



A 1940 Barrington Town Warming held in the K-12 Hough Street School.

## Spelling Bees, Barn Raisings and Town Warmings

A HUNGER FOR EDUCATION, CULTURE, AND entertainment must have lingered occasionally in the isolation of the mid-1800s Barrington farming community. The log cabin homes were often miles apart. The founders of Miller Grove, the first settled community that would become Barrington Center and then Barrington, came from the East and knew of the existing culture they left behind for the promise of rich farmlands out West.

“A passing stranger was most welcome with his news from other parts,” said Arnett C. Lines in his book on Barrington’s earliest history. “Spelling bees were a means of social gatherings, as were quilting parties, debating societies, barn raisings, and butchering and putting down meat. Public welfare was naturally a subject of interest, even if only indirectly,” he continued.

Lines was born in 1882, just 17 years after Barrington, relocated to be near the train tracks, was incorporated as a village in 1865. His grandfather was the first elected mayor of Barrington. At some point, Lines began a passionate and comprehensive documentation of everything about Barrington’s history.

The topic of local culture comes up often in Lines’ lengthy and invaluable tome. He continues: “After the township organization in 1850, the young men who had come here from the East as boys and had been growing up in the new West, took a vigorous hold in civic affairs and deported themselves nobly, either as officials or in community building.”

Seventy years later from those early Barrington days came big change on the social and political landscape. Women could now vote thanks to the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920. It would be just one generation later from that amendment that Barrington was on the brink of something significant in American civic affairs. It was called Town Warming.

The first Barrington Town Warming meeting was held in January 1939, a time when the Great Depression showed some promise of easing while World War II was on the horizon. Two civic-minded businessmen of Barrington felt that a need existed – not only in their community, but in America – for a rebirth of the early American town meeting. Taking clues from the earlier Methodist campground meetings and the Chautauqua revivalist models, Barrington’s Town Warmings were a success and may have lit the civic and cultural fire that burns in our community today.

Endorsed by nearly all of the late 1930s and early 1940s Barrington organizations including the churches, newspaper, schools, Junior Women’s Club, library, and Jewel Tea Co., the Town Warmings were “so stimulating, so satisfying, so American” that they continued for several more years. Hosted for about two to three weeks (with meetings each and every night starting in late January), they attracted the nation’s most influential business, religious, academic, and civic leaders who, in turn, stated enthusiastically that these meetings ought to happen all across the United States following Barrington’s successful model.

Dr. William L. Stidger, a speaker in 1942, said this: “The spirit of Barrington’s Town Warming is the most unusual, inspiring, and heartening thing I know about that is happening in this nation. Another significant thing about it is that it is needed to build morale and patriotism for these trying days.” U

*Editor’s note: If you enjoyed this story, order your copy of Quintessential Barrington’s special edition, due February 2015. This special edition is the official publication for the 2015 Sesquicentennial. Order forms are available at Village Hall at 200 S. Hough St., or online at [www.qbarrington.com](http://www.qbarrington.com).*