no quick solution to the building problem,” he was quoted as saying. “People don’t know that building materials are still in the forest. The whole story should be put out to the public for the real answer lies with the people of La Crosse.”

So dire was the housing shortage that it became the patriotic thing to do to open your home to veterans and their families if you had any empty room, apartment or house. And woe be to any slackers who were found to have an extra room they were not sharing. Mail carriers were enlisted to do a house-by-house survey to find places to meet the city’s needs “during the emergency.” All persons with housing to rent or those seeking apartments or homes were encouraged to work through the USO-Traveler’s Aid Society which then operated in the Skemp Building on State Street and had a telephone number that was charming by today’s standards — 752.

The USO-Traveler’s Aid Society, which provided assistance to persons who were displaced during the war or for “moving people” with other needs like meals, or temporary jobs, was run by Frances Meador. During World War II, she helped hundreds of individuals with housing and other needs, such as finding family members, before the office closed on April 30, 1946. The housing information center then became a part of the La Crosse Housing Authority, which was located in the Rivoli Building on Fourth Street.

The housing emergency was fought on many fronts beyond the old Ordnance buildings. A labor advisory committee
called for stronger price controls on materials and old and new houses because “the price of houses has risen beyond the workers’ ability to pay.” At the same time, labor called for controls on other prices that had been rising dramatically because of greater demand. With the price of butter becoming prohibitive, labor demanded price controls on cream used in manufacturing.

As part of its effort to improve the housing crisis, the *La Crosse Tribune* offered free classified ads to those who would share a room, apartment or house with a veteran. It also called for the community to pursue “every possible angle” in solving the problem.

“The real problem, of course, is beyond the acquisition of a few homes. La Crosse needs hundreds of them, but the difference between what we need and can get is the void which is our problem,” the newspaper editorialized. “Yet the effect of pressing into use vacant business buildings, of making a thorough canvass to be sure no vacant houses have been overlooked, might be significant. It would emphasize the distress citywide....”

Charles W. Bullington, whose landlord was about to kick him and his family out of the home they lived in, wrote:

“My pride is gone. I can no longer fight broken promises or extremely poor luck and must plead for assistance. Won’t someone please, please rent me a two-bedroom apartment or house? My situation is desperate for the welfare of my family and the finest job I ever had are in jeopardy. I so very much want both, a happy home and a worthwhile source of income.”

One of the reasons veterans were most frustrated and angry by the housing emergency is there were many landlords and homeowners who would not rent rooms, apartments or housing to families, particularly ones with young children.

Bullington, who had a child, said he had found landlords
who would not rent to him. "If you think this is an up-and-coming community, why don't you be like San Francisco papers and refuse to run rental ads which specify 'no children'? We have tried almost two years to find a decent place to live in La Crosse, but because we have a child, were refused or else the rent was so high we couldn't afford it. We tried to buy a home but were refused that too, as they said our income wasn't adequate to cover the payments — and yet — rents for most apartments and houses are equal to, or greater than, these payments. This I cannot understand. Who is to blame — the government, the city, the landlords, the inflation or us?"

One letter writer was even more blunt: "We drafted our boys to protect America's rooms, houses and apartments. If necessary, let's draft these same rooms, houses and apartments to protect these same — a correction please — the more fortunate of these same boys — the ones who came back."

The letter, signed only with the initials G.M.C., reminded readers that veterans fought "your war."

The La Crosse Tribune called the letter "extremely pointed, to the extent that it represents the most bluntly stated case for the veterans yet to appear in the public prints. Perhaps it is the jar we have needed, the blow at our sensibilities necessary to bring us abreast of the realization that we owe a share of our smugness with those who made it possible through the late lamented experience abroad. G.M.C.'s letter may be extreme. But the cause exposed also is extreme."

By March 1946 an estimated 1,300 homes were needed for veterans' families in La Crosse. The Tribune listed families anonymously whose housing needs were deemed most urgent by the USO-Traveler's Aid office. Among them was a household with three adults who had lived in the same place for 13 years but were given notice to move the next month. The husband, who was blind, was unable to find his way
around even familiar surroundings without help.

The movement to convert the ordnance buildings had its highs and lows. On March 6, the La Crosse Common Council approved a $45,000 loan to the La Crosse Housing Authority to remodel the buildings. The loan was to be paid back through the rent payments of those living in the buildings.

Not all La Crosse Common Council members agreed with the project initially. Dr. A.R. Kempter, who represented the 9th Ward, questioned the ability of the Housing Authority to pay back the loan.

"I understand that 1,000 veterans are out of work in La Crosse," he was quoted as saying. "If 60 of these move into the housing project, the remaining 940 will have to be taxed to furnish houses for the 60."

Dr. Kempter said he was "all for the veteran – but I'm for all of them. I want fairness and justice for all. I think the financing of the project should be on a broader basis."

Instead of converting the ordnance buildings, he said people should open their homes to the veterans and churches should take on a greater role. Later, when the issue came back to the Council, Dr. Kempter changed his mind and voted for the loan.

The project suffered a brief setback on March 15, 1946, when the National Guard claimed the buildings for an army storage plant. The Housing Authority and others in the community were shocked. The Rev. Schuh said the Housing Authority did not want to discredit the National Guard, but spoke firmly, saying it "is time to bring to a decision the question of whether a federal agency or human needs should have priority."

Mayor Joseph J. Verchota agreed, saying the "National Guard should recognize that our housing shortage is a more severe emergency than their need for a place to store equipment and they should not press their claim for the land."
The National Guard quickly gave up its claim and the Housing Authority was given approval for the conversion of the ordnance plants. Rents were set by the Office of Price Administration, between $23.42 and $46.42 a month, depending on the number of bedrooms and family income.

Remodeling work began immediately. On the first day applications were taken, 50 families — mostly veterans — applied. By April 11, the Housing Authority stopped taking applications as the number on the list for the expected 70 units (actually 57 were built there) had already reached 173.

"The wisdom and judgment of a Solomon will be required, it appears, to decide which families are in greatest need, not only for the first 25 units, which are expected to be available shortly, but also of the remaining ones," the La Crosse Tribune wrote.

The ordnance buildings were remodeled by contractors Theodore J. Molzahn and Sons and Peter Nelson and Son. The design called for some of the ordnance buildings to have a corridor through the center, with doors leading from the hallway to the individual apartments. Others had entrances directly to the outside.

To hold down the cost of the units to fit within the $45,000 city loan for remodeling, the Housing Authority shaved its budget here and there. Among the items to go was tile flooring to cover each unit's concrete floors.

Some of those working on the construction project took it upon themselves to provide what they felt was a necessity rather than a luxury. Dipping into their own pockets, they decided to pay for asphalt tile flooring to make the apartments more homelike. Architect Carl Schubert also approached several businesses for support. Among those who donated flooring were the G. Heileman Brewing Co.; The Trane Company; Gateway City Transfer; Cargill Coal Company; Peter Nelson and Son and men working for the company, Theodore Molzahn and Sons and men working for
Molzahns; Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson; La Crosse Mosaic Tile Company; Clark-Bracken, Inc.; and Erickson Bakery Company.

T.C. Esser and Company also donated paint for the concrete floors in the corridors and storage rooms. The walls and ceiling of three units were donated along with labor to install them by Peter Nelson and Sons.

An open house for the first eight units was held in late April 1946 with a planned occupation of May 4. More than 2,000 persons attended the event, touring model apartments which were temporarily furnished with furniture, curtains, stoves and refrigerators donated by local businesses.

Community members volunteered to beautify the grounds for the families. The La Crosse Garden Club donated its time, while local green houses and individuals contributed plants. The buildings were dressed up with window boxes and beds of petunias. If black dirt became available, the plan was to add borders along the driveways.

Those with the greatest interest in the open house clearly were the first eight families to move in on May 4, 1946. These families were selected because their situations were most dire — they already had eviction notices.

Among those touring were Robert and Alice Jenks, who then were living in a single room, while his mother, Mrs. Alois Topp, took care of their 10-month old daughter, Rhonda, in her home. A photo caption in the La Crosse Tribune said that when the couple moved into one of the temporary units, it would be their first home since their marriage in 1944. Melbo had been a lieutenant in the Air Force for three years.

Also touring that day were Robert and Arlene Lowell and their two children, Mary Ellen and Donald. The family gave up their home when Lowell left for service in the Navy. They lived for a while in Norfolk, Virginia, before returning to La Crosse where they lived with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Lowell, on South Fourth Street.
First In Line Monday Morning

to apply for rental of one of the
housing authority’s 74 dwelling
units in the ordnance shop
temporary housing project was
Russell C. Dobie, Liner hotel,
who received his blank from Mrs.
James Kibbe, secretary of the
USO-Travellers Aid clearing
house in the Skemp building.
Dobie, a former Minneapolis
resident, served as a naval officer
during the war and still is a
member of the reserves. He is
employed by the Auto Parts
Service
An inside shot of the Knothe family in their living room on Ward Avenue.

Young children of the D. Knothe family sit on the front porch of their apartment in the Veterans Emergency Housing on Ward Avenue.
Also looking at a model apartment were R.H. Burkhart, an Army captain with five years of service, and his wife, the former Gretchen Miller. The family, assigned to a two-bedroom unit, toured with four children, including a set of twins.

The emergency housing development soon became a community of its own. In a La Crosse Tribune photo spread, Woodrow Schoenfeld is pictured relaxing in a neighbor's lawn chair after helping his neighbor paint furniture.

In another photo, a group of women are washing baby clothes in a sink in the development's laundry room. Another picture featured a new baby, Donald Laster, who was dubbed the first new citizen in the community. The community also celebrated a wedding early on in one of its units. Arthur Kidd and Alvira Anderson, who were waiting for a finished apartment to be ready for them in the development, had their wedding there.

In an article written near the end of construction on the site, the La Crosse Tribune talked about the vision it took to convert the Army facilities into a community:

In the far southeastern corner of the city, where during the war years, more than 1,000 persons worked day and night repairing Army vehicles, today housewives go about their daily routines and children play with their little wagons and tricycles. The metamorphosis of one of the largest army ordnance shops in the nation to an emergency housing development is nearly complete — within a month the area will be a little city in itself, with a population of more than 200 and all the services required for the needs of the community.
Among the signs of the growing community were:

- resident Robert Lowell’s store, which included mailboxes for residents, groceries and relaying of telephone messages. It was not a supermarket, but it “gave super service,” the Tribune said.
- the former site for washing vehicles was converted into a community wash room where families' “weekly chore of wash day is made more pleasant when done in company with others.”
- a bus stop at one of the buildings.
- and a pay telephone in the building is for residents who could not get private service.

Future plans called for a primary school on the emergency housing grounds, a church, a playground and a resident council to govern its affairs.

Church services soon were held each Sunday in a heated building. Catholics had the facility from 7:15 to 8:30 a.m.; St. Paul Lutheran Church from 8:45 to 10:30 a.m.; and Grace Lutheran Church from 10:45 a.m. to noon and Saturday morning for religious instruction for children.

Years later, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church held its first services in one of the barracks in 1954.

A 1954 notice from Pastor Dwaight H. Shelhart to prospective members said “The new English Lutheran Church needs a gang to work on Saturday, September 25th. Would you like to help fix the T-3 Barracks in the Ward Avenue Housing Project so we can use it for the services of the New English Lutheran Church?”

Like the temporary housing it was in, Good Shepherd members knew its days in the temporary housing were limited. Plans for the new church building already were drawn at the time the congregation met for the first time on October 17, 1954, in T-3 at 2223 Ward Avenue.
In its earliest days, the emergency housing project was considered more comfortable and more convenient than many permanent housing locations in the city.

...Life at the La Crosse emergency dwelling development has its ups and downs, just as in any other neighborhood or community. Children squabble here just as they do other places, dogs bark and somebody's radio disturbs someone else. But there is fun and neighborliness, too, and the tenants agree as they say of their homes, 'We have it better here than we had before.'

The 57 housing units of Emergency Housing met about a fifth of the housing need. Unfortunately, the opening of those units did not free many other accommodations in the city. Most of those who moved into the emergency housing had been living in single sleeping rooms or with relatives.
The emergency housing development at the old ordnance site was just one of the locations used for housing during the "emergency." The Housing Authority requested 200 emergency dwellings — buildings to be transported from military facilities around the country that no longer were needed now that the war was over. Shortly after its request, the authority learned it would receive 50 such structures. While the allocation was smaller than requested, the response came much faster than anticipated.

The federal government agreed in March 1946 to pay for the transportation of and remodeling of emergency housing.
The city paid for water and sewer hookups. The housing was to be located on two sites:

- seven 100-foot, single-story buildings that were converted into 21 living units on the old airport site south of Green Bay Street. The barracks buildings came from Schick General Hospital, Clinton, Iowa; and other Army barracks from Savanna, Illinois and Camp McCoy (now Fort McCoy) near Sparta, Wisconsin.
- four two-story buildings that could accommodate 32 families on a north side site between the Milwaukee and Burlington railroad tracks, the Logan athletic field and Clinton Street. Some of this housing later came from Camp McCoy.

In addition, the La Crosse State Teachers College was allocated 60 units for veterans on the former fairgrounds between La Crosse Street and Campbell Road, and also at 16th and Vine streets.

The owner of the land for the Clinton Street site, Elmer A. Swanson, was praised by one labor leader who said “the philanthropic offer made by E.A. Swanson is very commendable. The recognition on the part of La Crosse citizens relative to housing emergency needs deserves the thanks of the public.”

Even before the temporary housing units arrived in La Crosse in July 1946, foundations were set. Construction began the day after the units arrived under the supervision of a Chicago company.

Acquiring materials was always challenging. At one point, work was halted because of shortages of materials for the last 18 apartments. Architects and contractors were said to have “combed half the state and part of Minnesota” in search of plumbing and electrical equipment. Most needed were sinks,
shower heads, valves, and electrical fixtures. Persons with these items were urged to call the architects. Work resumed after the problem was resolved.

As fall approached, the contractor concentrated manpower and material at the 16th and Vine location so those units would be ready as soon as possible after classes started at La Crosse State Teachers College. The U.S. Housing Authority then required veterans attending classes be given priority.

By the end of 1946, the Housing Authority had provided homes for 77 families and nearly completed work on another 55 units. Of the 77 families, 57 lived on the old ordnance shop site on Ward Avenue, 12 in the federal public housing project on Green Bay and 22nd streets and eight at the north side Swanson site. Nearly completed were 13 units at Green Bay and 22nd, 24 on the north side, and 18 at Ward Avenue.

Even with those units and 60 on the La Crosse State Teachers College campus, the housing situation still was described as "critical" by the end of the year. In December 1946, the Housing Authority still had 752 applications for temporary and permanent housing. One family, the George Forers, lived in the former Losey Boulevard School. The old Losey Boulevard School Board said "The project was undertaken on the basis of helping and solving in a small way. No physical changes were found necessary in the building other than the addition of some rather temporary partitions. The school board has felt that in representing the district all it wants out of the project is enough to cover the costs of the project."

The Forers, forced to leave their previous home, had five children: Ray, Albert, Clarence, Dorothy and Lorraine. The father had served in the Army for three years, one of which was "in the European campaign," according to the La Crosse Tribune's coverage.

The year-end report for 1946 also noted the cost of remodeling the ordnance plant into housing had been much
greater than anticipated due to the difficulty in finding building materials. "The increased cost was explained by the necessity of purchasing material and equipment when and where they could be found to rush the project to early completion and make the units available to urgent demand for them," the Tribune reported.

The Housing Authority had to borrow an additional $15,000 from the city during the summer of 1946 and asked the Common Council in December 1946 to settle an additional $10,000 in bills. These loans were offset by rental amounts totaling $1,700.

Among the early residents at the Green Bay housing complex were John and Mary Kampschroer, who were like many couples during World War II. While he served in Europe as part of the 11th Armored Division of the 3rd Army, she was back in La Crosse making 35 mm shell cases at the Northern Engraving Plant on Third Street. She was not exactly Rosie the Riveter but was happy to do her part for the war effort as she earned money.

Fifty years later, the Kampschroers remember vividly how important it was for them to find housing in the former ordnance barracks. "Absolutely," John Kampschroer said when asked if the housing was a godsend.

After his return, the family searched long and hard for an apartment or house they could afford, but none was available. Instead, they lived with her parents in two rooms in her mother's large house on Thirteenth Street, cooking on a hot plate and dreaming of their own place.

"It wasn't easy. Everybody was pretty desperate," Kampschroer said. "There just wasn't any place to live, or if it was there, we couldn't afford it."

So when plans were announced to convert the barracks at the old Ordnance Plant into one and two-bedroom apartments, the Kampschroers were eager to be among the first to live in them. Kampschroer, who worked for the Kresge
Company store in downtown La Crosse, frequently dropped by the La Crosse Housing Authority office in the Rivoli Building to make sure their names were prominent on the list for the first units.

"He'd go in and see the girls in the office. He'd go in there and talk to them. He'd do everything he could to get in," Mrs. Kampschroer said.

Once construction began, she said "we'd go out and take a look at them. We'd watch them closely to be sure we'd get in as soon as possible."

While they don't remember moving day, there is no doubt they were thrilled to move in 1946. "We were one of the first families to move in," Kampschroer said. "There was a sense of relief. We had two children. We were able to have a place by ourselves."

Each of the barracks was converted into three apartment units. The Kampschroers had two bedrooms and a kitchen with a wood and coal stove.

"Talk to my wife," he said, "She'll tell you about her disastrous meals."

Actually, it was one disastrous meal, as she recalled it. That first Thanksgiving in the former ordnance barracks, Mrs. Kampschroer did not quite have the hang of keeping the fire going in the wooden stove. The pumpkin pies she put in the oven that morning never did cook. Later, her husband bought her a roaster oven so she could cook meals.

While conditions were austere, there was a joy to living in the project. Everyone who lived in their neighborhood was in the "same boat," Kampschroer said. All had young families and very little else.

What did they do for entertainment? "Keep the fire going," he joked. "We played cards out there. Nobody had any money. There was very little entertainment. We just went around the neighborhood visiting with friends. All of us were in the same position; we had two or three kids."
Fun meant sharing a 48-ounce bottle of beer between six of them for a night of cards. Families worked side-by-side in gardens located on the nearby open prairie land. Many of the children went to school together either at the Holy Cross School or Longfellow Grade School. “We had strong neighborhood ties,” Kampschroer said.

In order to create more recreation for the children and to cool off during hot summer days, a group of men decided to build a swimming pool for the children. “I went to the Health Department to find out what we had to do, what chlorine we needed in the water. We didn’t have all those regulations in those days,” Kampschroer said. “We were not worried about lawsuits.”

The men also built porches on several of the units with materials that a neighbor, Ray Miller, had left over from his employer, Pittsburgh Plate Glass. “We thought it was pretty nice,” Kampschroer said.

Among their neighbors were the late Gilbert Rieland and his wife, Angie, who lived in the units for three years. Angie Rieland and Mary Kampschroer, like many women then, were home with their kids in post World War II America. When the children went off to school, the mothers enjoyed neighborhood coffee klatches.

“We thought it was great. There were a lot of young people, a lot of community coffees,” Mrs. Rieland said. “A big night was a six pack of beer and playing cards. That’s all we could afford.”

Gilbert Rieland spent the war years on a hospital ship in the Pacific, the U.S.S. Benevolence, where he worked as a pharmacist mate/mortician. After he returned home in November 1945, he went first to Prescott, Wisconsin, where his wife was living. He worked for the Seed Certification Office of the Department of Agronomy, which was located in the Salzer Seed Building (now Salzer Square Retirement Living apartments on Seventh Street).
In the spring of 1946, he relocated to La Crosse, eventually ending up in a seed business on Highway 16. Rieland lived first in a rented room in the old YMCA building at 7th and Main streets. (That building has since been purchased by Western Wisconsin Technical College and remodeled as West Hall.)

The first summer the couple was in La Crosse they lived in the home of Central High School Principal George D. Scott, who rented his house to them while he took graduate classes in Utah. Because the housing units were not yet ready when Scott returned, they had to go back to Prescott.

They returned to La Crosse and moved into their two-bedroom unit on November 11, 1946, with their children. It certainly was crowded, but “You made do,” she said.

More than anything, she said they were “happy to get something. I don’t know what we would have done. Gil would have had to live all by himself. We were like thousands of people who came back and wanted to get into something.”

Another neighbor was Maxine Lennartz, who lived in an apartment with her husband, John, a World War II veteran. Maxine Lennartz came into a “ready made family” as he already had two children. While the emergency apartment units were being developed, she said “we were watching. We kept in touch with the Housing Authority so that when a place was available, we could get it. All of us were desperate to find a place.”

The couple had two children from John Lennartz’ first marriage and one together. In addition to raising children, they also raised chickens in a pen outside their apartment. When one of those chickens nipped at a neighbor child, it became dinner sooner than expected.

Having grown up on a farm, Lennartz had no problem using the wood stove. Once they were in the two-bedroom apartment, she “made curtains, fixed it up so it looked like home. It was just great to be off on our own.”
Lennartz taught elementary education for most of her career, retiring from the State Road School in La Crosse. Her husband started Lennartz Trucking while they lived in the project. Money was tight.

“We hardly had food to eat. I'd fix a couple eggs for kids and I did without. It was hard times for most other people. We were all having problems. But we knew it would get better.”

In May 1947, the La Crosse Tribune published photos of families tilling their gardens at the Green Bay site. “It's good black soil,” Charles Kelly, maintenance manager for temporary housing projects, was quoted as saying.

Each of the 25 families had 100 by 50-foot plots, which were made possible after the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company of La Crosse furnished a tractor and plow.

By 1948, the La Crosse Housing Authority had reached its limit in providing temporary housing relief. Although meant to be temporary, with the housing market still extremely tight in La Crosse, most families stayed in the emergency housing. By January 1948, some 67 families had been served in the 57 units on Ward Avenue. The Green Bay and Clinton Street sites had served 86 families in 75 units.

Meanwhile the Housing Authority files still showed 707 applications for living quarters, with 560 families seeking permanent quarters and 147 seeking temporary housing. A University of Wisconsin study, based on local information, found that overall La Crosse still needed 1,720 housing units — 1,100 rental and 400 for purchase. Another 220, unfit for habitation, needed to be replaced.
The goal of the various temporary housing projects were just that — temporary solutions to the housing emergency after World War II. The long-term goal was the American dream — each family having its own home (white picket fence optional).

The mayor’s emergency committee proposed that the La Crosse Housing Authority develop 118 homes on the north end of the Salzer airport plat. The plan called for two and three bedroom homes on lots that included these sizes: 60 by 127 feet; 70 by 80 feet; 80 by 110 feet; and 90 by 100 feet.
Having homes with varying frontages eliminated the appearance of "too-much-alike homes," the La Crosse Tribune reported. Also on the plans were possible locations for driveways and garages. The project, estimated to cost at least $400,000, was the city's first attempt at large scale construction to relieve the housing shortage. It was financed by Federal Housing Administration guaranteed loans and 10 percent aid made available though the 1947 State Veterans Housing Act.

Architect Carl Schubert estimated that 33 of the first 52 homes would cost from $9,000 to $9,600; nine of the homes would cost between $10,000 and $10,800; six between $8,200 to $8,400; and four would be priced between $11,600 and $11,900. He also said prospective buyers could hold down some of the cost by doing some of the work themselves or by "leaving out the black dirt, changing the plumbing, using two coats of paint instead of three and insulating only the ceiling."

Contractors could bid on the entire 52 houses complete with excavation, construction, plumbing, heating, electrical installation, and masonry. They also could bid on construction of from three to nine houses. F.R. Schwalbe and Son was the low bidder of $507,983 for 52 houses. Although grading was done in 1947, the initial plan turned out to be too expensive for the entire project to be done at once.

In 1949, the city turned over the Verchota addition land to the La Crosse Housing Authority. The addition had 129 lots, "laid out according to the modern concept of subdivisions for families."

The Housing Authority offered the lots for from $700 to $900, with half of the money to be returned to the homeowners after their house had been built.

The area between Losey Boulevard and 21st Place, Green Bay and Weston streets, was named after the late La Crosse
Lots in Verchta Addition to the southeastern section of the city are being offered for sale by the city through the La Crosse housing authority. Plans for the development of this area started several years ago and grading and installation of utilities was completed last year. The plat is part of the old Salzer airport, which the city has been holding since the field was abandoned in the early 30's.
Salser Airport Housing Bids were opened in the mayor's city hall office Tuesday afternoon by the municipal housing authority. Seated, left to right, are the Rt. Rev. Msgr. A. N. Schul, Architect Carl Schubert and Philip S. Davey. Standing are Mayor C. A. Beranek and Joel E. Stokke.
Mayor Joseph J. Verchota, who had a dream of a housing development on the old Salzer land after the airport was abandoned. Verchota, the first American-born generation of Czech immigrants, never finished eighth grade but was a voracious reader. He operated a tailor shop at 123 S. Fourth St., across from the Bodega Lunch Club and served as mayor from 1923 to 1935 and from 1939 to 1947.

It was La Crosse Mayor C.A. Beranek, who served from 1947 to 1949, who began to push plans to construct medium and low cost homes in a portion of the Salzer airport plat north of Weston Street.

Msgr. Schuh turned over the first spade of earth in 1949 at a symbolic groundbreaking. The first two houses were built by Oscar Gullord, with an anticipated construction time of 60 days. One was to be a single-story home with two bedrooms, while the other would have two stories with room for two additional bedrooms upstairs. The family of Mr. and Mrs. Winton McEldowney was the first to move into a house in the development in June 1949.

Also in 1949, construction began on a 20-house project by Osborne Nolop, general contractor. The first 10 houses along Losey Boulevard were to be completed in three months and another 10 in three more months.

Present for the groundbreaking was Anthony P. Gawronski, Milwaukee state director of the Federal Housing Administration, who urged Nolop to “Do the job right and give the people something for their money. Build not just for today but for the future. The FHA is interested in sound construction and always will cooperate in approving plans and guarantee loans if good plans are presented.”

Another person attending the groundbreaking was Gilbert Rieland, who was living in one of the temporary housing units on Green Bay Street. Three years after they moved into the ordnance plant units, Gilbert and Angie Rieland moved into their home on Losey Boulevard in La Crosse.
Lots were sold to eligible families for half their value, but that $900 was hard to come by, Mrs. Rieland said. “At that time, we didn’t have any money,” she said.

The Rielands simple two-bedroom home was among the first five that were built by Nolop in 1949. They moved into their dream home on October 5, 1949. The house had four rooms. The second floor was one big room without any insulation. The floors were brown tile.

“It was a basic home. We stepped out the door and into a foot of sand,” she said, adding “on the front side it was back to nature. We were like pioneers.”

But the Rielands, like all other families in the development, were thrilled to have a home of their own. They had been looking for all the years they lived in the temporary housing, but could not find anything that was acceptable.

At the time Losey was just a blacktop road with potholes. “They promised us it would never be improved as a highway,” said Mrs. Rieland, who still lives in the home on one of the busiest streets in La Crosse.

The road and the Rieland family of four boys grew along with the home. Over time, the families added on to their homes, including building garages. One summer, Gilbert Rieland added a breakfast room; another year he added eight feet to the living room. Neighbors helped each other in these projects.

“Everyone kept at it to make it liveable. We were so grateful for it. It gave us a chance to start owning a home,” she said.

By the end of 1950, all 118 lots of the plat had been sold and construction completed on all but two. Cost of the homes were from $8,500 to $9,000, including the lot. Another section of the old airport, called the Schuh Addition, was being planned for development. Sanitary sewers for the area, including a lift station, were also being installed. An advertisement in the La Crosse Tribune in 1951 called for persons interested in buying lots to register by November 14, 1951.
By 1950, the housing emergency following World War II was more or less over, with families assimilated back into their communities. The American dream of “a little white house with a picket fence” was becoming a reality for many families as the home construction industry kicked into gear.

In every city, however, there still remained much housing stock that was substandard, and perhaps in worse shape than the problems the Central Council of Social Agencies identified in the 1930s. La Crosse was not alone in its housing needs; across the country, millions of homes needed replacing.

The federal government through the Public Housing Administration (later called the Housing Assistance Administration, which became a part of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)) was authorized to provide support to communities to build low-income housing. The vehicles were housing authorities, government agencies established by cities or counties.

A state was allocated a certain number of units. Local housing authorities applied for a number of these units, which then were “reserved” for them for future construction. After a preliminary application for a specific number of units of low-income elderly or family housing, the Housing Authority received funds to develop plans, which needed HUD approval before construction could begin.

Once the many approval hoops were completed — and there were many, particularly in La Crosse which had its own ideas about design — HUD signed a contract agreeing to make an “annual contribution.” This contribution provided funds to, in effect, pay the mortgage or loan on a project over
a 40-year period. The annual contribution was much like paying the mortgage on the buildings.

HUD also made funds available for modernization of units on a periodic basis. It approved the renovation projects and then provided an annual contribution.

Those living in the apartments then paid 25 percent of their adjusted income in the beginning and later 30 percent. Sixty to 75 percent of housing authorities across the country also received what is called an operating subsidy, an additional contribution to help pay expenses.

La Crosse has never needed or sought an operating subsidy in its 51 year history. The Housing Authority pays money to the city of La Crosse — about 10 percent of the income it takes in as rent. In 1997, the payment in lieu of taxes was about $150,000.
Public housing for La Crosse families

It seemed like a reasonable idea. Why not attack the city’s housing shortage by building 200 permanent low-cost housing units? The idea was to apply to the federal Public Housing Administration (later HUD) for a preliminary loan for the project for developing plans.

After plans were drawn, the federal government was to pay 90 percent of the cost of the $2 million development, with the other 10 percent coming from private sources. The agreement could be for up to 40 years.

Because the housing project would be tax exempt, the La Crosse Housing Authority would pay 10 percent of the rent income it received to the city in lieu of taxes. Thomas Bunsa of Chicago, field economist for the Public Housing Administration, told the La Crosse Common Council that the project would actually create more revenue for the city because many of those who would live in the project were “tax delinquent.”

Because those who moved into the housing project would come from substandard housing, the city was expected to eliminate the old units as people moved into the new housing project. Aldermen talked privately of using the project to clear the Green Island area along the Mississippi River in the southwestern part of La Crosse. That area had between 50 and 100 cottages and trailer homes in an area that was primarily below flood stage.

Rents would be based on ability to pay and would be adjusted as the income of those living in the apartments changed. Families would move out once their incomes increased to a certain level.
Bunsa said the project would involve no expense for the city government and said the housing units would belong to the Housing Authority after it repaid its loan from the federal government.

The project soon turned into a battle with overtones of the Red Menace or fear of Communism that was then pervasive in the country. Even before an application for a $70,000 preliminary loan to the Federal Public Housing Administration for planning the project was approved by the La Crosse Common Council, questions were raised.

“What can we do about the people who are making a good living and still live in shacks?” asked Alderman Don Lyden. “I know several of them who don’t have a decent place to live, but who still take home a sackful of beer bottles every night.”

Roland Teske, a Milwaukee attorney, homebuilder and past president of the Milwaukee Builders Association, came to La Crosse in February 1950 already questioning the plan. “Our answer to housing is for private enterprise to keep on building until we overbuild. When you get more housing, substandard units will be idle,” Teske said. “You should make it your business to bring houses up to standard and get rid of shacks.”

Teske said he was opposed to paying for housing for someone “who can get along on his own money.” In Milwaukee, he said 450 of the 804 residents of barracks and quonset housing had incomes large enough to pay for their own houses. In addition, he said only a small number of the total veterans — 1,000 out of 93,000 — lived in public housing.

“What we object to is having a Housing Authority build and not pay taxes. We can’t have the veteran who builds for himself saddled with extra taxes,” he said.

He also questioned whether a man on relief — and it was men then — could come up with the minimum payment of $23 a month required to stay in public housing. He said the
Housing Authority would have to force him to leave if he could not pay enough to maintain sufficient income to repay the loan.

"Somewhere, somehow, someone is feeding socialistic notions into this state of free enterprise," he said, adding "America is at the crossroads leading to more socialism or to free enterprise. If we want socialism, we should understand it and know where we're going."

Msgr. Schuh, forever the fighter for housing for the poor, disagreed, declaring "roofing America" as the major need in the country.

"The family is the basic unit in society; it must be kept together because in its welfare lies the welfare of the nation," he said. "When an emergency comes, the family is strapped. Social agencies can help a low income family with food, but they can't get shelter for them under existing conditions."

He urged the community and nation to "team up to meet the need and challenge to provide safe and sanitary units for every American family."

Not everyone wanted to be on the team. The La Crosse County Taxpayers Association voted in March 1950 to oppose the project, saying it was not needed at this time. It also called for a referendum on the issue. Joined by the La Crosse Homeowners Association, it stated its reasons as:

1. Such a project will remove property from the tax roll. The federal government makes that a prerequisite to receiving a federal housing loan. Property taxpayers will have to carry the extra cost because land on which the project is constructed must be removed from the tax rolls and the completed buildings cannot be taxed.

2. The payment of 10 percent of the rents excluding utilities costs in lieu of taxes will not even cover the total cost of municipal services, such as fire, police, education, etc., to the residents of the project.
3. A five-room living unit in a project, on the basis of a nationwide experience, would contribute approximately $30 a year to the cost of government. The same size and cost home, without land taxes, in La Crosse would pay 10 times as much in taxes.

4. It has been suggested that the project be constructed on land which could be utilized for the construction of private residences. Although the land may be unimproved, still higher taxes would be available if private building were eventually placed on this land rather than a public housing project.

5. Because the federal government provides a subsidy to maintain the low rental nature of the project during the period in which the federal loan is being retired, payment in federal taxes from the general public must be used to subsidize a few individuals.

6. After the federal loan is paid off, there will be no further subsidies from the federal government to keep the rents low. In that event, it will have to make direct contributions to maintain this project as a low rental project.

7. The federal law requires that only as many units can be built in a housing project as there are substandard units in a city. Many so-called substandard units can become standard with very minor repairs and efforts should be taken to enforce the sanitary, building and fire prevention codes.

At a Common Council meeting where the call for a referendum was discussed, Charles Lang, representing the
homeowners union, criticized the tax support for public housing. "I can't see why the people of La Crosse should play Santa Claus to the type of people living in the substandard areas," he said. "The majority of people living in Green Island are satisfied and don't want to move."

With the rent controls that had been in place during World War II and the immediate post-war period just ending, he said landlords were just at the point where "they can get their heads above water."

John Freisinger of the La Crosse Board of Realtors also weighed in with the opposition to the public housing project. "The housing shortage is fast being relieved," he said. "There has been so much publicity on the need for housing that it would seem people of the United States are the worst housed people in the world, while actually we are the best."

Freisinger said public housing competes with the private sector for workers and materials and the private sector is fast relieving the housing shortage. "The only answer is supplied by private industry today. There will be more than one million homes built in the Untied States this year," he said.

(The year 1950 turned out to be a record for La Crosse with permits obtained for 316 residences at an estimated total value of $3,047,100. The Verchota Addition growth was the most remarkable.)

Rev. J. Pierce Newall, president of the La Crosse Area Federation of Churches, defended public housing. "We have a concern for the low income families," he said. "It is out of this concern that we are for this program."

Msgr. Schuh said the clergy, veterans, labor and citizens who support the project do not fear a referendum. The group "throwing mud at us now is the same group that opposed the program in Washington. The La Crosse Housing Authority was created to meet the problem which should be met and was not met by private enterprise."

Those who would benefit from the housing "are eligible not
necessarily because they are shiftless. These people must have rentals. No competition is intended and there will be none."

Noting some of the criticism of public housing was because residents would not pay their "full" share of taxes, Schuh said every family is subsidized by business, commerce and industry that pay two-thirds of taxes. Families without children subsidize those who have children in schools. Most children would not be able to have even a grade school education if their parents had to pay that full cost.

In addition, Schuh said the experience throughout the country is that municipalities actually get more money from the 10 percent payment than they would from property taxes on houses in the blighted areas. As an example, he said the Hillside Terrace low rent project in Milwaukee gained $30 a year per unit as payment in lieu of taxes, compared with $24.68 a year per unit in taxes through rent of blighted areas.

After the council voted to take the issue to referendum, Alderman Oscar Harebo predicted the referendum would bring a "great influx of propaganda from a national organization into the city."

Comparing the La Crosse vote to a similar referendum in Racine, which turned down public housing, he said the propaganda will be designed to "pit the Protestant against the Catholic, the Christian against the Jew."

Alderman Franklin Pamperin, who introduced the proposal for a referendum, said he wanted the vote as soon as possible. He told advocates for public housing he was sympathetic to the housing problem but represented all people. "Until such a time as citizens vote for it in a referendum, I will not vote for it."

Alderman Emil Schultz cited figures showing 35 percent of the country's population earned less than $2,500 a year. "We'll be building houses for a third of our population," he said.
Some aldermen clearly were for public housing. Noting the Common Council already spent money for playfield lighting and bleachers, Alderman V.K. Arneson said "if we can't sacrifice a little for social welfare, we'd better stop spending money altogether." And Alderman Charles Buchmann said the move was "vital to the poor and needy."

The Veterans of Foreign Wars, War Veterans Allied Council, Disabled American Veterans, Amvets and Catholic War Veterans all supported the public housing project at the council meeting.

Police Officer James Christie urged the council to avoid "making a political football out of a program" that he felt was needed to "give people a decent place to live."

Attorney Albert Wolfe said action was needed immediately. "There cannot be the slightest doubt in the mind of any reasonable human being that La Crosse needs housing now," he said. "The situation is acute and has been for over five years. It hasn't been solved and it is not being solved."

World War I veteran Vern Gibson said veterans and elderly persons living on Social Security would be helped by the project. "A lot of our boys today need our city fathers to look out for them. They looked out for us over there."

But others disagreed, including Charles Mosser who said, "young fellows today haven't the backbone to work," a statement that drew boos from the audience.

Lang, who represented the homeowners organization, said he did not understand why anyone supporting the housing project would object to it being put to a referendum. "Any successor to Father Schuh could make a pretty sweet racket out of the project," he said.

On May 9, just days before the Council was to vote on whether to have a referendum on public housing, the La Crosse County Taxpayers Association took out a large ad in the La Crosse Tribune urging: "Let's Face Facts!"
Among the 17 "facts" presented by the association were:

- Public housing, under the federal law now under consideration by the La Crosse Common Council \textit{IS NOT A SLUM CLEARANCE PROJECT. THIS IS IMPORTANT!}
- Public housing under this particular federal law \textit{WILL NOT RELIEVE ANY HOUSING SHORTAGE.} Within five years the number of substandard housing units, equal to those in the housing project, will be removed.
- There has been no definite determination of the rentals to be charged in the public housing project.
- There has been no detailed estimate presented as to the cost to the city for its 10 percent share in the construction of public housing.
- Payments "in lieu" of taxes will not cover the cost of municipal and school services required by the tenants.
- Public housing will only aggravate the problem of tax-exempt property in La Crosse and force payment of governmental costs onto property which is "unlucky" enough to be classed as taxable and taxes to the latter group will be increased.
- Such a public housing project must be built and operated according to federal regulations; this means "selling" home control for federal grants.
- An effort to take advantage of so-called "free" federal funds is probably one major reason for suggesting public housing in La Crosse. \textit{IT MUST BE REMEMBERED THAT THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS "FREE" FEDERAL FUNDS — ALL SUCH "FREE" GRANTS ARE PAID BY PUBLIC TAXES!}
The taxpayers association said "EVERYONE should consider ALL THE FACTS before a decision is made, and further believes that on such a vital PUBLIC ISSUE the PUBLIC should have the right to express its opinion."

Two days later, on the day the Common Council was to make its final decision on whether to hold a referendum, a large ad was taken out in the *La Crosse Tribune* with a headline:

**Attention! Common Council ...**

**Do Not Straddle the Issue on Low Rent Housing**

**Vote NO on the Referendum**

**Face the Facts and Vote YES on the Cooperative Agreement as You promised.**

The ad listed these reasons for going ahead with the federally-subsidized housing project without putting it to referendum:

1. Private enterprise does not provide decent housing for low-income families.
2. La Crosse's need is pointed out in the files of the clearing bureau of the Housing Authority which still contains names of 362 families who require housing.
3. Public Housing payments increase local tax revenues.
4. Public housing eliminates slums.
5. Public housing rehouses families from the slums.
6. The lowest income families with the most urgent housing need are admitted to low-rent public housing.
7. Public housing does not compete with private housing.
8. Who pays for Public Housing? The major share of the cost of public housing is paid by
the tenants through their rents. The annual contribution, or subsidy, from the federal government is shared by all of us in the nation as a whole who pay federal taxes, regardless of whether our community has a low-rent project or not.

9. Public Housing is responsible democracy — not socialism. ... It is a scare word which has been used many times in American history to attempt to stop passage or prevent carrying out progressive legislative measures, such as public education, social security, workman’s compensation and insurance of savings accounts.

10. Public housing policy is made by responsible local leaders.

11. Low-rent permanent public housing is different than temporary veteran housing. Low-rent permanent public housing is the important long-term tool to aid in slum clearance, aid to disadvantaged families and the healthy growth of our cities.

12. Public housing increases tenant responsibility to the community, family and property. The challenge and opportunity of low-rent housing has been the clearly observable process of human development which has included a broader participation, increased financial stability, improved family life, and better care of property.

13. Public Housing is supported by a broad cross section of public interest organizations. (The ad listed 39 national organizations.)
The Catholic Diocese of La Crosse newspaper, The Times Review, editorialized against holding a referendum, saying the issue had been clouded "for selfish reasons on the part of several pressure groups."

Among its comments was "Christianity is not socialism. Regarding the objection of socialism, public housing for low rent income groups is Christian and charitable. These are not characteristics of socialism."

The Times Review urged the Common Council to live up to the agreement in approving the preliminary loan application. "The members now have the moral obligation to live up to its agreement by 'following through' with the actual signing of the cooperation agreement. They will be following the wishes of 95 percent of the people of La Crosse. They will be motivated by love of God and of neighbor, showing that religion is a way of doing as well as a motive for doing."

The Common Council voted by a slim margin — 11 to 10 — to hold the referendum and hold it quickly. The vote was set for June 6, 1950, about three weeks away.

The referendum wording was:

Shall the city of La Crosse enter into an agreement with the La Crosse Housing Authority by which the city will cooperate with the housing and finance agencies of the public housing administration under which there shall be constructed a low rental housing project to consist of 200 units, the occupancy for which shall be granted to families with low incomes based on La Crosse average; the rent to be based on the ability to pay and not rental value of accommodations?

The city would collect a sum in lieu of taxes not to exceed 10 percent of the shelter rent and within five years would demolish other unsafe and unsanitary dwelling units equal in number to those constructed under the project.

The La Crosse County Taxpayers Association took out a large ad recommending citizens vote no on the referendum.
THE
LA CROSSE COUNTY TAXPAYERS
ASSOCIATION RECOMMENDS

VOTE "NO"
TO OPPOSE PUBLIC HOUSING
BE SURE TO VOTE "NO"
ON JUNE 6th

THIS IS THE WORDING OF THE REFERENDUM QUESTION:
"Shall the city of La Crosse enter into an agreement with the La Crosse housing authority by which the city will cooperate with the housing and finance agencies of the public housing administration under which there shall be constructed a low rental housing project to consist of 200 units, the occupancy of which shall be granted to families with low incomes based on La Crosse average; the rent to be based upon ability to pay and not rental value of the accommodations?"

VOTE "NO" ON THIS QUESTION
Public Housing will cause more tax-exempt property in La Crosse and higher taxes.

This advertisement is sponsored by the La Crosse County Taxpayers Association as a public service to interest citizens in public spending.
"Public housing will create more tax exempt property in La Crosse and higher taxes," it said. The association also said the proposal is "definitely not a slum clearance project and will not be available for many of the members of the group now advocating it."

Ads in favor of the project included one from the La Crosse Housing Council, which urged voters to "Stick to the Issue." And that issue was "Homes for those who most need them. Homes that will help wipe out slums. Homes to save our city from blight." Also advertising in favor of the project was the La Crosse Industrial Union Council.

As always, the letters to the editor column of the La Crosse Tribune was a center for debate. A letter signed only by A Gold Star Mother, meaning a mother of a soldier killed in World War II, urged a "no" vote. "I, too, am whole-heartedly in favor of removing the distress and suffering the people of low income have as their lot," she said.

But she said the joy and freedom of home ownership was a better answer than renting. "Homeowners, you know the joy and freedom that comes to you on the day you receive the deed to that property. I do, and only because my son gave his life for our country in the past war. And those who came back surely deserve my support in gaining a home of their own, be it ever so humble, so they too may enjoy the kind of American freedom they fought for. Remember, as the home goes, so goes the nation."

Another letter, signed by A Voter and A Taxpayer, expressed amazement at the "selfish views and reasons some residents are showing toward the housing program. They seem to be under the impression that if this program wins approval, these two hundred units will house not people, mind you, but dirty, ignorant imbeciles who have no regard for property or morals."

The writer also said he or she had heard complaints from some people opposing the project that the public housing
STICK TO THE ISSUE!

WE NEED MORE HOMES

For 15 years, practically no homes were built in La Crosse. Children grew up, started families. New citizens came from other cities. Servicemen came back from the war. They all needed homes! Not enough homes are being built to meet this problem. Many hundreds of La Crosse families are jammed into attics, basements, and two-by-four apartments. Many are living with relatives. These conditions spoil good home lives.

Rent controls were removed June 1st. We can expect the housing shortage to cause substantial rent increases, even where they are not warranted.

Temporary housing is not the answer. We need permanent homes. We need more homes!

WE NEED LOW RENT HOMES

Low income families are hit hardest. They must pay more than they can afford, or live in crowded, unsanitary conditions in blighted homes.

They cannot buy. They cannot build decent homes. Private builders can't solve their problem.

The children of low-income families are not at fault, even in cases where the parents are. These children need a chance to grow up in a decent environment. They need a chance to become decent citizens. They need decent, low rent homes.

WE NEED SLUM IMPROVEMENT

Slum conditions cost us money. Blighted areas do not pay taxes for their share of tax supported services. We are paying a subsidy now!

That subsidy only continues crime breeding, disease breeding conditions. Why not apply the federal subsidy to improve these conditions? Why not give the families in greatest need of decent housing a chance? They need slum improvement!

Contrary to what you may have heard, building and maintaining 200 low rent houses will not cost the city one cent. It will improve conditions that cost us money. It is a sound investment.

THIS IS THE ISSUE. HOMES FOR THOSE WHO MOST NEED THEM. HOMES THAT WILL HELP WIPE OUT SLUMS. HOMES TO SAVE OUR CITY FROM BLIGHT.

VOTE TUESDAY

VOTE "YES"
would be so well kept up that other houses would look “shabby” in comparison. Another complaint he had heard was the view that La Crosse would go bankrupt because of the project. “I was under the impression that the people of La Crosse possessed more intelligence than this,” the letter said.

Noting a 103-unit apartment building under construction on Cass Street, the writer said incomes of between $5,000 and $10,000 would be needed for that rent. And that apartment building made no provisions for playgrounds or other needs of children.

“Memorial Day reminds us of another example. Here were hundreds of people honoring the dead, yet a few of them in their hearts were condemning the living relatives of these dead,” the letter continued. “...Let’s stop thinking of ourselves for a change and apply the Golden Rule to everyday living.”

The La Crosse Board of Realtors, wrote a lengthy letter to the editor opposing the public housing project. It listed eight points against the project and then said it meant only to provide facts, rather than “propaganda to deceive or mislead.”

“The proponents of public housing have the advantage of a sympathetic or humanitarian appeal, but a realistic approach to a problem of this kind on the basis of the economic effects should be equally important,” wrote J.J. Freisinger, president of the Board of Realtors.

Election day on June 6, 1950, found turnout “extremely light,” at least as of noon. Only 959 persons had voted by the time of the La Crosse Tribune’s press time. The Tribune reported many people, despite advertisements and newspaper articles, did not have a clear opinion on the issue.

The final results found 25 percent of eligible voters went to the polls. While voters in 11 districts voted in favor of the project, it was defeated 3,021 to 2,807, a difference of 214. “It is to be regretted that the referendum on public housing has crushed the hopes of people of low income. We hope that
the common council will reconsider the matter at its Friday night meeting," Rev. Schuh said. "It is evident that a good portion of La Crosse citizens have taken issue with the social agencies' pleas on behalf of the most distressed families. They have decided to let them live in crowded, unfit dwelling units, preferring to pit the dollar sign against human welfare."

Schuh said the Housing Authority ran a positive campaign against "the opposition's tactics of confusion, false accusations and intimidation. We are grateful to those who voted 'Yes,' thereby placing their confidence in the program of social betterment and Christian charity."

The battle was lost, but not the war. Schuh kept alive the dream of affordable housing in the city of La Crosse. Schuh continued to work for it until he left the city of La Crosse in 1952 to become pastor of St. John's Catholic Church in Marshfield, Wisconsin.
The emergency housing community
has its challenges

Any housing project, be it privately owned or publicly operated, has its challenges. Over the years, the La Crosse Housing Authority had tenants who did not pay their rent on time or at all, sometimes requiring eviction.

It also had children who got into trouble and adults who got into arguments with each other. Minutes from Housing Authority meetings show some of these challenges, including the need to work with tenants behind in their rent or who violated other rules.

"A motion was made and carried out that a letter be sent to the tenants in T12 to settle their own affairs," the minutes said in 1949.

During the 1952 polio epidemic, some parents were frightened to be living in such close proximity to other tenants who might have and/or spread the dread disease. One note in the minutes indicated no attempt was made to collect a partial rent payment from a Mrs. Jerome, "mother of a polio victim." And when Mr. Gardner moved out without giving notice "because of the polio fright," he, too, was relieved of his obligation.

Fire Chief Adolph Kessel had warned that some of the temporary housing units were potential fire hazards. While there had been one or two fires over the years, a tragedy occurred periodically, suddenly leaving residents of a whole building homeless. Saddest of all was the death in 1953 of a 4 year old who suffocated in a fire in her family's apartment in the Ward Avenue temporary housing project. The girl and her five siblings were home with a baby-sitter and two of her
friends at the time of the fire. They worked, along with a neighbor, to rescue the children.

While the fire was not caused by the construction of the building, it was a reminder of the potential danger of the older wood-framed buildings, particularly as they became dilapidated.
Housing Authority becomes debt free

There were some who wondered if the La Crosse Housing Authority's loan from the city of La Crosse for remodeling the barracks at the old ordnance plant would ever be repaid. It was, and as of September 1, 1954, the authority was debt free.

A statement by the commissioners of the authority accompanying the last $1,000 payment, noted the three projects at Ward Avenue, Green Bay and on the North Side had been operated without cost to the city.

The projects were to be vacated as tenants moved out. The Ward Avenue project was then in the process of being closed out, as were those at Green Bay.

Still, to the Housing Authority, the need for low cost housing remained critical. It had hundreds of requests for housing and continued to hear horror stories about people who needed homes or who were about to be evicted. Once it became debt free, the authority returned to its goal of providing permanent housing for the poor.

Former City Attorney John Flanagan is given some of the credit for getting permanent housing going again, although he said his role is greatly exaggerated. He gets the credit because of an opinion he researched and wrote concerning the impact of the 1950 referendum opposing permanent family housing. Flanagan wrote to federal authorities that the vote was only advisory, "a straw poll," as he put it. It was not binding and did not prevent future projects.
La Crosse Housing Authority, which since 1946 has provided living accommodations for thousands of persons, became debt free Wednesday. Final installment of a $60,000 loan from the city was turned over to Mayor Henry Ahrens by Mrs. David Sauber, housing authority commissioner who is secretary to the group. The authority now is in the process of closing out its temporary housing units.
Veterans housing shows its wear

The greatest impetus for a permanent project may have come because of the declining conditions at the temporary housing sites. The city passed a resolution in June 1956 calling for the Housing Authority to relinquish the right, title and interest to the Ward Avenue housing development so the city could get the right to develop it from the federal government, which owned the land.

The city resolution said:

- The city conveyed to the federal government the land for certain governmental purposes.
- The area was released to the local Housing Authority.
- It is desirable the area be discontinued as a dwelling development because of obsolescence and general unsuitability of the buildings for housing purposes.

The city hoped to regain the land from the federal government at its appraised value — $24,661.

The buildings had been inspected in June 1956 by the City Health Department. In a statement that followed that inspection, City Health Inspector Edward F. Peters said the “buildings are all in such a dilapidated condition that it would be impossible to make them fit for living quarters without a great amount of expenditures. The health department, therefore, has no alternative but to recommend that the entire project be placarded as ‘Unfit for further use of human habitation.’”
He identified plumbing in very poor condition, improper ventilation, improper heating facilities, lack of ample toilet facilities and overcrowded conditions. Electrical inspector Henry G. Affeldt and Building Inspector Eugene R. Daily also declared the housing was substandard. They reported insufficient exits, a lack of "fire-stopping" methods, and problems with wiring and plumbing installations.

"There are at present 21 units with 132 adults and children in this development with most of the units having only one exit and no fire-stops in buildings and attics," they said. 

"...The entire Ward Avenue dwelling development should be condemned as it constitutes a fire hazard and a threat to the lives and health of its occupants."

City Engineer Zenno A. Gorder agreed with the other inspectors. Not only did he feel the buildings were "definitely deteriorating as far as the surrounding area is concerned, surveys indicate the land and adjoining area is the logical location for school and educational system expansion; the area presently retards expansion of public utilities and much needed street improvements."

With 21 families remaining there with a total of 90 children from infancy through age 15, the Housing Authority rejected the city's request to abandon the project. It said it would discontinue the project only when the city agreed to provide permanent housing for low income families.

In its rejection of the city resolution, the authority said the 21 remaining families had been unable to find suitable housing elsewhere. Housing was limited because the construction that had been going on in the city in recent years had been for higher income families rather than lower income families.

The authority, then chaired by Frank Grover, argued that the buildings were unattractive on the outside but were well maintained. He also said the authority had received no complaints from tenants.
The Housing Authority submitted three alternatives for resolving the housing problem:

1. The city provide the Housing Authority with not less than five acres (at a site to be decided later) to construct permanent housing for low income families.
2. The city provide the Housing Authority with not less than five acres outside the city with sewer and water facilities so it could construct the housing.
3. The city provide five acres at the Green Bay site for the housing.

While the housing surely had deteriorated over its decade of use after World War II, there also was no question that many in La Crosse still remained opposed to the concept of public housing as former Housing Authority Commissioner and Chair Joseph Becker knew very well.

Becker, a La Crosse native, returned to his hometown in 1954 after graduating from Notre Dame University, South Bend, Indiana, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School. Becker knew about poverty. During the Great Depression, he helped deliver Christmas baskets to families who had rather primitive living arrangements.

"I guess you'd call them slums. There was a lot of substandard housing in the '30s here in La Crosse as there was elsewhere," he said.

He also helped Harry Newburg, whom he called one of the new "enlightened" landlords back in the 1930s and 1940s, collect rents. "Some of the older units had some pretty rough elements. I was meant to be a bodyguard of sorts. I'd go along when he'd collect the rents." Newburg later was the first treasurer on the Housing Authority Board of Commissioners.

Becker had experienced public housing first hand. While he attended law school in the post World War II rush, he lived in married students housing that had been part of the Badger Ordnance Plant near Madison. He remembers that housing
having no insulation and being constructed of single plywood without storm windows or storm doors.

He remembers clearly the day he lived in the ordnance building when it was a blustery 52 degrees below zero. “When it was cold, the wind would blow through the plastic curtains that covered the windows,” he said.

Still, he has positive memories of his days in the ordnance building, which he knew would be temporary. “I have lived in substandard housing. We didn’t feel sorry for ourselves. We felt like we were living like kings,” he said. “We’d commute by school bus back and forth to law school and the university. John Bosshard stayed in Badger Ordnance. Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Nathan Hefferman stayed there also. We were all in the same boat and we knew it was a temporary thing.”

In 1954, Becker came back to La Crosse to practice with lawyers Tom Skemp and Quincy Hale, a practice he stayed with until 1972 when he formed a new firm with attorneys Downing Edwards and Jerome Lynch.

As a young lawyer in the Hale Skemp firm, Becker heard strong opinions about public housing from the two very strong-minded lawyers. “I was very much opposed to it. I felt it was competing with the landlord. They thought it would ruin their business,” he said. “In general, the landlords and real estate interests were very much opposed to building any permanent public housing. They saw it as socialist. That was a terrible word at the time because of the Red Scare.”

During the Red Scare of the 1950s, even a hint of Communist — red — leanings could destroy a reputation. It led to blacklisting, which prevented many people from getting jobs in the private and public sectors.

La Crosse Mayor Milo Knutson was among the early opponents of public housing. Knutson was an eloquent and conservative radio commentator who modeled himself after Paul Harvey, the national figure who still is known for his
"The rest of the story..." commentary. Knutson wanted to appoint his young friend, Joseph Becker, to the Housing Authority as his proxy to prevent construction of permanent housing.

Becker sought the counsel of the conservative Tom Skemp about whether he should join the board. Skemp strongly advised him to turn down the appointment. "Don't touch it with a 10-foot pole. It's pure socialism and you'll be tarnished. We don't want them to come to La Crosse," Becker remembered Skemp telling him. "He said, I'd be tarred by a socialist brush. I turned it down."

When Mrs. Effie Grupp, who served on the Housing Authority board a brief time, resigned, Knutson had another opportunity to appoint Becker as the only "suitable" commissioner. This time, Becker went to his other partner, Quincy Hale, for advice. Hale, an "enlightened liberal Republican" took the other side of the issue. He reminded Becker that the law authorizing public housing had been written by Robert A. Taft — dubbed "Mr. Republican." Taft was a hero to Becker and other Republicans.

Taft was an outspoken political foe of President Harry S. Truman and was considered a leader against "all forms of a welfare nature," according to Richard O. Davies, who wrote "'Mr. Republican Turns 'Socialist:' Robert A. Taft and Public Housing."

The one exception was public housing. "We have long recognized the duty of the state to give relief and free medical care to those unable to pay for it, and I think shelter is just as important as relief and medical care," Taft was quoted as saying in the Davies article in the summer 1964 issue of Ohio History magazine. "I believe there should be a comprehensive (housing) plan with the ultimate purpose of securing decent housing for all American families, and I think the Taft-Ellender-Wagner bill is a step in that direction."

The issue for Taft was that public housing filled a need that
the private housing industry was not meeting. And, he saw a safe and secure home as the foundation for developing citizenship. "Private enterprise has never provided necessary housing for the lowest income groups," Taft said.

As Davies explained, "Basic to his interest in housing reform was a belief that decent housing was a prerequisite for good citizenship. He saw in a happy, healthy, well-housed family a microcosm of the democracy. Because the family provided the cornerstone upon which the United States was erected, good housing was vital," Davies wrote.

Not everyone agreed. His Republican colleagues were shocked. Some regarded his new opinion about housing as an attempt to garner votes for the 1948 presidential nomination. Some, including the National Association of Real Estate Boards, accused him of turning to socialism to earn organized labor's vote.

"If a candidate believes in public housing and thinks he must have a little of it to pacify the CIO, then he has to accept the implications. He does not any longer believe in the American private enterprise system. He is at heart a socialist," Davies quoted the association as saying in its membership newsletter.

With one American family in five forced to live in slum housing in the mid 1940s, the bill had overwhelming public support but died as a result of bi-partisanship wrangling. Taft even pulled the bill he co-sponsored in 1948 knowing it would not pass the more conservative House of Representatives.

The Democrats jumped on Taft for withdrawing the legislation. "Taft ran out on his own bill," said President Truman, a Democrat. "He tried to pose as a man who wanted decent housing legislation, but after his defeat at the Republican convention in Philadelphia, Taft didn't have to carry on his pretense of caring about the needs of the people."
He could act in his real character — as a cold-hearted, cruel aristocrat."

Taft did not support public housing reform purely for political consideration, Davies wrote. In 1949, he again co-sponsored a bill, which passed and was signed by Truman. "I am hopeful," Taft wrote Truman, "that the present Act will initiate a program of public and private housing which will lead to a solution of our housing difficulties, and bring about ultimately a condition in which decent housing is available to all."

La Crosse Housing Commissioner Becker, learning of Taft's ideas, became one of public housing's strongest advocates. What impressed him about Taft's law was that it required a unit of substandard housing to be eliminated for each new unit built. "It gave people a chance. It was not to be permanent housing. It was a bridge for people, a chance for safe, sanitary and affordable housing. There were no frills. I did think it was something worth looking into," Becker said. "I told Milo I would take the appointment, but I made no commitments about what I would do."

Becker became convinced public housing did not compete with the private sector. "It was not a socialistic scheme, but something to get people on their feet."
We need a roof over our heads’

The future site of Schuh Homes on La Crosse’s North Side. La Crosse Rubber Mills (now La Crosse Footwear) can be seen in the background.

Ellickson Studios photo

Groundbreaking at Schuh Homes, from left are contractor Robert Fowler, architect Harry Schroeder, Housing Authority Executive Director Frank Grover, Mayor Milo Knutson, Commissioners Father Mullen, Joel Stokke, Rev. Staffel, Joseph Becker, Harry Huber, and Housing Authority staff members Leone Oman and Charles Kelly.
By the time Becker joined the Housing Authority Board on May 23, 1957, plans already were underway to build permanent public housing. A site had been acquired from the Herman Tillman Estate at St. James and George streets. Architect Robert Hackner of Hackner, Schroeder and Associates, Inc., was hired to design the project that ultimately had 74 units — 14 one-bedroom apartments; 30 two-bedroom apartments; 22 with three bedrooms; six with four bedrooms; and two with five bedrooms.

Hackner was the third generation of the Hackner Altar Company of La Crosse, which made elaborate woodwork for churches across the country. A 1942 Notre Dame graduate, he served in the Marines during the war. After he was discharged, he went to the University of Pennsylvania on the GI Bill for a master’s degree. His studies of public housing successes and failures convinced him of the importance of a project’s design. Smaller buildings were the key to success. At Schuh Homes, most of the buildings are duplexes. That keeps the population density lower, reducing conflicts that occur in larger projects elsewhere in the country.

As Hackner designed Schuh Homes, he encouraged the Housing Authority to go beyond the standards set by the federal government. Recognizing the loan on the project would last 40 years, he argued the buildings should be designed to last just as long.

Housing Authority leaders, including Hackner, met with federal officials in Chicago for waivers that would allow it to use brick walls and asphalt roof tile rather than the less expensive asbestos shingles the federal government then
required on public housing buildings. They also wanted stucco and gables.

"We went to Chicago and had our design rejected three times," he said. "Frank Grover and I would come back and tell the Housing Authority that these guys had the money so we had to play by their rules."

Eventually, Hackner presented a paper that analyzed the longevity and reduced maintenance costs of brick compared with the initially less expensive siding the government wanted. Federal authorities eventually agreed, as they did on other issues that were thoroughly and logically explained. Another example was to use linoleum instead of asbestos tile to cover the floors.

The issue for commissioners then was not that asbestos could cause cancer — that was not known at the time — but that grease that fell on the floor could cause it to melt. La Crosse also insisted on better windows, more efficient heating systems and insulated doors, all of which meant the Housing Authority would spend less money on heating costs and, therefore, would have more money available to pay off the mortgage.

There was great satisfaction over the years in building housing the way "we thought it should be done, not the way they [HUD] wanted it done. We changed a lot of rules for the better," Becker said.

Hackner had a similar comment. "What we did is move

Special meetings had to be held in Chicago with HUD officials on plans for Mullen Homes. Returning from one such meeting, from left, are Father Mullen, the pilot, architect Bob Hackner, and Frank Grover, Housing Authority Executive Director."
the federal agencies toward better maintained housing."

Schuh Homes was built to last, Becker said. "It was architecturally pleasing, solidly built to last for over 40 years." The project reached that mark in 1997.

Even with the changes requested by the Housing Authority, the units still came in under budget and the project was completed ahead of schedule.

"With that success, the La Crosse Housing Authority was immediately established as a viable entity," Hackner said.

Bids for the project were $678,700 from Wisconsin Minnesota Contractors, Inc. (WMC), for general construction; $101,973 from F.M. Branson and Son for plumbing; $25,483 from Schneider Heating and Air Conditioning for heat; and $14,334 from Papenfuss Electric. WMC was a forerunner of today’s Fowler & Hammer, Inc.

Schuh Homes — and later Mullen Homes — was built in a swampy area of the North Side of La Crosse. To construct Schuh, 165,000 cubic yards of sand had to be taken out of Indian Hill to fill the swampland.

The actual construction site had a tremendous amount of cat tails and semi-aquatic growth. To make the land usable, the land also had to be "sweetened" as the decaying vegetation in the land had made the soil high in acidity.

"There were no great water reservoirs, just plain old wetlands. The top soil was decaying with aquatic vegetation, compost that we used to call 'loonshit," Hackner said, adding: "Schuh and Mullen Homes couldn't be built today in wetlands. They would go absolutely bananas over something like that. Back then it was just swamp land."

But with so much opposition in the city to public housing, swampland was about the only place the project could go politically, Becker said. "It was the only place that was politically acceptable at the time. There were no neighbors to complain."

One additional benefit to cutting into Indian Hill was it created land that could be developed for industry. The site
The Logan High School Band performs at the Schuh Homes dedication on September 13, 1959.

Msgr. Schuh, long a fighter for decent housing for all, was the dedication speaker.
became the home of the Gateway Foods warehouses. "Reiny was pleased as hell," Hackner said of Gateway Foods founder, D.B. Reinhart.

The architectural firm that became Hackner Schroeder and Roslansky (now known as HSR Associates) developed a regional expertise in public housing projects. Hackner was involved in the design of about 5,000 units of public housing in three states at a value of more than $375 million, including $60 million for La Crosse.

Ground was broken for Schuh Homes in May 1958 and the first 20 units were ready for occupancy in February 1959. The project was completed in July 1959. Even after the 74 units were all occupied, there still was a waiting list of 100 families in need of housing.

About 150 persons attended the dedication ceremony for Schuh Homes on September 13, 1959. Boy Scouts raised the flag, which previously had flown over the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Messages from Vice President Richard Nixon; Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wis.; Rep. Gardner R. Withrow, D-Wis.; Gov. Gaylord Nelson; and City Attorney John Flanagan were among those sealed in the cornerstone.

The dedication speaker was Monsignor Schuh, for whom the project was named. "Every American should have a decent place to live and in surroundings that produce a proper environment," he said. "These homes are a realization of what we have worked long and hard for."

Brice Martin, Chicago, assistant to the regional director of the Public Housing Authority, said "The men that started this project were men of vision and these men were led by Msgr. Schuh."

Noting there were 2,700 such developments in the country housing more than 2,000,000 people, Martin called Schuh Homes "one of the nicest in the region and the country. They will be even nicer with landscaping."

John E. Allen, the first resident said "the longer I stay here,
We need a roof over our heads'

Schuh resident Colleen Gautsch, who spoke at the dedication, called her apartment the fulfillment of a dream.

Filling in the cornerstone at the dedication were, from left, Robert Fowler, Rev. Staffel, Msgr. Schuh and Father Mullen.
the better I like it. It is a good place to live.” And Colleen Gautsch, who lived in Schuh Homes with her husband, George, and five children, called the homes “the fulfillment of a dream. It is like a miracle. We have a large family and a small income. We are now proud of our home.”

Flanagan, who spoke on behalf of the vacationing Mayor Milo Knutson, called Schuh Homes “a step in slum clearance ... These are really high quality homes at a low tenant price.”

For Schuh Homes and other projects to be successful, Mayor Knutson needed to be behind it, Becker said. “We needed Knutson’s cooperation. We made a convert out of him. It didn’t take much. It was the same argument that convinced me. If Robert A. Taft wrote the legislation, it can’t be socialistic. He became convinced and he became a supporter.”

Some of the landlords who had opposed the project in 1950 also came around. “They knew they couldn’t supply the market that we were providing. The better landlords and realtors realized that once these people landed on their feet, they would be candidates for buying houses. Many of these people were students and had young families. Once they were out of school, they would buy their own properties.”

Among the first residents of Schuh Homes was John Heberlein, who moved into a brand new apartment with his wife, Patricia, and two children, Susan and Edward. Heberlein grew up at Third and Jackson in a house that was acquired by the G. Heileman Brewing Company as part of a brewhouse.

He can remember his father working for the Works Project Administration during the Great Depression and later Funke’s Candy Factory and Heileman until his death in 1946. At the time he moved into Schuh Homes, Heberlein and his family had paid $45 a month in rent for their house.

The Heberleins were “really happy” to be in the new apartment. “There was no comparison. This was a brand new
house," he said of his apartment in Schuh Homes. "The one I left was 100 years old and when you walked in the room, you had to be careful because the termites had eaten the floors out."

At the time he moved into his apartment at 1423 Winneshiek Road, there were no stoves in the apartments and there was no black top on the street. "Probably a half dozen families had moved in before me," he said. "As they finished apartments, they moved people in."

Forty years later, he pointed to one of the buildings and remembered many children living there. "One lady had nine daughters and one son."

After living there for a while, Heberlein was offered a job in maintenance for Schuh Homes, a position he was eager to take and that fit his handyman skills perfectly. The job also fit the personality of this friendly, hard-working man. "That man could fix anything," Hackner said.

Heberlein, like many other Schuh Homes residents, became a "graduate." With stable work and a steady income, he bought a home for his family in the area.

The children of John Heberlein pose in front of their Schuh Homes apartment. From left, they are, Susan, Jean, Edward and Jim. John Heberlein went on to work for the Housing Authority Maintenance Department.
Bill and Louise Temte, residents of Schuh Homes from 1961 to 1964, had a drive to get the education they needed to better themselves in life.

"I was working my way through college, working about 50 hours a week at least," Bill Temte said.

He arranged for his classes at La Crosse State so they would be done by noon. Then he worked at Firestone Tire until 5 p.m. and delivered appliances for Wettstein and Sons until 9 p.m. On Saturdays, he worked for Firestone in the morning and Wettstein's in the afternoon. He also worked at a Clark Station until midnight on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings.

"From Sunday noon until night I went through my week's studying," he said. "And I graduated in math and physical science in three and a half years."

Even with three jobs, Temte said he would not have been able to make it if they had stayed in a privately-built apartment. "I was trying to raise a family and be in school. I simply wouldn't have been able to do it with market rates," Temte said.

Bill Temte went on to teach math and physics at Western Wisconsin Technical College, later advancing to counseling and then an administrative role comparable to vice president in charge of planning and development. In 1989, he became campus dean for the Sturgeon Bay campus of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College. He retired in January 1997.

At the time the Temtes lived at Schuh Homes there were many other students with families who were working their way through college. "It was a stepping stone, part of our
school experience, part of getting Bill through school," Louise Temte said.

It was a good place for their family, the couple said. "We had neighborhood get-togethers in homes periodically. We helped each other and were friends," said Louise Temte, who does consulting work as a human resource development trainer in Sturgeon Bay, is a church organist and music director, and worked for the Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics program.

Bill Temte said there was never a stigma to public housing. "Not at all. One of the strengths of the Housing Authority in La Crosse is that we had to live by their rules. We knew what they were ... keeping our place up. The Authority did its part keeping the premises up and we did ours."

And Temte said they felt like they were a part of a community at Schuh just as much as they did in La Crosse after they left public housing and had their own home and later in Sturgeon Bay. "We knew a lot of people," he said of Schuh. "People there appreciated what was going on in terms of working to better ourselves."

Baseball must have been in the water of Schuh Homes in the late 1960s. Two of its former residents made baseball a big part of their lives.

The first was Jay Buckley, who lived at Schuh beginning in 1967 with his wife and child for three years while he attended La Crosse State. The Buckleys were on a waiting list for about six months before an opening occurred. He remembers well cared for and managed facilities.

"It was very comfortable. It was wonderful for people in our circumstances," he said. "It didn't have the feeling of poverty. I enjoyed my life there. It was good for me and my family at that particular time."

One summer, Buckley was hired to coordinate playground and recreational activities. He put together a Schuh Homes baseball team in the 14 and under category of the Stars of
Tomorrow youth tournament. One of the players, Ken Happel, went on to be a star on the Logan High School team.

Buckley's interest in baseball has become a career. While he was a teacher at Lincoln Middle School and associate principal of the school, he was involved with the Stars of Tomorrow program. Eventually he became the director of the tournament which was started by La Crosse County Board Supervisor Robert "Kootch" Carroll in 1967. It draws teams from throughout the Midwest.

Today he operates Jay Buckley's Baseball Tours, which offer trips to major league games throughout the country. The tours started as a hobby and continue now as a full-time occupation.

The other baseball-minded resident was Jerry Augustine, who lived in Schuh Homes beginning in 1968 while a student at La Crosse State. Augustine, who went on to pitch for the Milwaukee Brewers after three outstanding seasons at college, said he never realized it was meant for low income people.

"You call it low income. It was home to us," he said.

Augustine first learned about Schuh Homes from other married students who had children. The Augustines then had a daughter, the first of five children. He applied and was accepted. A group of student families all moved into the same block.

He can remember big wheel races among the young children. "The dads organized it," Augustine said. "We'd cook out and do things....People were all in the same boat. Everybody looked out for each other. We thought that it was real cool. My best friend from college lived there, too. We all got along."

Augustine graduated from UW-L in 1974, but his wife and daughter continued to live at Schuh Homes while he spent his first summer in the minor league. He then returned for a semester of graduate school. His family moved out in February 1975.
Augustine was with the Brewers for 8-1/2 years, compiling a record of 55 wins and 59 losses. He was the opening-day pitcher in 1976 when the Brewers defeated the Baltimore Orioles 11 to 2 in Milwaukee. Twice during his career in Milwaukee, fans chanted "Augie" during games. Today, he is an insurance salesman who returns to La Crosse periodically for speaking events associated with the Brewers.
For the most part, the temporary housing worked as it was designed — to provide housing during the emergency until construction could catch up with the need. Still, there were some families that had not moved on.

The Housing Authority decided in July 1957 that it would close the Green Bay project as of November 1, 1957. The six families remaining were given notice.

As the temporary projects closed out, buildings were appraised and sold. The first three-family structure from the Green Bay development was sold to Arthur Jackman of Winona, Minnesota, who planned to move it to a site north of Onalaska, Wisconsin. He also bought a second building from the development.

As the last tenants moved out of the Ward Avenue project in April 1959, the Housing Authority sold the buildings as best it could. They weren't worth much even by the standards of the day. Building 27 from the Ward Avenue project brought in only $600 from Harold Tempte of Galesville.

The Clinton Street buildings were appraised at $500 each or a total of $2,000. With the availability of housing in Schuh Homes, the Housing Authority decided to close the Clinton Street project, which had growing problems, including pest infestation, general rundown conditions, and fire hazards. It notified the six remaining tenants to move out by midnight of May 31, 1959. The Swanson Brothers were paid $1,000 for the balance of the lease. They took the buildings and released the Housing Authority of all responsibilities.

As the buildings lost its tenants in the late 1950s, there were occasional incidents of vandalism. One police officer interviewed several of the boys believed involved in vandalism.
at the Green Bay site. "Several of the boys admitted their participation in window breakage only, but denied any gang activities," the Housing Authority minutes said.

First Three-Family Structure to be moved from the eight-year-old Green Bay Housing Unit was hoisted up Friday. The building, at 22nd Street and Hyde Avenue, was destined for a place north of Onalaska and was sold initially to Arthur Jackman, Winona, Minn. The office of the La Crosse Housing Authority said a La Crescent, Minn., mover was doing the work. The other almost vacant building at Green Bay and 22nd, also purchased by Jackman, will be moved at a later date. A city storm sewer will be situated in the area.
Housing for the elderly

It didn't take long after the opening of Schuh Homes for the Housing Authority to turn to other pressing issues in public housing, such as serving older residents. The Housing Act of 1958 did allow single elderly persons to be housed in low-rent apartments, like Schuh, but the Housing Authority felt it could make a greater impact if it reserved Schuh for families and built separate units for older persons, possibly adjacent to Schuh.

Max Katz, an acting regional economist for the Public Housing Authority in Chicago, came to La Crosse in April 1960 to survey housing needs for the elderly. He felt the Schuh site was too far away from shopping, churches and other services important to older persons. Instead, he suggested that the adjacent site be held for 50 to 75 more units of low income housing and a downtown location be considered for the elderly.

A block-by-block survey of elderly housing needs was done jointly by Walter Thoresen of Wisconsin State College at La Crosse and Sister Mary Roderick Chisholm of Viterbo College. They estimated 4,410 persons of La Crosse's population of 49,000 in 1960 were age 65 or older and that:

- 58 percent received less than $150 a month in income and 47 percent had income of less than $125 a month.
- 70 percent of the renters paid more than $50 a month for rent — more than a third of "a meager income for rent."
- rent in a public housing project would be between $30 and $45 a month.
"Our study, as well as many others, shows that adequate income is basic to health and happiness of older persons," a summary said. "For the most part, the Senior Citizens of La Crosse are living on modest annual incomes. Most of them would be eligible for housing in a PHA project and many would seem to need relief in rental costs."

While the summary said it had no indication of the number of elderly persons now living in their own homes who might welcome low-cost rental opportunities, it said "we might presume that some of the 67 percent homeowners would likewise be interested."

On the basis of the study, the La Crosse Housing Authority voted and received approval from the La Crosse Common Council on July 13, 1961, to apply to the Public Housing Administration for 76 units of elderly housing. The Housing Authority began searching for a site in the downtown area, eventually selecting the site of St. Mary's Church at 7th Street and Cameron Avenue. After an appraisal and negotiations, the authority agreed to pay the Diocese of La Crosse $90,000 for the land. It also took an option on the St. Mary's School property for a future apartment building for the elderly if the diocese built a new school for the Cathedral parish.

It was a sign of the times in 1962 that the minutes showed on January 11, 1962, that "some discussion was had as to bomb shelter plans for the new project." The nation's homeowners, in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, experienced a flurry of short-lived plans to build private bomb shelters to protect their families in the event of a nuclear war. Basement locations in public buildings also were designated as shelters. The Housing Authority Board took no action on the request for a shelter in the new housing for the elderly at that time, but, in December 1965, it did vote to have a portion of the Stoffel Court basement designed as a fall-out shelter "and stocked, therefore, by the federal government."
The war with the Soviet Union was cold, meaning it was a political and ideological struggle between the United States and its allies and the Communist countries. At home, though, things were once again heating up on the public housing front.

In February 1962, landlords began to object to the public housing project for the elderly. So strong were their feelings that Mayor Knutson asked to speak with the Housing Authority. The La Crosse Common Council called for a public hearing on the project for April 23, 1962. As usual, a war of words took place in the *La Crosse Tribune*, including this letter signed only by a "A Hard-Working Landlord."

I'm a landlord and I like old people just as much as the other fellow. No one's going to say I don't, but when the housing board starts talking about putting up a fancy, low-rent apartment building for 75 old people who can't afford to pay good rent, than I've got an ax to grind. What's going to happen to the places that these people vacate? I'll have plenty of them.

I'm not lucky enough to have someone hand me a fancy apartment for low rent. I have to work hard for every penny I get! Besides my regular job, I keep these places in constant repair by my own handwork — tenants don't do a hand's turn nowadays. There's cleaning to be done every time someone moves, and there's someone moving all the time. So I get these places in tip-top shape and the housing board takes my people away from me?

No one realizes the grief a landlord has. Believe me, it's no fun listening to complaints about having to climb all those steep stairs or always being so cold. Still, I can sympathize with these hypochondriacs, and I'm the first to overlook complaints from neurotics of falling plaster or leaking pipes because my Mother is in the same position and I understand the marks of senility! The housing board isn't that considerate, you can bet!
And no one realizes my share of troubles in keeping up my places that have plumbing and electricity. My efforts at do-it-yourself repairing have the inspectors on my back most of the time, demanding 100 percent perfection from what little I have to work with, not to mention the times I've sided with my tenants against the Health Department's warnings. And then the tenants grumble at the pittance they pay me for rent! I'm tempted to sell many a time, but outside my regular job, that's my only source of income, little as it is.

These fellows in the housing board had better come up with a pretty good reason for robbing us landlords of our people other than moral responsibility or dignity of the individual as a person or some other feeble nonsense.

And if the City Council can't see through all this propaganda and the apartment house does go up, then the landlords should by all rights get first option on the placements. I'm going to have to evict Mother, who is behind on her rent and those apartments sound awful fancy! Mother would like that!

--- A Hard-Working Landlord

The letter from “a Hard-Working Landlord” was supposed to be satire, although many readers then and today (including this writer) thought it was a serious letter because there were so many equally impassioned letters on the subject then. Who wrote the letter? Joseph Becker's wife, Ruth. The fact that it was such a fooler shows how well crafted her satire was, her husband said.

Warren Loveland, who would become La Crosse mayor in 1965, questioned why a public hearing was needed after the City Council "gave the green light" and even approved an application for federal funds for the project.

"All of a sudden some aldermen say they were 'misinformed' and now the matter is up for a public hearing," he wrote. "...It seems a little strange that months after the aldermen
themselves agreed that there was a need (otherwise they wouldn't have told the authority to go ahead) that these same aldermen want to abruptly reassure themselves that the need does exist."

Loveland also noted some people wanted the authority to stop all of its work, again saying it was strange. "It didn't have to bother about the old folks; it didn't have to subject itself to criticism or question or have its motives questioned. It took this assignment because it was interested in better housing for elderly people," he wrote.

"Many senior citizens are alone and their financial worth can be wiped out by misfortune," he continued. "While retirement sounds fine, there is not always sufficient money for the retirement years. The 'earning days' of these old folks are over — and they are now in their 'yearning days,' and when there is not enough income to permit them to enjoy their retirement, old age becomes a terror rather than a tribute," Loveland said.

Most pointed, Loveland asked why the Housing Authority has to explain the need again. "Is there some unknown pressure being exerted?" he asked.

Also weighing in in support of the project was William A. Eckart, business representative for Carpenters Union No. 1143, who said "We in the Building Trades Council have always been in favor of the public housing program for organized labor knows from experience that a worker who lives in a decent home is a better worker. We are doubly in favor of housing for senior citizens for our old people deserve an opportunity to live out their years in comfort and dignity."

He noted that if the housing units are not built in La Crosse, another city will gain the public housing slots. He asked if there was any construction coming to the area in the immediate future that would equal the amount of money the elderly high rise project would bring to the city.

"And if some other city builds it, La Crosse loses. It not only
loses something needed on a long range basis, but it will lose over $1 million in construction work," he wrote. "Are we so flush that we can afford this? Is there any construction in the immediate future, that calls for $1 million worth of jobs?"

The debate continued at the hearing with landlord and 5th District Alderman George Bonsack saying "to me rents aren't that high." The highest rent he charged on the six apartments he owned was $60 a month. "You don't have to go over $75 and $100 to get a place to live. There is a lot of low rental property. Competition forces landlords to keep it low — rather low than empty."

Roy Smith, business agent for the AFL-CIO Labor Council, said there were private rentals that cost less than Schuh Homes units, but "they aren't fit to live in. And those that are 'fit' to live there, can't afford it."

Rejecting the notion that public housing was "creeping socialism," he said the elderly had helped their elders when they were younger and that it is now time for the younger generation to help older people.

Charles Lang, a former alderman and president of the Landlords Association, said government was becoming more socialistic than free enterprise. Lang, who had spoken out against public housing in the 1950 referendum, asked "When will it stop?"

As an alderman, Lang said he was on a committee that supported construction of Schuh Homes with the understanding that substandard homes on Green Island, around Swanson Field and near the college would be eliminated in exchange for the new units. That has not been done, he said.

The Housing Authority presented nine arguments for the project:

1. Results of the survey reveal a potential "market" of this type of housing of more than 4,500 persons in the "elderly" bracket in the city of La Crosse.
The Story of the La Crosse Housing Authority

2. The majority of these persons are dependent upon Social Security benefits as their major source of income.

3. It is economically unfeasible for these persons to pay 35 to 55 percent of their income for basic housing of a standard nature.

4. The area served by the La Crosse Housing Authority includes the entire county and admission requirements are not restricted to persons only residing within the corporate city limits. This broadens considerably the so-called "reservoir" of prospective tenants.

5. Low-rent housing does not compete with standard rental housing. The Authority has in effect a policy prescribing that rents must be retained at least 20 percent below the rents charged for standard housing to ensure the "low-rent nature" of its operations.

6. The Housing Authority has heretofore complied with all the legal requirements necessary for its new development endeavors. It proceeded with these endeavors at the express insistence of the city via official council actions and approvals.

7. The Housing Authority now has an active backlog of 125 applications for admission to low-rent housing. Of this number, more than 65 percent are from elderly persons who desperately need this housing.

8. There is every indication that this application backlog will increase, rather than decrease. This means more pressure on the Housing Authority, already unable to provide housing for those who need it.

9. The low-rent program has the support of many agencies, groups and organizations in this
community. Its operations have been lauded as performing a necessary service to this city. To curtail a new program would be to imply disapproval of the authority's motives and aims.

The debate was hot and heavy on the airways. Jim Conway's program on WLCX Radio, "Vox-Pop," a Latin term for Voice of the People, received so many angry calls from landlords, he was asked to speak at the Housing Authority Board meeting.

The program, which he announced from 1961 to 1966 when he joined the new WLSU public radio station on the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse campus, was unlike programs today. "Our attitude, our policy was to try to be right down the middle without being adversarial at all," he said. "It was supposed to be an open line, kind of thing. Ideally, if we got somebody who said no to something, we would get a caller who would say yes to something."

Conway, who also broadcast Common Council meetings live from City Hall on WLCX, said the calls on the proposed housing for the elderly were a spillover from the City Hall debate. In addition to callers, he also had guests in the studio to discuss the issue, including Housing Authority Commissioner Joseph Becker and Executive Director Frank Grover.

"I don't remember any organized opposition," he said. "There was a lot of opposition, but it was not organized and the Housing Authority was."

The atmosphere of La Crosse in those days was "extremely conservative," Conway said, "much more so than now. There was a lot of opposition to 'creeping socialism' in government. Competition with free enterprise was an argument that was trotted out frequently. I was quite surprised when the first high rise was built. I expected the City Council to effectively kill it. Fortunately, more enlightened heads prevailed and it passed."
La Crosse Common Council approval for Stoffel Court came in June 1962. Low bidder for the project was Wisconsin Minnesota Company, Inc., at $675,000 for general contracting. Other contractors with low bids were F.M. Branson & Son for plumbing at $82,663; Hengel Brothers for heating, $67,069; Clark-Bracken, Inc., $51,900 for electrical work; and Wettstein and Son for master antenna work, $1,932.

Ground was broken May 1963 with the Rev. Thomas E. Mullen, Housing Commission Chairman, turning over the first shovel of dirt. The $1.04 million project, named after Housing Authority Commissioner, Rev. Harold N. Stoffel, was dedicated December 10, 1964. It was Pastor Stoffel, who died in a 1961 car accident, who suggested the Housing Authority build a project for the elderly.

Dedication speaker Marie C. McGuire, a federal Public Housing Commissioner in Washington, D.C., challenged the La Crosse Housing Authority to do even more. "There are still those who live in degradation," she said. "We don't have to have it. Yet, we permit it. There is no reason either in La Crosse, San Antonio, Texas, New York City or San Francisco for a single slum. Yet 18 million persons live in rat-infested slums."

The 1949 Housing Act said every American should have a decent place to live, she said. "We're still 18 million people away from that goal."

McGuire had praise for the Stoffel Court design. "We have built too many barracks and warehouses for the elderly, and even for younger families," she said. Too often we have forgotten that we're designing for human beings. This is false economy. Good design isn't fancy design, and it needn't be costly."

The cornerstone for Stoffel Court included copies of Housing Authority contracts with the federal government for the project, Council resolutions, need surveys, newspaper
Contracts for the construction of Stoffel Court, a La Crosse Housing Authority project for the elderly, were signed Tuesday morning. The nine-story apartment building will be constructed on the site of old St. Mary's Church, shown in the bottom photo, at 7th Street and Cameron Avenue. Razing of the church began Tuesday. General contractor for the project is Wisconsin-Minnesota Contractors, Winona, Minn., whose bid was $675,800. Shown in the top photo are, standing from left, William S.L. Christiansen, president of WMC; Joel E. Stokke, a member of the authority; Frank H. Geyer, the authority's director; Robert H. Hackner, architect for the building; and sitting from left, Rev. Thomas E. Mullin, chairman of the authority, and Harry H. Huber and Mrs. Olga Sauber, members of the authority. -- Tribune Photos.
clippings and a Kennedy half-dollar contributed by Father Mullen, chairman of the Housing Authority board.

"La Crosse is indeed fortunate to have such a hard-working group of Housing Authority commissioners to bring Stoffel Court and Schuh Homes to the city," said Alderman Peter Groves, whose district included the new project.

Conway, who then was a "stringer" for the Milwaukee Sentinel, wrote a free-lance article about Stoffel Court when it opened. As part of the article, he took pictures and interviewed a half dozen residents. "I recall going there and my presumption was I couldn't imagine people leaving their snug little homes and little yards and gardens and going into an apartment. Boy was I disabused of that....These people loved it....It was an eye opener for me. It made a convert of me that people really liked to be there. I had a feeling in the back of my mind that it was warehousing old people. It made a believer of me."

The first residents were among more than 300 persons who applied for and were interviewed by Flora Grover, wife of Housing Authority executive director Frank Grover. Of the first 103 persons selected initially, the average income was $1,215 a year. They paid rent ranging from $35 to $65 a month without utilities and $38 to $68 a month with utilities, based on 30 percent of their adjusted annual incomes.

Each apartment had a bedroom, living room, kitchenette and bath with combination tub and shower, extra heavy grab bars and a night light in the light switch. Stoffel Court also had a 10th floor kitchen and community area designed to be used by residents and community groups for recreation, another important need of older persons identified in that 1960 study.

Jane Alberts, current executive director for the Housing Authority, said the 10th floor community room has not been used as expected because older persons tend to only go up as far as their own floor rather than to the top of a building. The
best place for a community room, the Housing Authority has learned, is on the first floor, a design later incorporated into the apartment buildings for the elderly.

Among Stoffel Court residents is Florence Oslun, who at 85 in November 1996 was fairly typical of residents in apartments for the elderly. The average tenant age is 82.

"I don't want to live any place else," said Mrs. Oslun, who worked in her younger years for the Barron's Department Store in downtown La Crosse (now Herberger's at Valley View Mall). "I came in the year after my husband died. I've been here since 1977."

Mrs. Oslun, who had been living in a house on West Avenue, moved in on a February day in 1976 that was 32 below zero. The warmth of her neighbors in the building quickly made up for temperatures outside.

"It's a wonderful floor here," she said, looking out at the Mississippi River Bridge from her living room window.

She and her husband had been trying for a while to get into public housing together, but were over the income limit because of his small pension. One of her husband's co-workers at the Trane Company helped her move in after her husband's death. She remembered Angie Wiemerslage, director of the Housing Authority from 1973 to 1989, "as a big help." Also helpful was a cousin, Donald "Chick" Meinert, because her son, Bill, was then away in the Navy.

One indicator of how wonderful Stoffel Court is is the support Mrs. Oslun received after having open heart surgery. "I went to stay with my son for a week afterwards, but I was more anxious to get back home. Everyone on the floor is just super. We look after each other. I hope when I go out, I go out feet first and that is it."
La Crosse native Robert J. Daley, Sr., had been employed as an accountant at Northern Engraving Corp. when an opening occurred in 1961 with the HUD office in Chicago. Daley was eager to take the job so he would gain the experience he needed to take the state's certified public accounting exam.

"I had specialized training in HUD accounting, which has always been a little bit different," he said.

The job required him to be on the road frequently so when La Crosse CPA James Ash called him in 1962 and asked if he would be interested in working as a controller for a client of his, La Crosse Steel Roofing, he took the job. Daley's wife was then expecting a baby and he wanted to be closer to home.

Shortly after he arrived back in La Crosse and began working for La Crosse Steel Roofing, HUD called and asked Daley if he would provide accounting services on the side for the La Crosse Housing Authority, which "needed help."

"It was not that they were doing a bad job," he said, "but you needed special training. There are certain procedural things done in HUD accounting that are not done in regular accounting. In most accounting when you buy a car or truck, you depreciate it. You don't depreciate any assets in HUD accounting."

The work with the La Crosse Housing Authority led to work for the Housing Authority in Marshfield, Wisconsin, and then many others. "When I had about nine housing authorities, I had a full-time job," he said.

Soon the accounting firm of Hawkins, Ash and Baptie and Co. was looking for an accountant. Daley left the steel roofing
company to take the position, which primarily involved housing authorities.

Daley was particularly instrumental in further development of accounting systems for public housing, which led to computerization. In 1968, the La Crosse Housing Authority moved from logging every rent payment by hand in a journal to computerized records.

Daley's work was reviewed by staff from the Chicago office and was reported on at a national meeting. After that, Daley received calls from eight regional offices. He went to North Carolina and San Francisco to demonstrate the software. At one point, he was involved with 400 housing authorities across the country. At times, he would send staff from other housing authorities to spend a week in La Crosse, learning the system.

"We became a leader in the field in computer accounting for public housing," Daley said, "and the La Crosse Housing Authority was the pilot. La Crosse became the model Housing Authority."

Noting La Crosse has never applied for or needed an operating subsidy for its operations as more than 60 percent of public housing projects do, he said, "It is one of the good housing authorities in the country. They just always did an excellent job of managing their projects. The key to that was management."

It is because of its solid performance that La Crosse was considered favorably when there was federal money to build housing units. "It was well respected," Daley said.

Daley enjoyed accounting for public housing because he felt he was working for agencies who were meeting community needs. "I felt we were doing good for people," he said. "Being a humane type of person, I felt the projects were helping people."
In April 1965, La Crosse was, as the *La Crosse Tribune* put it in 1995, "a city under siege."

"Dozens of homes were evacuated and armed National Guardsmen patrolled parts of the city around the clock. A state of emergency was declared and President Lyndon Johnson flew over the city to see the devastation firsthand. The enemy in 1965 was the surging waters of the Mississippi River," writer Ken Brekke wrote in his recap.

The first warning of what was ahead came in the annual prediction of the spring flood. Then the word was the Mississippi River could reach 13.5 feet, a full 1.5 feet above the flood level of 12 feet. As snow melted and rain came down, the reality set in that the problem would be much more severe — as much as 18 feet, far higher than the 15 foot record set in 1952. Complicating the problem were ice jams on the river, which threatened bridges and natural gas pipelines.

As the river rose, volunteers began filling sandbags to build dikes. The bags cost 15 cents, but sand was free. On April 12, the city received its initial order of 10,000 bags; 35,000 more arrived on April 13. The *La Crosse Tribune* printed instructions for filling sandbags — fill them half full, don't tie them, and lay them like bricks. A total of 350,000 bags of sand were filled and city cleanup costs were estimated at $1.15 million.

Flood waters followed a Milwaukee Road track along the Black River on April 15. Portions of The Causeway [a north-south roadway that connects Rose Street with Third and Fourth Streets] flooded on April 16 when the river
reached 15.3 feet. Fifty cars were trapped in the Bell Store parking lot alone. On April 17, the Clinton Street Bridge was closed and seepage occurred through the dikes as the water reached 15.8 feet. On Easter Sunday, April 18, donated Easter baskets were distributed to children evacuated from their homes. Volunteers worked round the clock to add more sandbags.

A dike broke on April 19 and water poured in near the Black River, flooding 25 homes on the south end of the North Side. Another row of sandbags was placed on the city's 4.8 miles of dikes on April 20. That same day, a new mayor, Warren Loveland, was sworn in.

Schuh Homes, built in what had been swamp land, was among properties in the flood's way. "You could see the water go over the tracks and into the projects," architect Hackner said.

For most of April 20, a pump was used constantly behind Schuh Homes at St. James Street, but it was unable to keep up with seepage and water that was knee deep in the backyards and streets of the project.

Housing Authority Executive Director Frank Grover and John Heberlein worked along with many volunteers to hold back the waters as they moved over the Milwaukee Road tracks and to the wetlands.

"We worked all night long sandbagging. For four nights straight, I never got home," Heberlein said. "We pumped water as it seeped through. We had over 100,000 sandbags along the fence."

It took nine truckloads of sandbags, a crew of 20 and two large pumps to drain the area. There were as many as 150 volunteers from Logan, Central and Aquinas high schools who helped fill sandbags that extended along a half mile fence to protect Schuh Homes. Workers were aided by a donation from a neighbor, the La Crosse Rubber Mills — now La Crosse Footwear — of 60 pairs of hip boots for the
volunteers. No water reached the Schuh houses. Most residents moved out during the flood emergency.

On April 22, 1965, after the flooding danger had passed, the Housing Authority Board of Commissioners expressed its appreciation for the help it received during the flood, saying "... were it not for the valiant efforts of many people, much of the North Side of La Crosse, including Schuh Homes, would have been seriously inundated." A resolution approved by the board resolution specifically thanked:

- Executive Director Frank Grover
- Frank Grover, Jr.
- Charlotte Bute, Management Aide
- Kenneth Bute
- Ray Bute
- Frank Hafner, Custodian at Stoffel Court
- John Heberlein, Maintenance Engineer at Schuh Homes
- Bill Maravelas
- Antone Hafner
- William Eckert
- Craig Kastner
- The La Crosse Rubber Mills, for their generous furnishing of hip boots to the volunteer workers
- The Village of Ettrick for furnishing the pump
- The following tenants who worked to save their homes and the homes of others: Marge and Paul Kottmer, Jane Duncan, Dell Schroeder, Mike Koula, Pete Koula, Larry Burch, Doug Domnie, Eugene Johnson, Thomas Pauly, Jim Koelbl, Ken Barker, and Mr. and Mrs. Dalton Noel
- Commissioner Joseph D. Becker
- Aquinas High School students, and particularly the Columbian Squires
- Central High School students
- Logan High School students
- Holy Cross Seminary students
- Members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce
For several months after the flood, the board of commissioners discussed building an earth berm or dike along the north border of Schuh Homes for protection in the event of another flood. The Milwaukee Railroad agreed to give an easement to the authority for a berm or dike, but the plan was dropped after a city of La Crosse meeting on January 11, 1966, where government plans were discussed to prevent damage from a subsequent flood. About 200 persons attended the meeting in City Hall in which plans were offered for levees or flood walls and/or rerouting the La Crosse River. No decisions were made.

In 1969, as a significant spring flood was predicted for La Crosse, concerns were again raised about damaging Schuh Homes. This time, the Housing Authority invested in its own pump because the village of Ettrick could not make its pump available as it had in 1965.

Waters from the record 1965 flood approach Schuh Homes. Thanks to the hard work of many volunteers from La Crosse's high schools and the community who filled sandbags, the waters did not reach Schuh Homes.

John Heberlein photo
Mullen Homes and Stokke Tower

Within months of the opening of a second successful housing project and as the record 1965 flood approached, the La Crosse Housing Authority was back to work on its next housing programs. In April 1965, the Housing Authority, with the backing of the La Crosse Community Improvements Committee, authorized Executive Director Grover to prepare an application to reserve 90 additional units of housing for the elderly and 60 additional units for low income housing.

At the time of the decision, the Housing Authority already had 125 eligible applicants on a waiting list for Schuh Homes and 125 for Stoffel Court. With more than 100 qualified applicants for each project and pending loss of more housing in downtown La Crosse around the expanded La Crosse State University, labor leaders said more low rent housing was urgently needed.

Father Mullen said 12 persons whose homes were to be taken over by the university expansion had contacted the Housing Authority. Their average monthly income was $94 and the average rental in the city then was $50. It would be preferable to have private enterprise provide low-rent housing, Mullen said, but it wasn’t meeting the need.

Loss of housing also was expected as a result of a proposed downtown redevelopment project. La Crosse, like many cities, was experiencing “urban blight,” or buildings that had declined markedly over the years. Roy C. Kumm, chairman of the city’s Redevelopment Authority, noted a river city like La Crosse “rots” nearest the river and then into the rest of the city.

The 1965 flood not only took its toll on light industrial and warehouse buildings near the Mississippi River, housing also
was damaged. In the late 1960s, the city of La Crosse, through its Redevelopment Authority, proposed a major downtown development called Harborview Plaza between Mount Vernon and State streets and between Front and Second streets.

At one point in 1966, the Housing Authority suggested the city reserve space in Harborview for a high-rise apartment building for the elderly. That plan, like many others for Harborview, never materialized.

The project's most grandiose plan — primarily for a large shopping mall — would have displaced some homes as well, which led to the Housing Authority being asked to give these families priority. The Housing Authority agreed, but Harborview languished for years after the buildings were cleared. One frustrated alderman in 1975 called it "an illuminated race track for gophers."

Ultimately, the site became the home of the G. Heileman Brewing Co. corporate headquarters (now home of First Logic), a Radisson La Crosse Hotel, and the La Crosse Center.

The Housing Authority not only agreed to give "displacees" priority in its housing projects, it received approval from the PHA to raise the income levels for these individuals to $4,000 for one or two person families; $4,375 for families of three or four; and $4,750 for families of five or more.

Hackner and his firm, Hackner Schroeder and Roslansky, were once again hired to design the authority's next project. Low bids for the low-income family housing project were approved August 17, 1967:

- General construction — Nels Johnson Construction, $628,400.
- Plumbing — Winona Plumbing Co., Inc., $103,664.
- Heating — Schneider Heating & Air Conditioning, $52,945.
- Electrical — Wehrs Electric of West Salem, $36,500.
Hackner's own research on public housing projects for families convinced him that the best projects were low in density, meaning they were not high-rises with many, many families forced to live in close proximity. Instead, he favored duplexes or at least side-by-side apartments.

Mullen Homes was the only exception in family housing. The Public Housing Administration demanded and could not be dissuaded from the concept of Mullen having buildings with four and six apartment units in each, along with a few duplexes. The authority quickly learned there were fewer problems in smaller buildings. "After Mullen, the Housing Authority said no more 6-plexes," Hackner said.

Also in 1966, Hackner was involved in the design of a second high-rise for the elderly that would become Stokke Tower, named after Commissioner Joel Stokke, who began serving on the Commission in 1946. Again, there were disagreements with the Public Housing Authority concerning the building's design.

Hackner proposed an exterior concrete surface that was sandblasted, which the Public Housing Authority rejected as too costly. Hackner, asked to study comparable costs, said sandblasting would only add $10,000 to the building's cost.

In a letter to P.J. Papadopulos, Director of the Housing Development Division, Rev. Mullen asked for reconsideration, which was given in March 1967.

"The concrete textured by sand-blasting was the prime aesthetic feature of the building," Rev. Mullen wrote. "Without the texturing, it is felt the concrete's appearance is not acceptable, being cold and stark and not at all in keeping with the community's architectural tastes and seemingly not in keeping with your reduced maintenance theories....We feel the less than $10,000 cost to produce a building accepted by the community is a small price to pay."

These bids for Stokke Tower were opened and approved at the April 27, 1967, meeting:
We need a roof over our heads

Groundbreaking for Stokke Tower included Commissioners Harry Huber, Joel Stokke, Father Mullen, Joseph Becker and Olga Sauber.

- Electrical — Edward Stanek, d.b.a., Stanek Electric, $91,990.
- TV Antenna System — Wettstein & Sons, $2,693.
Rent for elderly housing was set at 25 percent of net income, with a minimum rent lowered from $35 to $30 a month.

The pressure was on to complete the two projects. The construction section of the Chicago HUD office demanded that all projects in its region be completed and occupied by September 1968, including Mullen and Stokke. Landscaping did not have to be completed by that date, however. No problems were expected with meeting those deadlines, although a strike in April 1968 stopped construction for a time.

Stokke Tower, a 10-story, 91-unit high rise, was completed and occupied July 30. Each apartment has a kitchen, bedroom, living room and bath. The 59 units at Mullen were completed on September 26. The project had 30 two-bedroom, 20 three-bedroom, six four-bedroom and three five-bedroom apartments. Total cost for the project, $821,509, was $112,000 less than the budget approved by the federal government. Each of the cluster of frame and brick homes in Mullen was built around activity clusters that included a play area for small children and a second play area for older children. Mullen Homes was the recipient of the 1970 Merit Award from the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, believed to be the first ever given to a public housing project in an open competition.

In an interview with the *La Crosse Tribune* at the time Mullen was occupied, Hackner said the addition’s 29 apartments with three or more bedrooms “reflects the needs of larger families in the La Crosse area that the commercial housing market has not been able to meet.”

Mullen was the only low rent family housing project completed in Wisconsin in 1968; other housing authorities then were concentrating on housing for the elderly. Mullen Homes was named for Rev. Mullen, former Housing Authority chair who resigned in July 1968 to become pastor of a church in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.
At the joint dedication for Mullen and Stokke, U.S. Senator William Proxmire called for even more public housing to be built. "I am very encouraged by progress being made," he told the 175 persons gathered at Stokke for the dedication. "But I want to take this opportunity to urge that the Department of Housing and Urban Development during the Nixon Administration redouble previous efforts in encouraging the construction of decent low-cost housing for low-income and elderly families now living in deficient housing."

Proxmire noted $5 billion was to be spent on 115 C5A cargo planes — twice the HUD budget.

"Elderly people are seldom found in demonstrations or social protest meetings," the senator said. "Yet their needs are no less urgent."

Mayor Warren Loveland praised the Housing Authority for being dedicated and "hard working" in its efforts to provide housing for low-income families and elderly residents.
Stokke Tower
Mullen Homes, above.

Stokke Tower residents celebrate a birthday in the early 1970s. They are, from left: Harriet Noel, Sophie Petersen, Palma Ravenscroft, Bernadine Meseberg and Nellie Leithold.
Sandy Lee has moved out of Mullen Homes, but you could say her heart is still with the La Crosse Housing Authority. Lee met her husband, Leighton, a Housing Authority housing inspector, while a resident from 1976 to 1989.

Sandy Lee, now a parent aide for the Family and Children’s Center, moved into Mullen Homes for the same reason that many women did — she had been divorced and had three children to raise.

"It was an extremely tough time," she said. "I was pretty much alone in La Crosse. I was not working at all. I had some medical problems. I had surgery and physically I was going through a hard time, too."

Mullen Homes were an inexpensive, but nice place to live "while I was rebuilding my life."

The challenge for her, however, was that Mullen’s six-plexes did not offer as much privacy as she was used to having. Still, she worked to make it a better place for all as the president of the Schuh/Mullen Tenant Association. During her tenure, there were teen dances, basketball games and other recreational activities, including camping.

“We were building a community. As a tenant organization, we were trying to bring people together and offer activities to keep kids out of trouble. We were trying to get parents involved in some positive outlets for their kids," she said. "We wanted kids to know there were caring adults who cared about them and were willing to participate with them."

The tenant association even lobbied Century Telephone to put a phone booth near the community center. "Many, many residents didn’t have a phone. They couldn’t afford one," she said.
The office 'girl'

In 1967, Rosemary Brechwald needed a job because her husband was ill. During her interview with then executive director Frank Grover in his law office, she remembers the key question — could she add and subtract?

"I said, 'yes, I thought I could handle it,'" she recalled with a smile.

Brechwald's job was to collect and log rents from tenants. Her office was in the Schuh Homes building that is now the site of the community center. She recorded rents in big logs by hand, counting the totals in her mind. Eventually, she was given an old adding machine that was not even electric.

Most rents were paid in cash, often with coins, or occasionally a money order. Tenants often came in at the last minute — just before 5 p.m. on the day rent was due — forcing her to reconcile the bills late each day.

What surprised her, however, was the first time she needed to complete three reports for HUD with short deadlines. "I knew nothing about reports," she said. "I remember all those calls to Bob [Daley, the CPA], probably in tears I suppose. What was I going to do? I had worked in a cosmetic shop five, six years before and a dress shop before that."

Daley's answer was to send blank reports in to meet the deadline and then he would help prepare the documents that were needed.

Because she was the one person in the office, Brechwald knew the tenants well. Many confided their troubles to her; some offered creative excuses for not paying their rents on time and asking for a reprieve from the penalty that came if they were more than five days late.

Brechwald remembered one woman who ran into the office
terrified, saying her husband was after her. "I was sitting there and she scooted under my desk," she said. "I was scared to death. I remember going home and my husband just laughed. He thought it was the funniest thing he had ever heard. I didn't know if I should stay working at the Housing Authority or not."

Housing Authority staff gather together in the early 1970s. They are from left: Jane Alberts (now executive director), Rosemary Brechwald, secretary, and Angie Wiemerslage, then executive director.
Sauber Manor at 1025 Liberty Street under construction.
Even before the Stokke and Mullen projects were complete, the Housing Authority began working on a fifth project, a high rise for the elderly to be located on La Crosse's North Side. In June 1968, the Housing Authority voted to send a letter of "reservation" for 100 units on La Crosse's North Side. A few months later, some people argued additional housing was not needed because of the Gates Report, a local study which found sufficient housing in the city of La Crosse. But, as Housing Authority staff clarified, that study looked only at higher income families — those with $10,000 or more of income a year. The study did not look at needs of older adults on fixed incomes.

After getting approvals from city and federal governments, Robert Hackner began looking for possible sites. There clearly was a need for apartments on the North Side. In 1969, 35 residents at Stoffel and Stokke were from the North Side and most preferred to live in the part of La Crosse where they grew up or had raised their families. As potential residents were interviewed for the new apartments, North Siders were given priority as were those who lived in Stoffel or Stokke wishing to move back to the North Side.

One indicator of the importance of the building for the North Side was a decision in May 1969 to have a lounge area on the top floor of the building.

"La Crosse has the unique situation of being divided geographically by a river which results in a North Side and a South Side with strong feelings and jealousies apt to be prevalent," the minutes of the May 8 meeting said. "Therefore, since this is the only high rise on the North Side, and since it will be its tallest building, and since Stoffel Court has such a
lounge on its top floor, North Side residents will only be happy if similar accommodations are provided for them. (This may seem to be provincial reasoning and logic, but in view of the circumstances, it is expedient).”

Bids were opened September 5, 1969, for what was to become Sauber Manor at 1025 Liberty Street. Low bidders were:

- General contracting — Nelson, Inc. of Racine, Wisconsin, $909,500.
- Heating — Kramer & Toye Plumbing and Heating, $85,569.
- Electrical work — Klich Electric, $86,900.
- TV Antenna System Work — Numsen TV, $2,292.

Tenants started moving into Sauber Manor on December 19, 1970. The 100 unit-building was named after Olga Sauber, a Housing Authority commissioner from 1950 to 1973. An eighth floor lounge overlooks the Black River and the Minnesota bluffs. The building also has a community room, arts and crafts room, and a laundry room on the first floor.

A standing room-only crowd heard Senator Proxmire praise Sauber Manor and the Housing Authority at the building’s dedication in 1971. He said the local authority had done a “marvelous job” of caring for older citizens. “I don’t know of any city that has done a better job.”

La Crosse’s attitude toward the elderly, which resulted in three high rise apartment buildings, was not typical of most other cities, Proxmire said. “It is the kind of thing we need so much.”

Older people “don’t want a sense of dependency, they want independence. It is an enigma to me why we don’t have more housing for the elderly when we need it so badly,” Proxmire said.

He noted the federal budget allocating $209 million for
supersonic transport planes and only a meager allowance for housing for the elderly. "We must find a way to reorder our priorities" to spend more money on projects that benefit more people.

Sauber Manor was the site of a fire in 1987 in the apartment of a seventh floor resident, who left a candle unattended. The fire was contained with no injuries, although two residents were treated and released from St. Francis Medical Center for smoke inhalation. The fire was discovered by relatives of another resident who heard a smoke alarm go off across the hall. "We were down visiting grandma when my son noticed the smoke detector alarm," the relative said.

Smoke filled the sixth, seventh and eighth floors, and took several hours to clear. Some residents on the seventh floor had to live elsewhere temporarily until repairs were made.

Sauber Manor survived the 1987 fire, but it was "completely gutted" floor by floor in 1995. The work then was designed to renovate it with a more modern look and to make it more competitive with other housing for the elderly. The project, which included enlarging apartments by making four into three, was done without moving residents out.

Four of its residents, the Hogden sisters, were featured in a *La Crosse Tribune* article in 1988. The sisters grew up on the city's North Side until one by one they moved into Sauber Manor over a five-year period. Bernice Lien lived in apartment 611; Esther Stenberg lived in 609; Irene Holstad lived in 613; and Agnes Tidquist lived in 604 until failing health led to her moving into Hillview Home.

"We've always been good friends," Esther said of her sisters. "We were always a close knit family."

The sisters went their separate ways during the day, but came back together for the evening meal, taking turns cooking. And at Christmas time that year, they reported making 125 pounds of lefse. "A lot of people in this building got a treat of lefse," Esther said then. Sadly, she is the only survivor of the four sisters.
Commissioners gather for the Huber Homes groundbreaking. From left, they are: Margaret Annett, Joseph Becker, Joel Stokke, and Roland Solberg, along with Mrs. Harry (Mina) Huber and Executive Director Angie Wiemerslage.
Huber Homes

With the experience of two successful family housing projects and three apartment buildings for the elderly, the Housing Authority hoped it could build more housing in 1970 for families on La Crosse's far south side without controversy. After all, the Housing Authority recognized the need still was there. As the 1970s began, the Housing Authority had the following applications on file for housing:

1 bedroom — 57
2 bedroom — 86
3 bedroom — 51
4 bedroom — 19
5 bedroom — 3

A Housing Authority survey conducted in 1969 also found that half of low-income families renting private facilities were dissatisfied with their quarters and that 50 percent of those units were inadequate and 15 percent were uninhabitable, Rt. Rev. Msgr. Norbert Dall was quoted as saying in a 1970 article in the La Crosse Tribune.

In 1970, the Housing Authority had plans for 160 more units, mostly for families. But neighbors near the Webster School site in the 1400 block of Redfield Street objected to having six units there. And neighbors also had objections to a planned development on Diocese of La Crosse land on a triangular 5.9-acre site between St. Dominic's Monastery, the former St. Michael's Home for Children, and Bluff Slough.

A note from the April 23, 1970, Housing Authority minutes showed a unanimous vote to hold a "meeting with residents of the neighborhood of a proposed site near St. Michael's to discuss with them the plans for housing in that area. The purpose of this meeting is to overcome their objections to
federal low-cost housing in their neighborhood.”

About 65 neighbors attended the meeting in Stokke Tower. One speaker, who refused to give his name in a *La Crosse Tribune* report of the hearing, said low-income families are social problems and clergymen are constantly at Schuh and Mullen Homes.

“Why bring this environment in among our kids?” the speaker asked.

Rev. Paul Servais, a Housing Authority commissioner and pastor at St. James Catholic Church, said he received no more calls to the Schuh and Mullen Homes than to any other area of his North Side parish. He said the 160 units were to be built in several phases around the city to avoid “developing too large a concentration of low-income families in one area.”

Having apartment clusters throughout the city also avoids overloading any one school, Joseph Becker said.

Hackner said the plan called for mixing one, two, three and four-bedroom apartments so it is less “project-like. It’s deliberately planned to be an excellent appearing neighborhood, and not a project area,” he said.

But neighbor John Nett argued that it would be a project. “I can’t see group housing developments such as that, putting low income families into one group,” he said. “Some, I realize, can’t do anything different. But you are labeling them by putting them in one area.”

Nett also said he was concerned about the density. “That’s too many children being concentrated in one area,” he said.

Keith Ellison, who later became a city alderman, objected to public housing in general. He said four private developers in Eau Claire had built their units at less cost and still paid taxes. “Why haven’t private housing developers been approached?” he asked.

Becker said private developers have had opportunities in La Crosse for 125 years — since La Crosse was founded. Even if they applied for federal funds, they could build units
only for middle income families, those who could afford to pay $90 to $100 a month.

"We are serving those who have very limited economic means," Becker said, referring to a minimum of $35 a month in rent.

Nett said he also was looking after the interests of the nuns in the Dominican Monastery, some of whom told him the two-story units would be "an invasion of their privacy."

Sister Mary Dominic, mother superior of the monastery, said in the La Crosse Tribune article that the community had not been consulted about the project and had no comment about them.

Harry Huber, president of the Housing Authority Board, said the project, which might accommodate as many as 112 children, would be designed to make sure the sisters' privacy was maintained. "We'll do everything we can to take as good a care of them as possible," he was quoted as saying.

A petition drive opposing the project forced a vote in the La Crosse Common Council requiring a three-fourths vote — 16 out of 21 aldermen — to allow the planned development project to continue.

Among those opposing the project was Alderman John Schubert who wrote a letter that was made part of the Common Council meeting on July 9, 1970. That letter, reprinted in an advertising publication called The Merchant, asked "Why haven't these six questions been reported by the local news media???:

1. Is it an actual fact that the city must accept the two properties in question, and only those properties, in order to assure federal financing? Does this have to be done now with no opportunity to search further for alternative sites? Is it not possible that by threatening that the federal monies will be lost if the council does not act immediately, that the council responds to the threat rather than the reality of the situation?
2. Does the council question the motives of the Roman Catholic Diocese in offering the south parcel for sale? That they would be justified in selling land is not in question, but why would they offer for sale a piece of land that borders on two institutions under their jurisdiction that will have many problems as a result of this, some of which are without solution? Is it possible that this is the least desirable of Diocesan properties, and the one with the least market value if not sold to the city? Consider, for instance, the property owned by the church at Holy Cross Seminary, which could be annexed to the city if not already a part of it, are there not more desirable and more saleable?

3. I am sure that the Common Council knows that the close proximity of two-story housing to the Dominican Monastery is not only an offence to them, but it renders their isolated and contemplative life impossible to maintain if they leave the building.

4. Does the Common Council realize that St. Michael's Home is not an orphanage? It is an institution housing and treating approximately 75 emotionally disturbed and/or delinquent children and adolescents, runaways and various forms of anti-social behavior are common. The council proposes to place a low-income housing project on St. Michael's grounds and to provide direct access to the project from St. Michael's by road.

5. The Common Council should take into consideration how deeply concerned the two institutions are concerning these matters. But they cannot speak out because the bishop is offering the land. Such an act, no matter how sincere, would be tantamount to disobedience to his authority.

6. How many members of the Common Council have inspected these properties personally to see for themselves their suitability? Is the council, instead, being subjected to high-pressure sales
tactics in the name of civic interest, but which actually may prevent the city from gaining more suitable land at a later date.

Next to the reprinted letter, was a 1963 political cartoon depicting a man labeled as a "public housing tenant" at the door of a man labeled "taxpayer." In the public housing tenant's hand is a tennis racket, while the taxpayer is holding income tax bills in this hands. The caption said, "I've come to collect your half of my rent."

Also in that ad is an advertisement taken out by the Wake Up America Committee, Keith Ellison, Chairman, at a cost of $139.20. The ad said:

There is no such thing as "GOVERNMENT MONEY"

"Government," whether city, county, state or national, has no money at all. No, not one penny! It is our money which "government" dishes out for various projects highly touted in the newspapers, on television and radio newscasts. It is our money stolen right out of our pockets!

In the minutes of the August 13, 1970, Housing Authority Board, Father Servais reported on a meeting Bishop Freking held with Aldermen John Schubert, Ferdinand Sontag, Joseph Addis and George Hickey. The bishop assured them that the 15th Street site met with the approval of the nuns at St. Dominic's as well as the personnel at St. Michael's. The bishop also explained why other diocesan land was not available.

The ever resourceful Housing Authority was certainly down but not out in terms of the project at 15th and Gladys streets. A HUD project manager suggested that if rezoning was not possible, the Housing Authority should consider duplexes, which would not require rezoning.
On January 14, 1971, it voted "that plans be made for construction of homes on scattered locations throughout the city, approximately 48 in number." The Housing Authority announced the new plan for a 112-unit, $2.07 million project at two sites in June 1971. In an article in January 1973, the La Crosse Tribune described the town houses "as a way to get around neighbors' objections."

Construction was started in March 1974 on 20 duplexes for low income persons that became Huber Homes. They were named in honor of the late Commissioner Harry Huber, who served on the Housing Authority Board from 1955 to 1973, including five years as chairman. At the April 19, 1975 dedication for the project, Huber was described by Commissioner Ray Ping, who served from 1973 to 1980, as "one of the infinitesimally small group of people who make things happen."

La Crosse Mayor Patrick Zielke said he had his differences with Huber over the years but had learned to like and respect him. "When you like and respect a man you have had differences with, that is a tribute," he was quoted as saying in the La Crosse Tribune.

Joseph Becker said the Housing Authority returned more to the city than it took away. In total, it used land that produced less than $1,000 a year in property taxes. In 1974, it paid $20,000 to the city in lieu of taxes.

The Housing Authority also was praised for its management. At the dedication, Samuel Clements of the Milwaukee HUD office said the La Crosse authority management typified the best of the 94 housing authorities in the state. "Keep up the good work," he said.

Huber's widow, Mina, said "It's a happy day for me, but a sad one, too. I miss my husband so much."

Shortly after his death in December 1972, the Housing Authority passed a resolution describing Huber for having a "sterling character."
And in a eulogy, he was said to "have distinguished himself by his sincere dedication and substantial contribution to the welfare of the community. His spirit of humanity, of developing the good of all, carried over into all fields of endeavor, including charitable and philanthropic activities."

Among the first Huber Homes residents were Roger and Mary Jezeski, who moved into the complex with their three children in March 1974. "It's real nice," Jezeski said in a La Crosse Tribune article about the dedication.

Mrs. Jezeski said the area is well kept and there is very little vandalism. She appreciated the fact that "the children can play outside without worrying about traffic."

The dedication program touched on the challenges that have occurred in building public housing in La Crosse. Speaking of the work of Harry Huber, the program said:

In his tenure, housing for the low income and the elderly made impressive strides. Not without opposition, it might be added; private investors and many taxpayers objected to the city entering the housing field. But to our knowledge, no scandal and no major mistakes in project planning have occurred. And hundreds of families have been helped over rough spots or provided housing they could afford in their later years, because the authority went ahead. La Crosse has provided decent low-cost housing at little cost to the city. The units already are a lasting memorial to citizen members of the authority like Mr. Huber who made them a reality.

***
Dorothy Stringham has lived at Huber Homes since it opened. She had a furnished apartment in Michigan before returning to her hometown, La Crosse, to be closer to family. She was in the hospital with complications of arthritis when she decided to apply for a Housing Authority apartment.

"I was laid up with arthritis. I could hardly walk when I moved in here my arthritis was so bad," she said. "It's been real nice for me. I have good neighbors."

In comparison with her furnished apartment in Michigan, she said Huber Homes "was much nicer. Everything was new. When I first came here, I paid $18 a month. Now I pay $99."
The great lettuce caper

The La Crosse Tribune, like many newspapers in the post-Watergate 1970s, was fearless in its investigations. Reporter Nick Pintozzi took on the free lunches given commissioners during their twice monthly meetings in the Stoddard Hotel. In a column called "On the Other Hand" on September 9, 1974, he wrote about the lunches, which were paid for out of rental income — all legal under HUD rules.

"Money isn't my main concern in this matter, although I'm sure it's a major concern of those paying the rent," he wrote. "My complaint primarily involves the manner in which the authority's meetings are conducted."

He then went on to describe one of the recent meetings:

About a half hour after the scheduled noon starting time, and after several items had been briefly discussed, authority member Joel Stokke looked at the chef's salad in this plate and said, "This is too much for me."

Other diners also noted the sizable salad.

"Usually I'm writing and chewing and talking," said Angeline Wiemerslage, authority executive director, while writing the minutes of the meeting. A few minutes later the salad dressing tray was passed to Joseph Becker, chairman of the authority.

While Becker was asking Mrs. Wiemerslage for a report, Margaret Annett, authority member, poured some dressing onto her chef's salad.

As Mrs. Wiemerslage talked about proposals for infant care, Ray Ping, authority member, poured himself a cup of coffee.
At 12:47 p.m., a young waiter opened the door and carried in dessert — chocolate tarts and whipped cream.

Stokke and Mrs. Annett offered the tarts to two news reporters, who said, "No thank you."

"You're all cowards," Mrs. Annett joked.

A bus boy entered the room and began taking away the plates.

Another distraction occurred a short time later when the boy poured coffee.

At 1:03 p.m. Becker said, "I guess that's it, unless anybody else has anything else to bring up."

No one did. The meeting was adjourned.

Between the passing of the salad dressing and the lighting of cigars and cigarettes by authority members, I wondered whether the authority members realized how much of a distraction it was for the reporters who were trying to hear the conversation and keep track of the official business.

I've since talked to Mrs. Wiemerslage and asked her why the authority has to meet at noon.

She said the time is convenient for authority members.

"It (use of rental income to pay for authority members' lunches) is an allowable expense under federal guidelines," Mrs. Wiemerslage said. "We have a regular federal audit on everything."

Nevertheless, I hope the authority will reconsider its practice of eating away part of its rental income and creating a distractive atmosphere in the process.

This controversy brought a response from radio station WLCX two days later. It was called Good Reporters Editorial.

A reporter's criticism...he's from another media ... of lettuce rustling at a luncheon meeting disturbing his work is urging enough of us to reiterate our stand on reporting. The luncheon meeting reporter
complained that he had trouble following the session he was at. It’s no wonder! That particular person is known in local governmental and journalistic circles as a chronic talker and interrupter at meetings. He’s so enthralled with his own voice, he doesn’t have time to learn the crux of the meeting he was assigned. We severely condemn this. It’s our view that reporters are your observers at various functions ... but not your representatives — They’re elected by you. Our news staff is determined to present the news as it happens, so you can be better informed of the many things affecting your life. If we speak at a public session, we do so like the rest of the public, for we have no more privileges... we do not sit on a pedestal above others.

A reporter’s job is to report ... not to interrupt and interject during meetings of public bodies.

The issue of lunch meetings would rear its ugly head again in another form a decade later. However, Becker said Housing Authority meetings were held at noon in order to get a quorum. “We had a terrible time getting a quorum with these extremely busy people before we met at noon,” he said. “We were talking about this problem at a national meeting one year and we asked other commissioners what they did. It was their practice to have lunch meetings, with typically the authority paying for the meals as a budgeted necessity.”

Attendance rose dramatically with the working lunch meetings, according to Becker. “It may have inconvenienced some people in the Fourth Estate, but that was not our major concern.”
Margaret Annett Day Care Center
Meeting child care needs

As early as 1968, Housing Authority staff realized the importance of quality child care for allowing mothers to work outside the home and, therefore, develop the financial stability they needed. In May that year, the board agreed to allow the La Crosse Area Child Development Association to rent the community room in Schuh Homes for a day care center from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Rent was set at $200 a month. The association was the forerunner to the La Crosse Day Care Centers, Inc.

In November 1968, the Housing Authority began exploring the idea of building a permanent day care center in Schuh Homes that would primarily serve residents there. The $225,000 center, designed by Hackner, Schroeder, Roslansky and Associates, became a reality in 1975 in large part because of the dedication of Housing Commissioner Margaret Annett.

"The red tape and road blocks we encountered were unbelievable," said Housing Authority Commissioner Joseph Becker at the time of the dedication. Becker, who was then chairman, credited Annett for having the perseverance to make it a reality. The center was the first in Wisconsin to be funded through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The challenge was communicating the needs and plans with state and federal governments. "If I did anything, it was bring people together," Annett was quoted by the La Crosse Tribune as saying at the dedication. "I saw what a marvelous opportunity it was for children to get together in an
environment that was planned for them — so beneficial for them."

Annett said she was "very proud" of the center. "Everybody has a dream and very few people have their dreams come true. I've finally had a dream of mine come true."

There was nothing that La Crosse needed more than a day care center, she added. "I want all children to be able to come to a day care center. It's so helpful for them to intermingle with other children this early in their lives."

Renee Kreisa, then executive director for the La Crosse Day Care Centers, which operated the center, said it was an opportunity for government and the private sector to work together. "The government puts up the money and it's run locally. It allows for local control," she was quoted as saying. "The staff will be responsible to the parents and not a federal agency."

Many persons applauded having the center on La Crosse's North Side, where it was close to where many people worked. Half of the children who attended Margaret Annett, which was named after the commission member who served from 1973 to 1996, were supposed to be residents of the Housing Authority's low income housing complexes. The other half were to be from the general population.

The ideal mix of children at Margaret Annett Center, unfortunately, was not met during its years as a child care center. After 17 years, the day care center operated by La Crosse Day Care was asked to move so the La Crosse Head Start Family and Children Development Center could take over the facility at 1321 St. James St.

Among those arguing for a takeover of the Margaret Annett building was the president of Head Start's Board, lawyer Frank Papenfuss. "It was built with federal money. At the time it was built, it was understood that 51 percent of the children would be residents of Schuh Homes or related housing projects....We're busing 50 kids from Schuh Homes to different centers."
La Crosse Day Care Center was initially unhappy with the Housing Authority’s decision, said its executive director Jayne Riffenberg. “But the building was funded through HUD. A percentage of our enrollment had to be left open so low income children could come here. We did that, but not a lot of low income students came here.”

The 68 to 72 children then enrolled at Margaret Annett moved to a new child care center built for it in Bluffside Commons on Hwy. 16. Today, La Crosse Day Care has 600 children in eight centers in La Crosse, Onalaska, West Salem and Holmen, including the Bluffside Day Care Center. “It all turned out well,” Riffenberg said.

Head Start Child and Family Development Centers, Inc., now serves 108 children at the Margaret Annett Center, many of whom come from the Housing Authority apartments. Head Start has a total of 236 children in centers in four counties with the Margaret Annett Center the largest.

Having Head Start in the Schuh Homes complex is “an excellent fit,” said James Vermeul, Head Start director. “The special thing about Margaret Annett is not only do parents bring their children over, they stay with their children a lot. They stay and participate in what their children are doing.”

Having Head Start at the Margaret Annett Center is saving taxpayers money, he added. “We have saved a lot of taxpayers dollars in transportation for children. We had to bus them all over the city. Now they just walk across the street and go in.”

The center also offered opportunities for expansion at a time when the federal government was increasing funding for Head Start. “We were immediately able to expand by 60 kids in the city.”

Head Start leases the Margaret Annett Center from the Housing Authority. “The Housing Authority has been wonderful to work with. They are great people to work with,” Vermeul said.
We need a roof over our heads

Stoffel Court and Becker Plaza

The Becker Plaza groundbreaking included from left, Commissioners Roland Solberg and Margaret Annett, Alderman Brian Carroll, Commissioner Joseph Becker, Mayor Patrick Zielke, Executive Director Angie Wiemerslage and Commissioner Joel Stokke.
Becker Plaza and Forest Park

It was expected to be another crowning moment for the La Crosse Housing Authority on July 1, 1976 — what a writer for the *La Crosse Tribune* called "the authority's double-header." The new 76-unit Becker Plaza at 7th and Cameron streets was to be dedicated and ground was to be broken for the Forest Park project, a 112-unit high rise off West Avenue near Badger Street.

As that reporter put it — actually the writer of this book in her younger years — "All went well for the authority until the groundbreaking." Then Forest Park neighbor Margaret Derkes told Housing Authority Chairman Joseph Becker, for whom Becker Plaza was named, she objected to trees being cut down for the Forest Park Project.

"Mr. (Joseph W.) Losey left the land to be a park for the city," she said. "It looks like a forest and should not be used for some stupid high rise."

Architect James Gersich of Hackner, Schroeder and Roslansky and Associates said eight of the 58 trees on the site would be removed for the building, three for the parking, and 52 new trees would be planted. Plans also called for 81 specimens of shrub and ground cover. "We felt that God created these beautiful trees so we would build something that would augment them," Gersich said.

And Becker told Mrs. Derkes, "We think the trees and people belong together."

Commenting in 1996 about the incident, Becker said, "We eventually got a shovel and we had the groundbreaking."

The $1.7 million Becker Plaza had 12 units on each floor, including two for persons with physical disabilities.
Construction began in May 1975 and was completed in June 1976.

Ground was broken for the $2 million Forest Park with solar heating in mind to save energy. It was a time when America first became worried about the hold that Middle Eastern countries had on the oil supply. Long lines already had formed at many gas stations at times, and Americans were looking for alternatives.

Two months after the Forest Park groundbreaking, the plan for solar heating was shelved when HUD rejected the $15,000 cost for the project because energy costs savings were estimated at only $360 a year. Although additional solar panels in the roof of the building might have doubled the energy savings, Becker said it would have cost the city $2,000 a year in interest on the 40-year mortgage to get a savings of $720 a year.

The authority voted to incorporate space in the structure to accommodate solar panels and to add more panels in the future if and when they became more durable and if the guarantee extended beyond 10 years. “I’m very disappointed at the results of this project, but if they come out with a more efficient conductor in the future I’d like to see this building constructed to accommodate a solar energy unit,” Becker said at the time of the decision.

Forest Park marked a departure from other Housing Authority projects in its financing by the Wisconsin Housing Finance Authority, a state agency that was given funds through HUD grants. That financing would soon prove problematic to executive director Angie Wiemerslage, who did not like the idea of the state holding title to the building. The state also had required the Housing Authority to hold a certain percentage of rent money from Forest Park in reserves called residual receipts.

“Technically, they said they retained ownership of the projects,” CPA Robert Daley said. “They financed it and said they constructed it and owned it. They said you don’t own it. We own it.”
As a result, there was a major confrontation between the Housing Authority and the Wisconsin Housing Finance Authority in 1979. The La Crosse Housing Authority decided to refinance the project to lower its interest on the project. That would mean substantial savings, much like refinancing a house — a very big house — at a significantly lower interest rate. When the state then claimed it should benefit from the refinancing, Wiemerslage strongly disagreed. Regaining ownership from the state became a goal for the refinancing.

Wiemerslage chartered a plane to take a group of Housing Authority Commissioners, Daley and legal counsel Tom Sleik to Madison, Wisconsin, to meet with Housing Finance Authority officials. (The chartered flight was less expensive than paying mileage and other expenses, including additional hours for travel for the attorney and accountant.)

Sleik remembered a series of meetings between the HFA lawyer and himself; between the HFA accountant and Daley, and then lawyers, CPAs and the entire La Crosse delegation met together.

"It was the closest thing I've seen to a fist fight. Angie had the ability to articulate a position in a clear, undeniable fashion. She threw down the gauntlet," Sleik said. "Angie came to town to tell them it was our money and that we were going to get it."

The tone was polite, but hostile, Sleik said. "These guys got so red in the face. They were so exasperated in dealing with Angie. She was just so firm in her position."

What was so special about Wiemerslage, Sleik said, is that she ran the Housing Authority with the pride, determination and entrepreneurialism one normally would find in private business. "She had the zeal and thoughtfulness and proprietary interest in running the Housing Authority that any owner would hopefully exhibit in the private sector," he said. "She was under no illusion that she owned it, but she ran it as if she was the owner. She couldn't have fought any
harder and with any more enthusiasm than if she did own the Housing Authority.”

It took months of work and persistence to convince the state to give up its claim of ownership. Jane Alberts, the La Crosse Housing Authority’s executive director since Wiemerslage’s retirement, remembers one lobby encounter between Jean C. Broeren, executive director of the Wisconsin Housing Finance Authority, and Wiemerslage at a state housing meeting. “It was rather loud. I didn’t like all that yelling,” said Alberts, who stood by while Wiemerslage let her opinions fly.

In addition to the issue of residual receipts, Wiemerslage did not like the state’s interest rates. “She felt they were fattening their coffers,” Daley said. “The state agency was supposed to be like God. They almost tried to be bigger than HUD. They really tried to build an empire for themselves.”

After months of heated discussions, the state finally blinked and agreed to the refinancing and the sale late in 1979. All papers had to be signed, however, by the end of that year.

It came down to New Year’s Eve in 1979 with the bond refinancing consultant, Ronald Newbanks, flying in from Cincinnati, Ohio, to get the signatures on the papers that would refinance the project, and, therefore, free Forest Park from the state’s clutches.

“Bond refinancing people are a breed apart. They love paper, the more paper the better. Ronald Newbanks was a very conscientious gentleman. That is one of the reasons that it took a long time,” Sleik said.

The group, working in a room in the old La Crosse Municipal Airport, signed paper after paper. With time dragging on and a dinner dance to attend with his wife, Judy, Sleik excused himself to go home and arrange to meet his wife at the party. He returned in tuxedo to finish the refinancing work.
"It's not normally the way I spend New Year's Eve," Sleik said upon his return.

Forest Park's refinancing was an example of the perseverance that Wiemerslage and other Housing Authority officials had when they felt they were doing the right thing.

"Other housing authorities had the same problem, but did not persist to get out of it," Daley said.
The $1 million, 30-unit Grover Estates, a public housing project named for Frank Grover, former executive director of the La Crosse Housing Authority, was dedicated Tuesday. It is the authority’s fourth project for low-income families. The Rev. Thomas Mullin, pastor of St. Stephen’s Catholic Church, Stevens Point, and former authority board chairman, said the public housing program here is “one of the best in the state.” After providing a housing project for veterans after World War II and losing a 1948 referendum on public housing, the authority in 1956 persuaded the Common Council and the federal government to allow construction of the 74-unit Schuh Homes west of George Street and south of the Milwaukee Road tracks, a public housing project for low-income families. It since has added the 59-unit Mullen Homes, 40-unit Huber Homes and now Grover Estates, all for low-income families, and five high-rises for low-to-moderate-income elderly.
The development of Grover Estates had its share of challenges as well. In 1978, the city learned that it might lose its Community Development Block Grant funds if it did not meet its goal of having 70 units of low and moderate income housing built in the city that year. The issue was critical for Harborview Plaza, a La Crosse Redevelopment Authority project that had languished since the 1965 flood. The city had applied for $2.8 million in an Urban Development Action Grant to help fund the proposed $9.75 million convention center-auditorium-parking ramp development in Harborview.

There also was the possibility that the city would not receive any financial aid to build units for the elderly if La Crosse did not build the housing for low and moderate-income families first.

Alderman Keith Ellison, never a friend of the city's public housing, called it "blackmail. I don't think there should be any blackmail at the 11th hour that we will lose federal funds," he said.

But Alderman Loren Wardwell said, "If you feel real courageous and want to gamble on a $1 million building being lost, that is your privilege. I'm not prepared to do that."

The decision revolved around rezoning land at George and Taylor streets for 30 units of low-income duplexes. Rezoning failed on April 13, 1978. A three-fourths approval was necessary because legal objectors — neighbors — had petitioned against it.

Compounding the problem was a demand by family members of the former owner to return the unused land for
$12,500. That was the price the Housing Authority paid through condemnation.

The son of the former owner of the land demanded the Housing Authority build on land outside the city, but the sites he suggested would not meet federal guidelines. The Housing Authority also received legal advice that it could not sell the land back to the family, but instead would have to auction it off. The Housing Authority instead decided to proceed with plans for Grover Estates.

In the meantime, Ellison, who announced he wanted new public housing built outside the city, threatened a referendum on the issue. He announced plans to introduce legislation that would give taxpayers a say in what, if any, public housing would be built.

"The Constitution of the United States does not guarantee public housing to anyone," he said. "Public housing is not a guarantee, so the voters in the city of La Crosse should decide if they want to build this type of housing."

Alderman Lee Foley said he was tired of dealing with an unresponsive federal bureaucracy. "If this was not connected with Harborview, I'd tell them to go to hell," Foley was quoted as saying in the April 27, 1978, La Crosse Tribune.

A month later, the council approved the rezoning, as the Tribune put it in its headline: "Council caves in to HUD on rezoning."

Ellison called the council's vote a sellout. "In essence, you are saying your vote's up for sale. You can be bought if they come in and offer enough money," he said.

Alderman Brian Carroll disagreed, calling the vote "reasoning in the real world" and said more harm would be done if the city lost the funding.

Alderman Randall Larson, who represented the district in which the land was located, said it is a "disgrace the taxpayer has to put up with this."

Foley, who normally supported legal objectors in zoning issues, went along with the rezoning. "I feel like we have lost
sovereignty. It is like we are in the South during Reconstruc-
tion. Reluctantly, I’ll vote for this. It’s like the old song, ‘I Owe
My Soul to the Company Store.”

Ellison pushed his issue of a referendum through the
Common Council’s Judiciary and Administration Committee.
“After sitting on the council about a year, I’ve come to the
realization that the biggest threat to the taxpayer is us,” he
was quoted as saying. “We’re going to give the power to run
us into debt to the taxpayer. I don’t see how any elected
official could say, ‘No, I’ll make this decision for you.”

The original site for what would become Grover Estates was
14 acres, but the Housing Authority swapped 10 of those
acres to the city for a 1.6 acre parcel between La Crosse and
Badger Streets just northeast of the recently completed Forest
Park apartments. The additional land would provide more
housing for the elderly. “We still have a waiting list of more
than 300 persons,” Wiemerslage was quoted as saying. “It
seems that the more we provide, the more aware these people
are; so more people apply for this housing, letting us know
that they’re eligible.”

Grover Estates was dedicated March 25, 1980, with the
Rev. Thomas Mullen, who was then pastor of St. Stephan’s
Catholic Church, Stevens Point, as speaker. Mullen described
the Housing Authority as “one of the best in the state.”

The project was named for Frank H. Grover, long-time
member of the La Crosse Housing Authority Board, who died
in 1984. He had been a commissioner from 1947 to 1957,
including service as chairman. He then became executive
director from 1957 until he retired in 1973. Even after he
retired, he served as legal counsel for the Housing Authority
on future projects.

The program for the dedication of Grover Estates at Taylor
and Hamilton streets in La Crosse recognized Grover for “a
quarter of a century contribution in providing decent housing
for people of limited income.”
Architect’s sketch of the front view of Ping Manor, named after Board Commissioner Ray E. Ping.

Solberg Heights
Ping Manor and Solberg Heights

Ping Manor, built on the land obtained in the swap with the city, was dedicated on June 19, 1981. The project had 61 units for elderly of moderate means, bringing to 718 units the number of apartments managed by the Housing Authority, including 515 for the elderly and disabled in six high rises.

The new project was named for commissioner Ray Ping, who, contacted in Naples, Florida, said he was “flabbergasted, pleased and a little shocked” by the decision to name it after him. Ping had been active in other community activities, including serving as an Oktoberfest festmaster in 1973.

One of the reasons the Housing Authority was successful was that it always had a building in the works. It was no exception in 1980 when the authority announced plans for what would be its last elderly or family housing project for the foreseeable future.

Housing Authority Chairman Joseph Becker announced the $3.7 million high rise for the elderly to be built on South Sixth Street, calling it a “shot in the arm” for downtown La Crosse which then was facing a variety of problems as a result of a recession and the opening of Valley View Mall on the north edge of the city.

The building’s 79 units would only put a small dent in the growing list of elderly needing housing. The list had grown to 400 at the time of the announcement.

The last and final Housing Authority project, Solberg Heights, was dedicated on September, 29, 1983. It was named after Roland Solberg, current chairman of the board and then administrator of the Cooperative Educational Service Agency 11, which provided services to area school districts.
Speakers at the dedication for the 79-unit building included Mayor Patrick Zielke and State Superintendent of Schools Herbert J. Grover.

A 1982 article noted La Crosse was up to 796 public housing units, compared with 297 in Oshkosh, 682 in Madison, and 435 in Superior. Only Milwaukee had more at that time with 4,500 units.
Dogs and cats and birds, oh my

There may have been some chickens roosting in pens outside the emergency housing apartments in the 1940s, but by the time the La Crosse Housing Authority built its permanent units, there could be no animals, edible or not, other than birds or fish.

In 1984, U.S. Senator William Proxmire introduced a bill that would allow pets in high rise housing for the elderly, a move that was not welcomed in La Crosse by most people tenants, according to a survey of the elderly in the buildings.

"If this home were on the ground floor level, it might work. But can you see dogs and cats in here? The people who come in here most are not able to take care of pets, let alone take them out for exercise," wrote Fern Brandenberg, president of the Becker Plaza council. "I say no to dogs and cats in here. Let them have birds if they want pets."

A letter signed by Sauber Manor tenants said they preferred not to have pets. The letter then went on to be specific about rules for having pets:

There will be no animals in the halls unattended and only when passing through with owners. They are to be carried in and out if possible, otherwise they should be muzzled and on a leash. Only small dogs allowed. They should not be allowed in the nutrition center, the lobby or the library. Litter boxes should not be thrown down the trash compactor. They should be walked only on sidewalks, but not on the front lawn, the patio or bus stop. Pooper scoopers should be carried at all times. A pet owner should carry a liability insurance.
At Forest Park, the vote was unanimous to recommend only birds and fish or a seeing-eye dog.

One resident of Stokke Tower, Neva Gautsch, wrote to Proxmire of her opposition to pets in high rises. The senator responded with understanding, but remained firm in his conviction that animals be allowed.

Thank you for taking the time to write me regarding your views on the recently-enacted Pet Bill. While I can understand your opposition to having pets around, I know you are aware that there are many older people who want — and need — the companionship of a pet. Recent medical research tells us that many old people live longer and more happily if they have a pet companion.

The new law simply prohibits the arbitrary ban on pets which project managers have imposed. At the same time, it specifically reserves to management, the right to set reasonable rules and, if necessary, to order the removal of pets which endanger others or are nuisances.

The new law seeks to recognize both individual rights and responsibilities. It relies on the reasonable need of people to resolve problems and differences of opinion. I am confident that reasonable rules for keeping of pets can be developed and administered, and that they will afford many older persons great health and happiness.

Joseph Becker was in favor of the pets, according to a report of the December 27, 1984, Housing Authority meeting. “A pet, after all, for our elderly persons is a good companion, and I’ve been sympathetic to that for a long time,” he said.

A La Crosse Tribune article about the meeting noted a discussion about a python that had gotten loose in a private boarding house in Milwaukee and, at that time, hadn’t been seen since.
"It's still slithering around in that apartment house," Wiemerslage noted.

She noted that the day a python is in a high-rise is the day she considers quitting her job. "And I hope we don't see any baboons or raccoons," she said. "We're not talking about South America. We're talking about La Crosse, Wisconsin."

Jane Alberts remembered going to state Housing Authority association meetings and finding directors "up in arms" about the idea of pets in elderly housing projects. "They were upset. They couldn't see how they could manage to keep control of dogs in elevators. They worried about dogs biting residents and the possibility of lawsuits."

There have been no pythons, raccoons or baboons in La Crosse's high rises, according to Alberts. The dogs, cats, birds, and fish that are there have been, for the most part, good neighbors and good companions. Rules require residents to care for their pets inside and out. They pay a refundable $250 pet deposit when they move in that, so far, has always been returned in full. Currently there are about 20 pets in the high rises in La Crosse. "We have never had to ask residents to get rid of a pet because it is causing problems," she said.
‘We need a roof over our heads’

Angie Wiemerslage, Executive Director, 1973-89.

Frank Grover, Executive Director, 1957-73.
Mention Angie Wiemerslage's name and big smiles and a little trembling follow. Angie, executive director for the Housing Authority from 1973 until her retirement on December 28, 1989, inspired both feelings in those who knew her, along with a very healthy dose of admiration. Even HUD officials commented they dreaded taking her on about issues.

"HUD officials told me they would shake when they were told to call Angie. They hated having to call La Crosse for an answer to a question," Jane Alberts said.

Wiemerslage, who had a mind that held practically every detail about every project, always claimed to know an answer, even on those rare occasions when she didn't. "She would work to get it," Alberts said, "and then call back."

Steve Porath, director of the HUD Office of Public Housing, said he had great respect for Wiemerslage in the year or so he worked with her before her retirement. "Our role is to serve folks like Angie and Jane to help them be successful. Angie always knew all her stuff. It sure made us want to be up to her standards whenever she interacted with us."

Porath had a vivid memory of Wiemerslage "leading the charge against welfare fraud. She was a character."

A character she was. Jane Alberts recalled a picture of Angie Wiemerslage, clad in hard hat and white cowboy boots, gripping ropes on a scaffold as it was pulled up to Stokke Tower, which was then under construction. "She was going to go up there, hell or high water," Alberts said. "She was going up to see what's going on. Her hands clung to the rope."

Wiemerslage was very much a hands-on director, scaffolding and all. Part of her role was to interview workers
on construction sites for HUD reports. “She was always on the site during construction,” Alberts said.

Donald J. Anthony, now the Housing Authority’s maintenance engineer, had vivid memories of Wiemerslage arriving on a construction site, wearing a hard hat, an eel-skin coat and white cowboy boots that she kept in the trunk of her car for impromptu inspections. “I wish we still had those cowboy boots. I’d put them in a glass case,” he said.

During one inspection of construction of Forest Park when there were only decks on the floors, she had to go up and down via the elevator shaft in a contraption that was pulled with ropes. After the visit, she discovered one of her diamond earrings was missing. “She got alarmed,” Anthony said. “Ten to 12 grown men went down on hands and knees digging in sand and rubble, looking for her earring. The men respected her,” Anthony said. “She would go down there and wouldn’t flinch.”

The earring was not found on the site. Instead, when she took off her jacket back at the office, the earring fell out.

Wiemerslage was strong, firm in her beliefs, and tenacious. Wiemerslage’s belief was simple... the local Housing Authority knew better than the state and federal government.

“Angie walked to her own tune a lot of time,” said John Franzen, executive director of the Oshkosh Housing Authority. “When she was at odds with the old Wisconsin Housing Finance Authority or HUD, itself, I don’t know if it created problems for her in her own community. In doing so, she certainly ran her program the way she wanted it run. After working in public housing for more than 25 years, I find myself in many cases doing the same thing.”

Peter Terranova, who retired in 1991 as Wisconsin’s Acting Director of Public Housing for Wisconsin, noted La Crosse had three projects when he first met Angie and seven or eight when she retired.
“She knew what she had to do to get her projects built,” he said. “One of the hallmarks of her buildings is they were always well looked after, well maintained.”

Wiemerslage also knew how to have fun. “She and I led a conga line through a hotel at one annual convention for housing authorities,” he said. “We sure had a lot of fun together.”

Fear was mixed in with the respect her staff had for her. “She scared me,” said Rosemary Brechwald, a secretary at the Housing Authority from 1967 until her retirement in 1981, although she continued to work part time for a few years. “She had a whole different way of doing things — her way — and you had better learn it.”

Brechwald and Alberts were secretaries whose desks were just outside Wiemerslage’s door. Often they overheard heated telephone discussions coming from Wiemerslage’s office.

“We would look at each other and worry about who was going to get it,” Alberts said with a smile.

Wiemerslage was never after vengeance; she just wanted to know about a problem so it could be corrected. If a staff member fessed up, the executive director often shouldered responsibility herself.

“Angie used to say, ‘Just tell me if you did it wrong. If you did it wrong, we will fix it’,” Alberts said.

“You may have goofed up big time on something with a tenant,” Brechwald continued. “You might have calculated rent wrong. She might glower at you a little bit. But if you were honest, she would take the responsibility for it. She didn’t want to be in the dark for something that could come up later,” Brechwald added. “She didn’t want anything to be kept from her. We never did that, did we, Jane?”

“No way,” Alberts said.

Wiemerslage joined the Housing Authority staff a few months before Alberts in 1968 after working as a highly-efficient legal secretary for the Hale Skemp law firm in La Crosse.
“She did a wonderful job,” said Becker, a member of that firm until he joined another in 1972. “She was not always the most diplomatic person. She would ruffle feathers, but she got the job done and she got the job done well. Jane Alberts recounted the time she had to bring materials and mail to her boss who was in the hospital following eye surgery. When budget time came, Alberts also had to bring the eight-page document to her. “I remember having to read that entire budget to her, line item by line item,” Alberts recalled at the time of Wiemerslage’s death in 1995.

During a time when the Housing Authority was constantly building new projects, Wiemerslage and Brechwald made house calls on applicants to make sure they really needed the housing. Frequently as they walked the streets of La Crosse, they’d run into members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, whose faith required them to witness door-to-door.

“We’d always run into the same two,” Brechwald said. “They had a clipboard and we had a clipboard. We’d just chuckle, not making fun, but we called ourselves the Sister Marys of the La Crosse Housing Authority.”

After Alberts succeeded Wiemerslage as executive director, the former executive director and current executive director of the authority had conversations about Housing Authority operations. When Alberts talked about the difficulty of evicting a tenant or taking an employee to task, Wiemerslage told her simply: “You have a job to do, not a personality contest to win.” That was a defining statement.

La Crosse has been blessed with a relatively low eviction record, in great part because of Wiemerslage’s firmness and fairness with tenants about paying their rents. Still, there were times when evictions had to occur.

Housing Authority Chair Roland Solberg remembered one eviction that had to occur on December 24th or the entire six-month eviction process would have to start again. “Not
one of us who was involved felt good about it. I remember Angie looking at us and saying that it had to be done,” Solberg said. “But she really didn’t enjoy that Christmas.”

Wiemerslage was the proverbial tough-on-the-outside, warm-on-the-inside person. Alberts is warm on the outside but can be just as tough when she needs to be.

“You get the same total package with both of them,” attorney Tom Sleik said. “But they present themselves in entirely different ways. Jane is a public relation’s person’s delight. She is extremely credible, a really nice person. Angie was a public relations person’s concern. As a spokesperson, she could be so blunt.”

Among ways that Wiemerslage demonstrated her compassion was how she dealt with the tenants, particularly the older ones. After the Housing Authority office moved to the first floor of Stokke Tower on the South Side in 1968, Brechwald was told how important it was to say hello to the older residents and smile. “She said ‘That may be the only hello they get that day.’ It was true.”

Of course the other side of being friendly to the older residents was the difficulty of breaking away from them once conversations began. They would sometimes keep talking to Brechwald in the morning for 15 minutes or longer, delaying her morning entrance to the office for the day. “Angie would be listening to this and be waiting for me when I came in,” Brechwald recalled with a smile. “She’d say, ‘You had to ask, didn’t you?’ I’d say, ‘I was only doing what you told me to do.’”

Wiemerslage frequently called Brechwald, “Pollyanna Rosemary” because she always saw the good in people.

“There were so many terrible things, a lot of sad stories,” Brechwald said. “So many times people would come in and simply didn’t have a place to live. They waited a long time on waiting lists when finally an apartment was available for them.”
Alberts' classic story of the compassion Wiemerslage had inside of her was of a woman who had nothing in her apartment other than one chair, a table, and a bed. She would sit the entire day in the lobby and then return to her apartment at night.

"She clutched her little purse. People kind of picked on her. Angie really liked that person," Alberts said. "I can remember Angie went to her apartment one day because she was ill. She had to make the call to go by ambulance to the doctor. Angie stood by the elevator with her. I could see tears coming down Angie's face. That surprised me, but that was Angie Wiemerslage."

Roland Solberg agreed. "She had a hard outside shell so that she could handle the tenants in certain situations, but she also had compassion for the people. She'd go to bat for them with the board."

There were times Wiemerslage would bring in items from her own home to help a family. "She wouldn't want word to get out. It would be a nick in her armor," Solberg said.

Alberts remembered a closeness to residents when the Housing Authority offices were in Stokke. "You were close to the people. It was much like a family. You had really close relationships with the elderly in the early years."

Sometimes, Brechwald and Alberts found themselves in the role of giving advice to tenants, particularly those who lived in family housing. They'd notice some families who received Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps were buying junk food instead of healthy foods. "We'd try to tell them to buy a chicken and put it in the pot," Brechwald said.

For a number of years, Stokke residents had at least one item on their grocery list — eggs — delivered to them. Alberts and Brechwald are not sure who started the practice, but a woman they called the "egg lady" delivered fresh eggs to sell to residents each week in Stokke Tower. "It was a service for tenants who couldn't get out," Alberts said.
The egg lady, who may have known Wiemerslage in La Crescent, Minnesota, where both lived, sold her eggs in the lobby of the Housing Authority and, if she had any left over, would leave them on Brechwald’s desk. Residents would call down and ask for some to be held for them. Even Daley would call home and say, “I’m at the Housing Authority. Do we need any eggs?”

Brechwald and Alberts did not take a cut in the egg action but simply helped by enabling the sales to occur in the building, sometimes from their desks. The egg business became too much for Wiemerslage.

“It got out of hand,” Brechwald said.

“When we started taking orders from another high rise, Angie said to get those eggs out of there,” Alberts added.

Bill Schultz, retired maintenance engineer for the Milwaukee office of HUD, noticed the close relationships between staff and tenants when he made his rounds each year to inspect housing projects. “I got to know those folks quite well. La Crosse was one of my favorite housing authorities,” he said. “They were just good people ... Angie, Jane and Jack Herberlein all were great people.”

Schultz joined HUD in 1972, just before Wiemerslage was named executive director in 1973. He respected her determination to do what was best for La Crosse. “Angie would bother HUD to get as much money out of them as she could,” he said. “She did a good job.”

He also recalled Wiemerslage encouraging all her employees to improve themselves, even if it meant leaving the Housing Authority for another job. The only exception was Alberts.

“There was no way in hell she would let Jane get out of the Housing Authority. She was willing to help anybody else go elsewhere, but not Jane.” he said.

The only upward movement that Wiemerslage wanted for Alberts was to be her successor. HUD rules required the Housing Authority to advertise the position and it did. The
Board of Commissioners still felt they had the best candidate inside — Jane Alberts. After Alberts took over as executive director, Wiemerslage helped her make the transition by coming in several times a week.

Schultz told the story of how he would inspect the buildings in jeans, but change to dress clothes for board meetings. On one occasion, Wiemerslage told the serious Peter Terranova, who retired as HUD’s acting director of public housing, to be sure to tell Schultz “his pants are hanging in my closet.” Terranova was flustered about the message, not realizing immediately that the pants were in the office closet.

In an interview at the time of her retirement, Wiemerslage spoke of a far different era in public housing for Alberts than she had. The vast sums of construction money for public housing projects available in past decades had dried up at the end of her tenure.

“There have been more projects built by private developers. That’s how it should be,” Wiemerslage said. “Private developers should be providing this type of housing.”

Instead of new construction, the Housing Authority was authorized to participate in a voucher program in which qualified applicants rent private rental property that meets certain standards. Tenants with vouchers still pay 30 percent of their income in rent, with the authority voucher paying the difference between that sum and the rent charged by the landlord.

Wiemerslage also noted changes in demand for housing, particularly for older persons whose economic status and health had changed tremendously over the years. “People who are 65 today are much more vigorous than people [age 65] 15 years ago,” she said in that interview. “They are more solvent, more able to stay on in their own home.”

She noted many of those who lived in family units in the 1950s and 1960s were military veterans studying under the GI bill and raising children while working for their college
degrees. Hmong families living in the units in the 1980s showed the same determination as the veterans of the previous era.

Wiemerslage described the Housing Authority work as fulfilling. "It's always good to feel you're able to help your fellow man have a better or decent lifestyle."
Christmas at the office, from left: Rosemary Brechwald, secretary, John Heberlein and Charlotte Bute, administrative assistant.
Awards, awards and more awards

Housing Authorities across the country have had their share of troubles, particularly in large cities where projects with hundreds of apartments in a building were built. These buildings, little more than warehouses, led to unsanitary conditions, vandalism, and other crimes. In some cities, the problems were so severe, the federal government could do little more than tear the buildings down and start again. Among the most notable was St. Louis’ Pruet-Eigo, which was highly publicized for its terrible conditions and the implosion that brought what was left of it down in the late 1970s.

La Crosse’s projects, with a much lower density than in larger cities, always were well maintained. The crime and eviction rates were relatively low; and the turnover in family housing is such that the projects are viewed as temporary, rather than permanent living arrangements.

Wanting to recognize housing authorities that were performing well, the Department of Housing and Urban development in 1985 gave out its first management awards. The La Crosse Housing Authority was named number one in the country in its mid-size category.

"Too often it is your less industrious, less conscientious, more irresponsible colleagues who make news," said HUD Secretary Samuel H. Pierce, Jr., the award presenter.

Pierce said HUD has had a fine record that should be a source of pride. "But just as importantly, each of you — yes the award recipients in this room — you, too, should be proud of it ... for you’ve been a major part of it. You haven’t simply led — you’ve triumphed. You haven’t just invested time for your career — you’ve invested the best of yourselves and the finest of the human spirit," Pierce said.
In a news release about the awards, Pierce said, “Through innovation and commitment, these public housing agencies are fostering not only individual pride but are delivering to taxpayers a good return on their housing investment.”

That award followed another honor given that year by the Milwaukee area office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in October 1985. La Crosse was honored as the best housing authority in Wisconsin.

That award was based on the authority’s financial records, occupancy rates, rent collections, maintenance of projects, spending and energy conservation efforts.

Mayor Patrick Zielke was among those quoted at the time of the state award. “I am very pleased and proud of the way that they have provided housing for so many elderly people,” he said. “We would really be in dire straits today if it wouldn’t be for the Housing Authority.”

In a La Crosse Tribune article on October 17, 1985, Zielke went on to credit the commission and its 20-member staff. “We’ve always thought it [the Housing Authority] was one of the greatest,” he said, “but when we receive an award like this from the HUD office which recognizes not only the ability to manage it but the providing of that many units not only for the elderly but for low income people, I think it is tremendous.”

Roland Solberg, also quoted in that article, noted two factors for La Crosse’s success. The first was Wiemerslage, whom he called the best executive director in the United States. The second was the cooperation of city officials.

“We haven’t always agreed on the sites and that, but when we’ve had something to discuss, we’ve been able to go to the mayor and the council and talk about our needs and the mayor and the council have been very, very cooperative,” Solberg said. “I think if you look at the histories of a lot of communities, everyone likes public housing, but they want it somewhere else. That has not been the case in La Crosse.”
At the request of HUD, several Housing Authority Commissioners and Wiemerslage went to Washington to accept the national award at a conference that included educational talks. Financing for the trip came from income the Housing Authority took in through its rent.

_La Crosse Tribune_ reporter Monte Hanson took the Housing Authority to task for the trip in an article entitled, "Elderly and poor fund panel's dining, travel."

One day early this month, four people from the La Crosse Housing Authority boarded an airplane and headed for Washington D.C. Their destination was the Holiday Inn Capital for a ceremony the following morning honoring the top 29 housing authorities across the country, including La Crosse.

The event, held practically in the shadow of the Washington Monument, featured speeches, award presentations, picture-taking and lots of back-patting for a job well done.

... It also was an event that has drawn the attention of some critics, who contend the people who went to Washington should have paid their own way.

Hanson did not stop with the Washington conference. He went on to criticize the Housing Authority for having its meetings in the La Crosse Club, the private club that had its rooms adjacent to the Radisson La Crosse Hotel:

... which has a members-only sign at the front door that may discourage people from attending the meetings that are officially open to the public. None of this is illegal, hidden or violates federal standards. But some people are raising questions about the propriety of how the authority functions in comparison with other government agencies.
Joseph Becker (left) and Angie Wiemerslage (right), accepted a Performance Award in Washington, D.C., in 1986, from an unknown HUD official.

Joseph Becker, then chairman of the authority, said the trip to Washington and the lunch meetings did not cost taxpayers anything. The money came from the $1 million a year collected in rents.

"We don't get paid anything at all. Our work is absolutely gratis," Commissioner Margaret Annett said. "I mean, all year long, we don't get a cent out of this thing."

One La Crosse commissioner fanned the flames by suggesting meeting at the La Crosse Club certainly was better.
than meeting at McDonald's, an argument that ironically was used a few years earlier by a state Housing Authority leader who was called to task.

Jean Broeren, the executive director of the Wisconsin Housing Finance Authority whom Wiemerslage had fought to free Forest Park in 1979, was accused of running up meal, travel and hotel bills totaling $23,610 in a 2-1/2 year period. "I'm not going to take the chairman of the board to McDonald's for lunch," Jean Broeren told the Milwaukee Sentinel in 1981, just a few months before his planned retirement.

In the La Crosse Tribune article in 1985, Wiemerslage weighed in without apology about the La Crosse group attending the national meeting in Washington, D.C. "I'm not going to be a bit humble. I think we're doing a damn good job," she said, adding state and national meetings of public Housing Authority staff were learning opportunities. "The interplay and exchange of information is invaluable," she said.

Hal Scheie, then a critic of city government, also was quoted in the article, accusing the Housing Authority of "living high off the hog" by having lunch at the La Crosse Club with rental payments that many people barely can afford to pay. "Public meetings in a private club? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? How many elderly people would feel comfortable going there?"

Hanson went even further in his journalistic tongue-lashing of the authority. He noted buildings, including Becker Plaza, Solberg Heights and Margaret Annett Day Care Center, were named after current commissioners and Grover Estates, Mullen Homes and Stokke Tower were named after retired members. He added Dick Record and Donald Iverson were the only current members then without buildings named after them.
The article resulted in a fury of letters to the editor, including one from Marc Ranger, a La Crosse realtor, who wrote passionately in support of the Housing Authority:

Your reporter obviously took many statements out of context and deliberately turned a phrase to make his hard-hitting investigative reporting more shocking. Look deeper and he doesn’t have a story. Talk to more citizens that are closer to the events that have enabled the La Crosse Housing Authority to become recognized as one of the nation’s best and he doesn’t have a story. Talk with the elderly and subsidized renters in one of our many (you’ll notice he only mentioned those named after commissioners) Housing Authority apartment complexes and there would be no story.

In fact, the only story in this is the fact that La Crosse benefitted from the dedicated efforts of these truly outstanding civic contributors.... Let’s face it, these people have done a truly outstanding job. These people have not done an illegal or unethical thing. They have given so much to the low income and elderly in this community only because they were asked to serve and unselfishly they did so. I hope that every building they build in the future will be named after commission members who haven’t yet been recognized. Who should we name the buildings after, the Tribune’s advertising manager?

Other letter writers were less supportive, including the fiery Hal Scheie, who wrote:

The bizarre idea that they deserve something for the thousands of hours of their volunteered time makes me think of my mother who, for at least the last 25 years, has also given thousands of hours of her time doing volunteer work at St. Francis Hospital and I can’t recall one time when she sat with other volunteers backslapping each other and voting to
take patient money for lunch, to travel to accept a meaningless award or to name buildings after one another.

Paul Zoellmer claimed to write for the taxpayer, although taxpayer money was not involved. "All of this boils down to one easy question: Are the taxpayers in this day of already outrageous taxation able to afford the luxury of public officials treating themselves above the constituency they are supposed to serve?"

Kim M. Pierce, who congratulated Hanson on good investigative reporting, asked four questions, including why Zielke had not appointed a poor or elderly person to the Housing Authority, especially one who lived in one of the projects.

"Although I do not live in one of the housing projects, I do have a low income, and would like to submit my name for consideration for an appointment; it may be my only chance for a country-club lunch and 'Pierce Plaza' has a nice ring to it," she wrote.

Others came to the defense of the Housing Authority, including Phil Dyer, who wrote to congratulate the authority on "a job well done, and I am happy that they had the opportunity and thrill of going to Washington to accept their award.

"I would also like to thank them for years of silent, devoted service to La Crosse and area, and efficiency of operation of housing units. They have set a standard of operation for every board in the city and county of La Crosse. They have realized that bigger isn't better, and spending and spending is no solution. ...Yes, they could have created their own little empire, as others have done, but they didn't. All they did was do their job, and they did it very, very well. So have a good lunch, Angie, you've certainly earned it," he concluded.

David D. Baptie, a partner in the firm that did accounting for the Housing Authority, also spoke out in a letter to the
editor. “Your criticism of these Housing Authority commissioners who give annually thousands and thousands of hours of services without compensation is wholly uncalled for,” he wrote. “In the interest of fair journalism, let me ask you to review the travel, entertainment and convention expenses of La Crosse Tribune officers and the officers of Lee Enterprises, Ltd., for the last three years. Publish this with names, places and amounts as you did in Sunday’s article and print it under the headline ‘Tribune readers fund Tribune officers’ dining, travel.’”

More than a decade later, Ranger still felt passionate about what he believed was a wrong leveled against the Housing Authority. As a landlord he knew there was no way he could provide the same level of services as the rent levels of the Housing Authority. “It is absolutely necessary,” he said of the Housing Authority Services. “I sold a home for a woman who went into a Housing Authority building who, when her things were sold on a Saturday afternoon, got $800. If she had to live on her savings and Social Security and that $800 from selling her possessions, she couldn’t do it and her family couldn’t help her.”

An even broader issue, Ranger said, was how articles of that type discouraged volunteerism. The Housing Authority commissioners did not volunteer their time for power or recognition even if buildings were named after some of them.

“As we become critical of people who do these kinds of things, it will be harder to find people who will volunteer if they are worried about somebody nipping at their heels,” he said. “They will start to believe it is not worth the effort. We will lose our real volunteers, people who put in hours and hours and hours.”

Roland Solberg said he never felt completely comfortable with holding the meetings at the La Crosse Club, but they were an outgrowth of the meetings at the old Stoddard Hotel in the 1970s. When La Crosse’s once most luxurious hotel
was in serious decline — it was demolished in 1982 — the La Crosse Club, which met in the Stoddard, began bringing in sandwiches for its members. It was natural for the La Crosse Housing Authority to get sandwiches from the club as well. Then, when the club moved to the Radisson Hotel, the Housing Authority meetings were invited along with it. Today, Housing Authority meetings are held in the authority offices at 1307 Badger Street. Members dine there on sandwiches brought in from the nearby Subway store.

The lunches may have changed, but the management of the Housing Authority continues in its same positive direction. The La Crosse Housing Authority won the state HUD office's Management Award Sustained Performance Awards in 1994, 1995, and again in 1996. And because La Crosse scored 100 points out of 100 possible on a performance standard for the third year in a row, it was honored in Washington, D.C.

The awards show "we care about people and take good care of our facilities and we do it our way," said former La Crosse Mayor Patrick Zielke. "We are careful of the dollars and getting our money's worth out of that program."

"We are very happy with this Housing Authority," said Steve Porath, Director of HUD's Office of Public Housing. "It is very unusual."

Porath said Wisconsin, in general, has well-run housing authorities. He knows that because he and other officials assigned to Wisconsin frequently are loaned as consultants to other states, including Louisiana, Michigan, Connecticut and New York, which do not run as smoothly. There they find "political gamesmanship going on," including commissioners putting their own family members in projects in some cities.

"We don't do that in Wisconsin. Folks take their responsibilities on the Board of Commissioners very seriously. La Crosse is a perfect example of that," he said. "La Crosse does everything that the rest of the Housing Authorities [in Wisconsin] do, but they do it very carefully and with a lot of
thought. They run themselves as a business and it really shows.”

Del Reynolds, state coordinator for HUD, agreed. "La Crosse consistently does well ... It is not just in tone and spirit, but hard numbers show their excellent performance.”

Reynolds, who toured La Crosse's public housing projects in the late 1980s, said he was impressed by how well they were maintained and how pleased residents were. "They seemed outgoing, certainly satisfied from a customer's point of view.”

Leighton Lee, a Housing Authority housing inspector, is in every unit at least once a year as required by HUD. "We want to make sure every apartment is in good shape, that nothing is broken," he said. "We want to make sure everything is working properly and there is general cleanliness.”

Inspections of a high rise apartment are never performed unless the resident is there. For family housing, the Housing Authority posts a notice of intent to inspect the property. If the family is not present, two staff members enter the apartment together. All units are inspected before a new tenant is given the key to the apartment.

Most inspections show the property is in good working order, although there are times when a resident is given a week to correct a problem that is his or her responsibility. General maintenance, however, is the responsibility of Housing Authority staff, a duty that is taken seriously.

"When we turn over a unit, it is perfect. There are things we expect to be maintained by the tenant and things that we maintain," Alberts said. "We do have high expectations for our tenants. I was brought up with the old idea that soap is cheap. To keep a property well maintained, the Housing Authority has to have a role in that and so do the tenants.”

Don Anthony, the Housing Authority's maintenance engineer, said there has been a commitment to quality construction and maintenance for all the years he's been
associated with the Housing Authority. HSR, the architects for Housing Authority projects, hired him in 1967 as a drafter, a job that involved working on some of the drawings for Mullen Homes.

After two years military service, Anthony returned to HSR and was assigned to be clerk of the works for Sauber Manor. His role was to make sure everything was done correctly on the project. Later he worked on Becker Plaza, Forest Park, Ping Manor, and Solberg Heights as full time superintendent. He joined the Housing Authority staff in 1990.

"The dramatic thing is the quality of the people at the Housing Authority," he said. "They've always been dynamic people. They've always had a real drive to do things the right way."

As buildings have been remodeled, Anthony said Alberts has shown a commitment to make the buildings attractive as well as efficient. Having the facilities more attractive with coordinated colors and wallpaper adds to the pride residents feel in their buildings.
The awards keep coming. Commissioner John Flynn and Executive Director Jane Alberts with the Housing Authority's 1996 HUD Management award for Sustained Performance.
Reasons for success

In 1975, a reporter from the *Quad Cities Times* in Davenport, Iowa, was sent to La Crosse to do a story on why the La Crosse Housing Authority was so successful, while Davenport's was not. "While Davenport debates, flounders, and generally passes the buck, some communities have moved boldly ahead in public housing. Here is the story of the success of a Wisconsin city that is only half the size of Davenport," wrote reporter Paul Davies.

He quoted architect Robert Hackner, for one, on why the Housing Authority has been so successful. "This La Crosse bunch, I don't think will ever quit," he said. "They've always got an idea, they're always bugging somebody and they're very fluid. And, of course, they're not noted for their lack of guts."

In his comments in the article, Joseph Becker noted the Housing Authority was aggressive in seeking HUD grants, knowing they would be built somewhere else if not in La Crosse. "It certainly isn't going to save the taxpayer of La Crosse anything if these units are built in Alabama or Mississippi or Davenport," Becker said.

And Becker noted the Housing Authority paid $20,000 to the city in 1975 in lieu of taxes on land that had produced less than $1,000 in taxes.

Malcolm Johnson, then director of the La Crosse County Department of Social Services, called the Housing Authority a "God-send" and estimated $90,000 annually was then saved taxpayers "because so many families would be welfare recipients, because of excessive rental charges, if they were not in public housing."
Davies also quoted Helen Huebner, a resident of Stokke Tower, who said "It just seemed like Heaven when we came here."

Today, Hackner is convinced La Crosse was successful in gaining public housing projects because of the commitment of its commissioners. "Schuh was a driver. I don’t think our needs were any greater or less than any other community, but they had the initiative," he said of Housing Authority Board commissioners. "They got more housing because they had more initiative and they had better relationships with bureaucrats."

Because the Housing Authority commissioners cared about how Schuh Homes looked and that it would last, they pressed for exceptions to HUD rules. When the project still came in on time and under budget, La Crosse had a track record to build on — and it did.

No one can overstate the role that the Msgr. Alphonse Schuh played in the Housing Authority’s early success. A highly-intelligent well-spoken man, he brought with him the clout of the Diocese of La Crosse, which later sold the land on which several housing projects were built. Several other equally committed clergy, including Rev. Mullen and Rev. Stoffel, were influential and committed to the cause of decent housing as well.

Becker, who served as a Housing Authority Commissioner until 1986 when he moved to La Crescent, Minnesota, said the support was always ecumenical for the Housing Authority. "We always had support of all the churches, had clergy on the board. We had people who were the movers and shakers in the community."

While there were skirmishes with neighbors or a few small groups on just about every construction project, Becker said the community in general supported public housing after the first building or two.

"The family projects were probably the major contributor as far as getting people off welfare and getting started," he said.
"By the time we built the first high rise, we convinced the 
powers that be that it was a good thing for the taxpayers. We 
were saving the taxpayers lots of money and were fulfilling a 
need that private developers could not afford to meet. Public 
housing is housing of last resort, but it is good housing."

Mayor Zielke, who served 10 years on the La Crosse 
Common Council before serving as mayor from 1975 to 1997, 
said his only concern over the years was whether too many 
public housing units would be built. "Like everything else, 
you can overdo a good thing. We have stopped it at the right 
place in time. We have what we need and they are working 
properly," he said. "I've been supportive of what they're doing. 
They've been a good group. They've done a great job and it's 
not an easy job."

Wiemerslage was a "great person and now Jane is doing a 
super job," Zielke said. Over the years, he'd had his share of 
heated discussions with the late executive director. "I'm sure 
she's the one who came out the better," he said with a smile. 
"She cared about what she was doing and she always knew 
what she was doing. She was tough as nails. She had to be to 
fight Washington."

One source of pride for the La Crosse Housing Authority is 
there are few if any second and third generation tenants in 
family housing. Most stay a few years to get them through a 
rough time, Solberg said. "It is a helping hand. Many people 
who are highly successful have come back and told us they 
would not have made it without the years they spent in 
public housing."

The only exceptions today are persons with disabilities, 
mentally or physically, that prevent them from the kind of 
jobs that would make them financially independent.

Solberg, another commissioner who initially was an 
opponent of public housing, became so dedicated to it that he 
helped La Crosse County begin its own Housing Authority 
and served as its board president for a number of years. The
city and county housing authorities worked cooperatively for many years with the county contracting with the city staff to do its initial management for projects in Bangor, West Salem, Mindoro and Holmen. Later, the county hired its own staff.

"I started off not believing in public housing. At the time, I thought it was just all free places and that people would get in there and not get out. I also thought it was competition with the private sector," he said.

It was former Mayor Warren Loveland who convinced him it was not competition with the private sector, but "housing of the last resort."

"A lot of tenants couldn't afford to be housed in the private sector," Solberg said.

Today, nearly half the family housing apartments are occupied by persons born in Southeast Asia, primarily Hmong refugees from Laos. Because many of these families have five, six or more children, they have made use of the apartments with four and five bedrooms that for a time seemed unnecessary as the size of families declined. One change that had to be made to accommodate Hmong residents is exhaust ventilation because of steam created by their cooking style.

Like many persons who are American born, many Hmong have followed the pattern of living in public housing temporarily and then moving on to home ownership or apartments in the private sector.

Among them was Xay Vang, who came to the United States in 1980. After he started working part time in maintenance for the La Crosse Housing Authority, he moved into Huber Homes in 1985. Vang, now a full-time maintenance staff member, and his wife, Chia, who works at Franciscan Skemp Medical Center, saved money and bought their own home on La Crosse's North Side in 1992.

"It was a very good start," Vang said.
The Housing Authority assisted the Vang family in financing for their home through a HUD program. "It helped me get money to get a better living. Jane [Alberts] and Donnie [maintenance engineer Donald J. Anthony] helped me buy my house. They explained many things to me."

Anthony likes to say that he and Vang were both in Southeast Asia at the same time — Anthony as a U.S. soldier in Vietnam and Vang as a Laotian soldier helping the Americans. Though they never met in Southeast Asia, they do talk about their experiences.

"He has one of the best work ethics I ever saw," Anthony said. "Bar none, he will do anything I ask. Everybody likes him. He fits in well. He is a gentle, kind person, considered one of the elders of his community. The fact that he is in the maintenance department helps a lot with interpretation. He has the respect of the Hmong community and now he is an American taxpayer."

The Vang family is hard at work to make the American dream a reality. One son is studying to be a doctor; another son is studying business. "Education is very important," their father said.

"Xay helps us tremendously," Alberts said. "He is a great asset to our maintenance staff."
Dedicating a new flag for Sauber Manor are: Lorraine Fought (with sunglasses), Mildred Krueger (holding the flag) and Cleo Krueger (next to Mildred Krueger).

He can fix anything. Sauber Manor resident Roy Kampmeier is so handy and helpful, he’s been given space for a workshop. He’s always willing to help residents.
What current high rise residents say

As the third resident to move into Ping Manor in 1981, Lorraine Fought can remember it was a bit lonely at first. “It was an eerie feeling going up on the elevator and having nobody on the whole fourth floor, but me,” she said. “They were only moving in one at a time.”

The loneliness is long over for Fought, the first and still president of the Ping Manor Tenants Association. She has friends on all the floors.

The Ping Manor resident, who once ran Lorraine’s School of Dance in La Crosse and performed on the Kiddies Hour on WKBH Radio, loves her home in Ping Manor. “I don’t have any responsibilities. I don’t have to worry if something goes wrong. I can call the maintenance man and he will fix it.”

Eileen Billings, a Forest Park resident since 1985, agreed. “I don’t have to shovel snow or cut the grass,” said Billings, who was no stranger to the neighborhood when she moved in. “I used to live across the street, the second house from the corner on 13th Street.”

Ruth Oliver, a Forest Park resident since 1994, lived in a duplex but found she could not handle the work any longer. “I didn’t want to put a lot of money into it. I didn’t have a lot of money. This was my best bet,” she said. “It’s convenient. The maintenance man’s there and I have people to talk to if I want to talk.”

Joy Hanson, Sauber Manor Tenant Association president, appreciates not having to do lawn maintenance or snow shoveling. “I have a lot of company. You can be alone or join different things. I like it really well.”

Why do residents live in the high rises? Many are widows or
widowers who no longer wish to or are able to care for their homes; others have physical challenges requiring special facilities.

To live in one of the high rises, a person must be 62 years or older unless the tenant has a handicap or disability.

Income limits in 1997 for one person in all of the buildings except for Solberg Heights is $22,450 a year and $25,650 for two persons. At Solberg, the limit is $14,040 in annual income for one person and $16,040 for two persons. Tenants pay rent that equals 30 percent of their income.

All of the high rises offer these services:

- a live-in custodian
- transportation to and from area grocery stores
- bus stop near each high rise
- minibus on call
- noon meals Monday through Friday at five of the seven high rises
- newspaper delivery
- mail delivery and mail pickup six days a week
- dairy delivery
- weekly fire alarm checks
- monthly newsletter to keep residents informed of upcoming events and new information
- an active tenant organization which arranges activities
- Housing Authority Tenant Services Department available for assistance with Homestead Credit filing; setting up housekeeping services, home care providers, delivery of meals by Meals on Wheels, nursing services and other resource referrals.
- an “I’m OK” Program — a daily check to see if residents are “OK.”
- a pet policy, which allows dogs, cats, fish and birds in the high rises.
Views from family housing

For Dawn Bernard, living in the Housing Authority's Grover Estates allowed her to make it through Viterbo College.

"No one likes to be in low income housing, yet it was a tremendous help to be able to have something (with payments) adjusted to my income," said Bernard, who graduated in February 1997 and was looking for a teaching job in art at the time she was interviewed.

Bernard, who has one daughter, age 4, "was highly motivated to get through school. I hope to succeed in the teaching profession."

Bernard, who moved into Grover Estates in 1994, said it was a learning experience for her. "It took me a long time before I was not embarrassed and would tell my friends and be honest that I was receiving food stamps and living in low income housing. But people shouldn't be ashamed for their circumstances if they need to have help."

It is better to accept help on a short-term basis and gain the education needed for a good job than to drop out of college, she said. "I eventually would have gotten my degree, but it would have taken me twice as long if not longer," she said.

Bernard said it is "just great that there is the opportunity for low income housing for people who need it, who are not just using the system but have a goal."

Lisa Bina, who has two young children, can remember the first time she had to apply for welfare after her partner's problems led to their filing bankruptcy. She remembers how rudely she felt she was treated during the application process.
“I told myself that if I ever get myself out of this mess, I wanted that job,” she said.

Bina, who left her partner and now lives in Huber Homes, does work for La Crosse County Department of Human Services as a support specialist or caseworker for child support. An upbeat person, she knows how it feels to be on the other side of the desk and tries to be sensitive to the applicants.

Bina said the Housing Authority has been “wonderful. It was a blessing that I was able to move in. The kids have lots of friendships and we are close to work and to school and their friends.”

Her rent has been rising with her income, making it hard to save for a down payment on her own home. She now pays $368 a month in rent, compared to about $86 when she moved in. Even with rent payments adjusted to her income rather than the higher rent of privately-owned housing, it is still tough to make ends meet. When she does have money left over, there always seems to be a new challenge, such as buying boots for the children. “I just don’t seem to get ahead,” she said.

Still, she has the dream to own her own home, something she knows will be challenging. “The Housing Authority has given me security. If I go off in my own house, I won’t have someone to repair the toilet. I’ll be responsible for maintenance.”

Income limits for family housing are:
- $22,450 for one person
- $25,650 for two persons
- $28,850 for three persons
- $32,100 for four persons
- $34,650 for five persons
- $37,200 for six persons
- $39,800 for seven persons
- $42,350 for eight persons
Family housing residents have available to them a variety of services, including:

- Maintenance staff available during the week for repairs and if a tenant is locked out without a key.
- Maintenance person on call weekends in case of emergencies.
- Monthly newsletter to keep residents informed of upcoming events and new information.
- Active resident organization.
- Bus stop near each housing complex.
- Newspaper delivery.
- Mail delivery/pickup six days a week.
- Resident Services Department, which operates a Recreation Center at Schuh/Mullen Homes and Huber Homes for children and assists with Homestead Credit.
- Headstart Center at Schuh/Mullen Homes.
Two of the workers on the renovation of Schuh Homes in 1997 lived in the housing complex as children. They are: Mike Herold, an employee of Squire Painting, who is working on the steps in one of the apartments, and Pete Johnson, employed by Voss Construction, who stands in a remodeled kitchen.
A look to the future

The years of new construction in public housing are over for all intents and purposes in La Crosse. In addition to limited funding from HUD for new construction, vacant land has long been in short supply within the city limits.

La Crosse did very well during the boom years, building four family projects:

- Schuh Homes, which has 74 units, in the 1400 block of Winneshiek Road, 900 and 1000 blocks of Wood Street, and 1000 block of Redbird Court.
- Mullen Homes, which has 59 units, in the 800 block of Winneshiek Road & the 1300 and 1400 blocks of St. James Street.
- Grover Estates, which has 30 units, in the 1700 block of Taylor Street & the 2900 block of Hamilton Street.
- Huber Homes, with 40 units, in the 1500 and 1600 blocks of Gladys Street and the 2800 block of Huber Court.

It also built seven high rises for the elderly:

- Solberg Heights, with 79 units at 215 South Sixth Street.
- Stokke Tower, 92 units at 421 South Sixth Street.
- Stoffel Court, 76 units at 333 South Seventh Street.
- Becker Plaza, 76 units at 415 South Seventh Street.
- Forest Park, 112 units at 1230 Badger Street.
- Ping Manor, 61 units at 1311 Badger Street.
- Sauber Manor, 100 units at 1025 Liberty Street.

Del Reynolds said he expects the federal government to continue to provide funds to maintain and preserve existing
public housing, but he does not expect new buildings to be constructed. He noted La Crosse has never had an operating subsidy, a grant for additional funds for operations beyond what it receives in rent from its tenants. “It has always carried its weight. That’s a plus. It is solvent, but not by using federal taxpayers for on-going operations.”

Terranova, the retired Acting Director of Public Housing, said he was impressed that La Crosse not only did not take an operating subsidy, it had money left over at the end of the year to pay toward its debt. He believed one reason La Crosse was able to do that is because it had a good mix of renters, including some who had more income and, therefore, their 30 percent of income for rent was higher.

“It was not unusual, but maybe a fourth of housing authorities did that. A lot of housing authorities didn’t. They always needed an operating subsidy to meet their operating expenses,” he said.

Terranova said La Crosse managed to get as many projects as it did because of Wiemerslage’s assertiveness. “She always knew what string to pull to get things done that she wanted,” he said.

The dollars that allowed for new construction no longer are available, but that doesn’t mean the need for public housing has gone away. The many apartment buildings and projects in the private sector have nearly eliminated the waiting list for housing for the elderly.

As of February 1997, there were about 80 older persons on the list, compared with an all-time high of 275. It could take just weeks rather than months or years for a qualified applicant to find housing in an elderly high rise for a qualified applicant.

The shortening waiting list to get into the elderly high rises has led to modernization programs for the buildings. Work already has been done on Stoffel Court, Stokke Tower, and Sauber Manor. Forest Park remodeling has just begun and Becker Plaza is under consideration.
"We have to be competitive," Solberg said. "We've spent a lot of money updating our facilities to make them as good as any out there."

The waiting list for the family housing units is still long and it can take three years for a family to get an apartment, depending on size and if it has priority because of being homeless, veterans, or a city resident. As of February 1997, the waiting list for family units was 234, compared with 400 in 1990.

Instead of building new units, the Housing Authority works to meet the family housing need through vouchers that allow families to find their own housing. Federal funds subsidize 63 percent of the cost of the private housing. About 130 families participate in this program, which requires landlords to bring housing up to certain standards. As of February 1997, there were 363 persons waiting for the vouchers, although some of those persons also were on waiting lists for the housing projects.

It is unclear what the future will bring for the Housing Authority, particularly with Wisconsin Works (W2), the welfare reform program of Gov. Tommy Thompson that went into effect in 1997. With Wisconsin Works, recipients have two years on welfare before they must get off. During that time, they must work in unsubsidized employment, trial jobs, community service jobs, or W2 Transitions positions. While there will be support for child care and health costs during the two years, this support will end.

The question is whether after two years there will be people living in public housing with no job, no support and no way to pay even the 30 percent of income mandated by the program. Or, whether the 30 percent residents pay will cover Housing Authority costs, particularly if their income comes from sub-minimum wage jobs.

"We think what is going to happen to us is that we will end up with the poorest of the poor, the people who can't be trained to work," Alberts said. "Then we really will be housing of the last resort."
Charles Kenneth Smith, a senior operations specialist for HUD, is involved in studying the impact of welfare reform on public housing. One concern is that persons who had been on welfare might become sanctioned, meaning they would lose all their income for not following the W2 requirements. They could end up with no income from which to pay the 30 percent to the Housing Authority. Because of the Housing Authority paying the costs of utilities, the Housing Authority could end up paying out money rather than getting income from tenants. And it's possible there would be no incentive for these individuals to move out since their rent and utilities would be free.

There still remains a tremendous amount of people who are unhoused or underhoused in this country, Solberg said. There will be large numbers of elderly retiring in the next century.

The Housing Authority also has to look creatively at new ways of serving low income people and the elderly. The average age now in one of the high rise buildings is 82. Many of these individuals are 90 or older.

One potential area of services may be transitional living arrangements for older persons who cannot live completely independently but who do not need a nursing home. The Housing Authority could arrange for supportive services, such as meals or nursing care through another agency. Much research needs to be done before a program like this would be a reality. But it is an example of the kind of creative thinking and willingness to tackle community problems that has been a part of the La Crosse Housing Authority's history for more than 50 years.

"To our knowledge, no other public Housing Authority has provided this kind of service," Solberg said. "There is much research to be done before we would begin this kind of program, but we've never been afraid to take on new challenges."
Executive Director Jane Alberts leads Congressman Ron Kind and aide Jennifer Ehlenfeldt on a tour of Schuh Homes in February, 1997.

Margaret Annett at a luncheon that marked her retirement from the Board of Commissioners.
Isabelle Strand, Ragna Olson and Mary Cullen gather outside Stoffel Court.

Marie Conniff and Lorraine Hoffman play cards in the Stoffel Court community room.
Housing Authority Commissioners

Board members and their years of service are:

Dr. C.D. Petersen 1946-1950
L.V. Weisensel 1946-1948
Msgr. A.N. Schuh 1946-1952
Harry Newburg 1946-1947
Stella Trane Jackson 1946-1950
Joel Stokke 1947-1984
Frank H. Grover 1947-1957
Rev. Oscar S. Paulsen 1950-1952
Olga Sauber 1950-1973
Rev. La Vern Hanson 1952-1956
Rev. Thomas Mullen 1952-1968
Harry Huber 1955-1973
Rev. Harold Stoffel 1956-1961
Effie Grupp 1956-1958
Joseph D. Becker 1957-1986
Rev. Paul Servais 1968-1971
Roland Solberg 1971-present
Ray E. Ping 1973-1980
K. Donald Iverson 1980-present
Judge Peter Pappas 1986-1992
Richard Record 1984-1987
John E. Flynn 1987-present
Margaret Annett 1973-1996
Sue Mathy 1992-present
Judy Carpenter 1996-present
Cher Vang and his wife, Mai Chor Lee, stand in the kitchen of their remodeled apartment in Schuh Homes with Carolyn Benson, public housing manager.

Arnold Senn enjoys a quiet moment outside Ping Manor.
## Housing Authority of the City of La Crosse Employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>DATES EMPLOYED</th>
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<td>Darrell Larson</td>
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<td>H. Tom Larson</td>
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<td>Leighton A. Lee</td>
<td>1976-Present</td>
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<td>Marie A. Lenser</td>
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<td>Gregory J. Loetz</td>
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<td>Patricia A. Lyons</td>
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<td>Richard Marcello</td>
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<td>Anne McGough</td>
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<td>Lester Mickelson</td>
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<td>William Mihalovic</td>
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<td>Robert J. Moe</td>
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<td>James Ness</td>
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<td>Susan O'Brien</td>
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<td>1954-1963</td>
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<td>David G. Patros</td>
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<td>Nancy A. Peters</td>
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<td>1972-1976</td>
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<td>Tim A. Quam</td>
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<td>Nancy A. Rinkenberger</td>
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<td>Joan Ross</td>
<td>1977-1982</td>
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Kimberly A. Schmidt      1995-Present       Administrative
Ruth Scholl             1978-1982       Administrative
Dorothy M. Severson     1977-1996       Administrative
Steven P. Staples        1991-Present       Maintenance
Rhonda Sullivan         1995-1996       Resident Services
Carmen E. Switzer        1994-Present       Resident Services
Robert Taylor           1976-1977       Resident Services
Pao K. Vang             1992-Present       Maintenance
Xay D. Vang             1985-Present       Maintenance
Angeline Wiemerslage    1968-1989       Administrative
                          1973-1989       Executive Director
Ginger Wilkinson        1975-1980       Administrative
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It seems like a simple idea . . . providing housing for people living in unsafe and unsanitary conditions or who are unable to meet their bills because of limited income. But, as 'We need a roof over our heads' . . . The Story of the La Crosse Housing Authority describes, the concept was not always popular in La Crosse.

Cries of socialism, unfair competition to landlords and more have been the meat of La Crosse Tribune letters to the editor for the last half century.

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