Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

'Dear Ripon' series will explore community's past

How much do you know about the history of Ripon?

Most people drive past familiar buildings and places every day without thinking about the stories behind them. We know Ripon as it is today — but what did it look like 50, 100 or even 175 years ago? What people, businesses, institutions and events helped shape the community we know today?

The Ripon Historical Society invites readers to look back through a new series of "Now & Then in Ripon" articles.

The 14-part series will feature the infographic posters created for the society's new exhibit, "Dear Ripon: Stories in Their Own Words."

The posters explore different aspects of Ripon's history and provide a snapshot of the people, places, events and developments that have helped shape the community.

Each installment will feature one of these posters, allowing newspaper readers to enjoy a portion of the exhibit right here in the pages of the paper.

The topics cover a range of Ripon history, including railroads, mills, agriculture, manufacturing, the Civil War, the first schools and the first churches.

The first of the 14 installments feature "Life in Ceresco," which looks back at one of the early communities that played an important role in the story of what would become Ripon.

If these glimpses into Ripon's past leave you wanting to know more, the Ripon Historical Society invites you to stop by the Pickard House Museum and see "Dear Ripon: Stories in Their Own Words" for yourself.

The exhibit goes beyond the posters, bringing Ripon's history to life through artifacts and personal stories that offer a closer look at the people who lived, worked and made their homes here.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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THE WISCONSIN PHALANX & LIFE IN CERESCO



Evelyn Kain (1946-2022)
Black ink with watercolor wash of Ceresco Prairie, 1999

THE DREAM: GOOD FARMLAND & GOOD WATER

- **Picture this:** A beautiful amphitheater-like valley, bordered with oak covered hills and limestone bluffs. The natural habitat consists of wild turkey, geese, ducks, prairie chickens. Through the valley runs two streams, one a brook with crystal clear water, and the other a larger stream with good sites for mills. The soil is rich and limestone and oak timber provided a good supply of construction material.
- **Location:** On the western side of modern Ripon, bounded by North Street, Church Street, Union Street, and Warren Street.
- **On Sunday, May 27, 1844 nineteen men and a boy reached a beautiful plain, surrounded by hills.** They came for good farmland and good water in a swiftly moving stream to be used for water power. They arrived with provisions, ox teams, cows, tools, and tents. They named their village Ceresco, after Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture.
- **They incorporated themselves as the Wisconsin Phalanx, an experiment in associative living.** Inspired by Charles Fourier's theories, they rejected competitive capitalism and traditional wage labor. Instead, members held individual stock in the enterprise.
- **They began ploughing the land for turnips, potatoes, buckwheat, and winter wheat. They began construction on the first housing unit.** The clear stream was named Crystal Creek, and could accommodate a saw mill and flour mill. They worked hard on building a dam and sawmill, along with two additional housing units.
- **On June 28th, the families of the pioneers arrived by horse teams.** The family of Warren Chase (the leader) arrived in August. By September, the people of Ceresco moved into partially completed houses. They raised livestock and intended to add wool growing, fruit cultivation, gardening, and cloth manufacturing.
- **As the fall ended, they prepared for the long cold winter ahead.** They stored crops for the members and the livestock. Firewood was cut and gathered. Cracks in the split-board houses were stuffed with hay to keep out the cold because the first buildings were hand-made and crude.

COULD YOU LIVE LIKE THIS?

The Ceresco settlers believed that living together in a "Long House" and sharing their work and food would make for a better life. The Long House had private units for each family, but they ate in a common dining hall.

DIFFERENT DUTIES

The people of Ceresco divided up work duties into different categories: mechanical, agricultural, necessity and attractiveness. People were assigned different duties. Having skilled craftsmen was very important to the people of Ceresco. They needed a millwright, tin & copper smith, baker, stone & brick mason, blacksmith, brick maker, tailor, and carpenters & joiners.

THE TOWNSHIP OF CERESCO IS ORGANIZED

- **In 1845 a few more settlers arrived and the township of Ceresco was organized.** There was a post office, and the postmaster was Lester Rounds. James Stuart, the cook, carried the mail once a week from Fond du Lac.
- **The sawmill was in operation by spring of 1845 and it furnished lumber for many projects.** They also began work on a grist mill and a brick hen house. In the summer of 1845, they began construction of the 235 foot and 32-foot-wide longhouse.
- **They built many other structures for their ideal community:** a school, a unitary that contained the common kitchen, bakery, dining hall and dance parlor, and a hotel.

DECLINE & DISSOLUTION

- **By the end of 1846, the settlement had grown to 180 residents.** This would mark the peak membership for the Ceresco association. However, only a minority of Ceresco members were eating together at the general table by this date.
- The reality of tightly shared accommodations, with numerous families occupying rooms in a single crowded "long house," proved less than compelling for many members of the phalanx's resident community.
- Membership declined, and in 1848, there were only 29 families with 120 people remaining. The Wisconsin Phalanx was dissolved in 1850.