Presenting...Backus Kids Club!

The already busy Backus building has added another activity to its bustling schedule: the Backus Kids Club (BKC). This program provides a fun, academic, and active environment for kids ages 5-12. The mornings are set aside for academic activities such as reading, handwriting, and some math games. The afternoons are full of field trips and outdoor recesses (weather permitting, of course). Breakfast and lunch are provided through the Summer Food Service Program (see article below).

So far, the Backus Kids have enjoyed paddling around the high school pool, browsing through books at the Public Library, walking to Riverside Park, and even working on a scavenger hunt at Voyageurs National Park for an afternoon. That’s not all Backus Kids Club Coordinator, Julie Talmage, has up her sleeve. Trips to City Beach and an alpaca ranch are just a glimpse of the sights these kids will see!

Room 208 has become a welcome and familiar sight with over forty-five kids of this community. They enjoy the company of each other as well as the supervision of a caring teacher and aide.

Backus Kids Club has grown tremendously in its first month; we hope to see its continued growth and success throughout the summer and fall.

To enroll your child in the Backus Kids Club, contact the office or email hoasobczynski@backusab.org.

Did you know we’re providing free meals?!

Thanks to a new, fully operating kitchen and several grants, this summer we began providing meals June 7 to kids (ages 1 to 18) through the Summer Food Service Program. We will continue to provide breakfast and lunch until August 31.

Breakfast is served from 7:45 to 8:15; and lunch is available from 11:45 to 1:15. Just step right up to the kitchen window and our cook will provide you with “a nutritious and healthy meal” to eat. Those over 18 may purchase a lunch ticket in the office. Look for “Kids Eat Free Flyers” or contact the office for more information.
This summer our community is celebrating 100 years of papermaking in International Falls. That endeavor was begun by Edward Wellington Backus in 1910 under the name of the Minnesota & Ontario Paper Company and continues today under the corporate name of Boise Paper. E.W. Backus was a risk-taker, an entrepreneur, a visionary, and referred to International Falls as a “city of destiny.” In many ways the original group of citizens who organized and formed “Citizens for Backus/AB” to save the AB and Backus buildings from destruction, exemplified those same characteristics. Today, thanks to their vision, risk-taking and hard work, the Backus Community Center is a vital part of our community’s cultural and economic life.

At the annual meeting of the Koochiching County Historical Society recently, I asked Mr. Bill Beck, author of *The Mill At The Falls*, why more place names in Minnesota did not bear the name of “Backus.” (Outside of our own local building and Backus, Minnesota – I can think of no others.) Mr. Beck’s reply was that had E.W. Backus not died shortly after losing his company and when he was bankrupt, more attention would have been paid to him. He was perhaps viewed as a “loser” and not remembered for the success he had achieved and the impact of his accomplishments.

Apparently Backus, as well as his son Seymour, were well thought of in International Falls at the time. E.W. died of a heart attack at the Vanderbilt Hotel in New York on October 30, 1934 and his only remaining son died of a heart attack in Florida on June 30, 1936. The school board chose to name the new junior high school being constructed in 1936-37 in honor of E.W. Backus in spite of the fact that his holdings had passed into receivership in 1931 with a personal loss to Backus estimated at $50 million.

Thinking back to the “turn of the century” – the years of 2000 to 2002 – we may forget that the fate of the AB and Backus buildings hung in the balance. The school district was abandoning the buildings. Community members and local government were divided over demolition versus re-use of the complex. What a shame it would have been to demolish and consign to a landfill these two historic buildings named in honor of two such important men in the history of International Falls: the first settler – Alexander Baker and the visionary, Backus, who harnessed the power of Koochiching Falls and built an industry founded on forest products that survives and flourishes to this day.

E. W. Backus might well be proud of what’s happening to the building named in his honor. With growing support from community members, local business, alumni, foundations and users, the Backus Community Center is a thriving place today.
These massively constructed buildings have been well worth the almost $1.5 million in improvements that have been made in the past few years:

- Extension of fire sprinkler system in Backus
- Auditorium re-roof
- Art Room re-roof
- Complete re-roof of both AB & Backus
- Installation of fully-licensed kitchen & dining room remodel
- Construction of 4,000 sq. ft. of office space on Backus third floor
- Installation of four-stop elevator
- Installation of security camera system

In February the new kitchen opened in Backus and began serving noon lunch to St. Thomas School children. Free dinner tickets were offered to Falls Food Shelf clients. As anticipated the kitchen has made Backus more attractive to hosting events with meals. A geology conference, moose symposium and Kootasca Annual Meeting were held at Backus. The Rotary Club, City, Boise, bridge club and other groups have all made use of Backus meeting space and meal service. A Summer Food Service Program with free breakfast and lunch for children ages 1-18 is being offered from June 7 to August 31. The program is sponsored by the MN Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In April the third floor of Backus was opened for use for the first time in over 20 years. Local contractors including Up North Builders, Kantor Electric, Shannon’s, Pelland-Swenson and Ewald Enterprises completed a remodel project that provided over 6,000 square feet of new office space for Rational Alternatives and Northland Counseling. Koochiching County provided tax-exempt bonding authority that allowed almost $700,000 in funding through Border State Bank, Bremer Bank, TruStar Federal Credit Union, Koochco and the Northland Foundation for the project. With the completion of the elevator, all floors became completely accessible.

In spite of these “big ticket” improvements to the building, perhaps the most exciting thing that has been added to Backus this summer is the “Backus Kids Club.” Over 45 children in grades K-6 are registered for this summer-long activity program that runs from 7:30am to 6pm daily. Each day these children interact with an enthusiastic and capable staff of licensed teachers and teacher aides. Their footsteps echo in the halls and stairs as they enjoy art, academics, games, recreation, field trips and swimming at the high school pool. Many people have commented on how great it is to have so many children using the building again.

Two years from now, in 2012, the AB Building will note its 100th year of existence and the Backus Building will celebrate 75 years of service to the community. This summer plans are being developed for the re-use of AB. With continued support, we believe the Backus/AB complex will serve the International Falls community well into the next century.

Even E. W. Backus might take some pride in the fact that his name goes on in such a vital place as the “Backus Community Center!”

Ward Merrill, Executive Director
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Joel Haase and Joe Gust at the Ethnic Food Festival.
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Meet Our New Staff!

Bob Scholler: Volunteer Coordinator

Where are you from?
I was born and raised in International Falls.

Favorite animal?
Yorkshire Terrier! Because I have two: Caesar and Bandit.

Favorite part about your job?
Seeing people satisfied with the events! And having volunteers wanting to become part of the Backus community is great. The connections are great. You get to meet all different kinds of people.

What is something you’d like to see happen with Backus?
I’d like to see Backus keep growing as a community center and just staying busy and putting on events not just for entertainment but for a greater good.

What’s the number one item on your bucket list?
Go on a vacation where there’s water. No phones. No people. And just relax somewhere serene!

Julie Talmage: Backus Kids Club Coordinator

Where are you from?
Rush City. In southern Minnesota.

What’s your favorite season?
Summer! I don’t like the cold but I enjoy being outside camping, fishing, running and hanging out with the kids.

Favorite part about your job?
The variety of people and kids and being busy. There’s always something new!

What is something you’d like to see happen with the Backus Kids Club?
I’d like to see the program grow to need more staff and more rooms and become a “go-to” place for those in the community with children.

What’s something from your bucket list?
Originally, it was to run a marathon. Now, it’s to run a half marathon. I’d like to travel to Alaska. And eventually get a new car!

The Backus Kids Club on a field trip at Voyageurs National Park.
New Faces on the Backus Board!

Julie Bartkowski: Board Member

What do you like to read?
I like to mix it up. I like mystery, a little bit of sci-fi, and the occasional romance.

Any pet peeves?
Lying, dishonesty.

What is your oldest memory with Backus?
We held our baccalaureate for graduation from high school in the auditorium. I remember reading the sayings on the walls. It was a big step, and Backus was the right place for it to happen.

What is a goal you have for Backus?
To have Backus become a premier community spot for all ages.

Where do you see Backus in twenty years?
I’d like to see it grow. And to fully utilize the whole building including the AB side, as well as the gym for theater productions and art.

What did you want to be “when you grew up”?
A policewoman. My undergrad is Criminal Justice. I used to watch “Cagney & Lacey”. It was a TV show about these two woman detectives.

Sherrie Lessard: Treasurer

What’s your dream job?
To be a travel writer for a magazine.

Do you remember the first time you were at Backus?
I used to play volleyball Wednesday nights at Backus.

Any pet peeves?
People that are late.

What did you want to be “when you grew up”?
An Egyptologist! That stuff just fascinates me.

What is one goal you have for Backus?
To make it self-sustaining overall.

What about Backus that caught your attention?
It’s a fascinating place, just the building itself. There’s a lot of history there.

Betsy Ward: Board Member

Where would your dream vacation be?
An “eco-vacation” at the Galapagos Islands counting how many sea turtles are hatching or sailing. Somewhere warm.

Any pet peeves?
People who are quick to blame others.

What are some goals you have for Backus?
To continue pursuing our cultural mission of reaching children with the arts. There’s always more that can be done.

What was your first impression of Backus?
I thought it was cool that they had a community center. Because I lived in the city, I didn’t expect it to be so effective. I’ve been proven wrong many times over.

Why should someone become involved with Backus?
It’s extremely rewarding. And the community needs more people willing to give their time.

What did you want to be “when you grew up”?
I’ve always wanted to be an artist: a Georgia O’Keeffe or Picasso. A classic artist that was considered eccentric by the rest of the world but amazingly successful. Or a geologist. I’ve always loved rocks.
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Bremer Give-to-the-Kids Challenge

September 28-October 5

Every dollar donated to Backus online at Give MN.org during that time will be matched by the Otto Bremer Foundation up to $6,000. Funds will be used to support the growing youth programs at Backus. Thank you for all your support!

Above: The All-School Music Festival and Concert held Feb. 10. Organized by John Faith, it comprised over 280 school musicians from ISD 361, Fort Frances, St. Thomas School, Indus, Emo, and Littlefork.