

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

Watson Street housed funeral businesses for 57 years

At Halloween time, thoughts turn to cemeteries and the dead.

This Halloween, the Ripon Historical Society looks back at funeral traditions of years ago and one of Ripon’s early funeral businesses.

When someone passed away, it was customary in 19th-century America for friends or neighbors to wash and dress the deceased.

A cabinet or furniture maker made the coffin and delivered it to the family home. The family then displayed their dead relative in their home before the body was taken to be buried. A cemetery sexton dug the grave. If the cabinet maker had a horse and cart, they also might provide transportation of the deceased to the cemetery.

The first funeral undertakers, also known as “funeral directors” or “morticians,” evolved from the woodworkers who made caskets. This was a logical extension of their business, and as time went on many discontinued making cabinets and furniture to concentrate on preparing the dead for burial and arranging funerals.

For 57 years, the building at 305 Watson St. housed a furniture, coffin and undertaking business. Known as the “Cooley Block,” the building at 305 Watson St. was built in 1869 by Charles Cooley (1828-1898).

Cooley was in business with Justin Delano (1846-1915) who was also was a marble cutter.

A fire in 1868 destroyed their



THIS EARLY PHOTO of the 300 block of Watson Street shows 305 Watson St. as the building with three arched windows and “Delano” showing on the south side sign. This building was built in 1869 and housed the Delano and Cooley company, which sold furniture and acted as undertaker until 1890. The building housed many funeral directors over the years. *submitted photo*

original building on the east side of the 300 block of Watson Street and all of the buildings on the east side of the 200 block.

Cooley then built a new two-story building at 305 Watson St., which is the only building on Watson Street that has stone facade using locally-produced limestone.

It is believed that the Delano & Cooley furniture and undertaking business might date back to 1856, when Cooley first came to Ripon. A blurb in the April

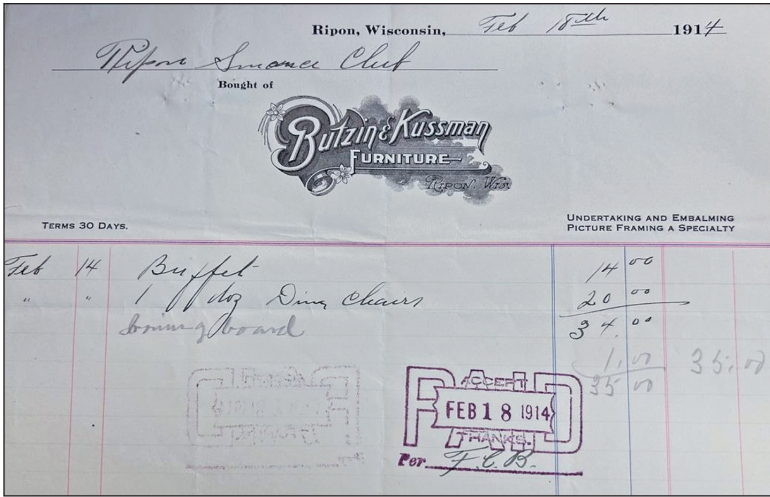
29, 1859 *Ripon Weekly Times* shows Delano & Cooley was a new advertiser. Advertisements after this date show Delano & Cooley as “Cabinet Makers and City Undertakers” with “Coffins of all sizes ready-made” and “Particular attention paid to the business of undertaking.”

A newspaper ad from an 1875 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* states that the business sold “parlor, chamber, cottage furniture and marble top tables.” In addition, the company had “two good hearses” and that they “keep the largest stock of metallic cases, caskets and undertakers goods in the northwest.”

Delano left Ripon in the late 1880s and Cooley retired in 1890. The business at 305 Watson St. then was taken over by George Knaup (1870-1898) and Gustav Propst (1866-1948). Both had been in the furniture and undertaking business in Beaver Dam. Knaup became ill and returned to Beaver Dam around 1896. Propst continued to run the business.

The obituary of Frederick Butzin (1879-1957) states that he started in the funeral business in 1896 with Propst. He then acted as a funeral director for 61 years, of which 31 years were spent at the 305 Watson St. location.

In 1902, Butzin and J. Fred Falkenstein (1874-1947) bought out Propst. In August 1907 a notice in the *Ripon Semi-Weekly*



THIS 1914 RECEIPT from Butzin & Kussman Furniture at 305 Watson St. also states the company does “Undertaking and Embalming.” Frederick Butzin (1879-1957) and J. Fred Falkenstein (1874-1947) were in business together from 1901 until 1922. The invoice is found in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society. *submitted photo*

Press reported that Falkenstein had retired and William Kussman (1868-1961) joined the business, creating Butzin-Kussman Furniture & Undertaking.

Kussman retired in 1922 and Butzin renamed the business “Butzin Furniture & Funerals.”

In 1926, Butzin opened a “funeral parlor” at 202 Blossom St., leaving the 305 Watson St. location with only furniture.

Butzin’s two sons, Karl Butzin (1913-1996) and Frederick Butzin Jr. (1916-1966), joined the company in 1935 in 1947, respectively. In 1945, the Butzins stopped selling furniture to concentrate on the funeral industry.

In 1966, the business became the Butzin-Marchant Funeral Home and stayed at the Blossom Street location until 1970. The company still is in business today at the corner of Oshkosh Street and Mayparty Drive.

From 1945 until 1953, the building at 305 Watson St. housed Michloves Furniture Store and from 1954 until 1956 it was Moodies Variety and Novelty Store. For the next 23 years, from 1956 until 1979, the building at 305 Watson St. housed The Ripon Variety Store owned by Russell Schenke (1924-2003) and Joyce Van Alstine Schenke (1925-2007). In the 1970s, Russell Schenke was named head of the Ripon Downtown Renovation Committee. This committee wanted to restore the Watson Street buildings to their original historic look and the Schenkes lead the way with a renovation of 305 Watson St. in 1976.

Between 1976 and 1978, the General Federation of Women’s

Clubs sponsored a Business for Beauty contest for outside building improvements. The Ripon chapter held its own local contest in which they awarded the Schenkes with the Ripon “Business for Beauty Award.” After winning the local women’s club contest, the building at 305 Watson St. then was eligible for state recognition. It then became the state’s first-place winner in 1978.

The building underwent another renovation in 2008 by Boca Grande Capital LLC. Its company, Granite Broadband, occupied 305 Watson St. and they had an office next door at 303 Watson St. In 2018, due to unpaid back taxes, Fond du Lac County foreclosed on the building.

American Alchemy, a retail store, has occupied the address since 2019. The name of this business seems appropriate because alchemy is a medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy which aimed at the transmutation of base metals into gold, along with the discovery of a more universal cure for diseases and a means of indefinitely prolonging life.

The building is located in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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.

For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org



THIS 1887 INVOICE from Delano & Cooley at 305 Watson St. lists the sale of a casket and case, hearse and chemicals for the funeral of James Gilholy. The cost was \$41 (equal to \$1,022 today). The name “Delano” is crossed off the invoice as he had left the business and Ripon. The invoice is found in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society. *submitted photo*

Answers to the Crossword Puzzle
from the October 30th issue of
The Commonwealth Express

DOUBT	AGRA	MIATA	DABS
ERROR	CEOS	ARLEN	ARIA
BELLY	JEANS	MAIL	TRICKS
OMARR	DING	HASHES	
CUTTER	BOOKIE	HOES	
BNAI	IWAS	STUMP	RAKE
CHIEF	BILLY	MASTS	OLEO
INSEAMS	REF	SCORN	
ANT	TAP	CRETE	WHACKERS
IGETA	FDIC	AERIE	
REDO	THICKEN	CHAI	RAVI
PLEAS	IOUS	NAVAL	
PUFFED	STEPPER	DNA	OSE
EGLIN	LOT	REASONS	
OLAV	QUAKE	SEEN	BALLAD
NINE	PUTTS	HOPI	DELA
RIAL	SQUIN	INTER	WASH
OHIO	ANIS	VIREO	
HANDY	CARTS	BRAZEN	REDD
MIDI	EGGOS	LODZ	ELSIE
SLOE	SEEPY	OBEY	EDSEL

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