

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

From bakeries to breweries: Watson Street's 200 block

By Pat Grahm

Editor's note: This is the third in a series of articles about the Watson Street commercial district which runs from the 100 to 300 blocks of Ripon's downtown. An article on the 300 block will follow in the coming weeks.

The Watson Street Commercial Historic District is comprised of most of the buildings on three blocks of Watson Street and some buildings on the streets immediately next to it. The district was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

The 200 block of Watson Street is much like the 100 block, having many Italianate-influenced two-story cream brick buildings. Also, like the 100 block, the streetscape was the result of a fire. In 1868, a fire destroyed all the buildings on the east side of the 200 block. This means the buildings that seen today date from approximately 1870 when the block was rebuilt.

The three-story triangular building at 205-209 Watson St. sits across from the town square on the east side of the street at the intersection of West Fond du Lac Street. It housed many businesses over the years, including a cigar manufacturing and tobacco store from around 1900 until the 1970s. Also found in the building was a barber shop, which operated from the 1890s until 1970. Other business found here over the years were a harness maker's shop, a



THIS UNDATED PHOTO is looking south on the 200 block of Watson Street. The buildings shown on the left side of the street are dated after 1870 because an 1868 fire destroyed the earlier buildings. The building on the lower right-hand side of the photo was built in 1885 after three other buildings on this site burned in 1871, 1878 and 1885. The three-story building in the middle on the right side currently is Farrell's Fine Furnishings and was built in 1922 after a fire destroyed the previous building in that location. *submitted photo*

millinery shop, a dressmaker's shop and the Central Federal Savings Bank between 1940 and 1968. Today, this fully renovated building houses Patina Vie, a boutique retail store and "sipping room."

A meat market occupied 211 Watson St. from when the building was built in 1870 until approximately 1969. The location is now the home to "Gents," a retail store. The first floor still retains the historic walk-in refrigeration cooler from the meat market days.

The Reichmuth's Bakery and later restaurant occupied 213 Watson St. for three generations

from 1870 until 1942. It then became a drug store, clothing store and card shop. In recent history, people remember it as Only Her, a women's boutique, and then Imagineers Screen Printing.

The current day Back Porch Gatherings at 217 Watson St. occupies a building that at one time had two separate storefronts, 215 and 217. The 215 building housed a saloon from 1876 until after the turn of the 20th century. The building was reinvented as a soda fountain during prohibition. After prohibition, several drug stores occupied the site.

The building at 217 Watson St. first housed a harness shop and then by the turn of the 20th century became a clothing store, a shoe store and then a tavern. The wall between the two retail spaces was taken down to create a large space for the drug store at 215 Watson St. to expand. The most interesting thing about this location is that over the years the occupants of the building wrote their names and date on a basement wall. The signatures go back to the 1870s.

On the west side, the Pratt Block at 200-208 Watson St. is located on the corner of West Fond du Lac Street and overlooks the town square to the north. This is the fourth building to sit on this corner, the other

buildings burned in 1871, 1878 and 1885.

Because of its size, Pratt's Block has been the home to many businesses in Ripon. Perhaps one of the better-known stores was the shoe store of Arthur Steinbring (1879-1950) at 200 Watson St. He branded this "The Busy Corner" and served customers for almost 50 years as Ripon's first Santa Claus. This location was a shoe store from 1909 until the 1960s.

The building at 212 Watson St. once housed Vieth's men's clothing store, which was in business for 42 years. It is believed that Harrison Ford of "Indiana Jones" and "Star Wars" fame worked in this location as the obituary of one of the store's owners, Jessie Vieth (1905-1990), stated that "One of the highlights of her retail career was employing Harrison Ford while he attended Ripon College."

The address now houses Diedrich Jewelers, which started in the 1890s as the Charles and Samuel Sharp jewelry store at 204 Watson St. The jewelry store changed hands many times at the same address and in 1921 became the Fargo-Diedrich Jewelry Store and then Diedrich's Jewelry. The store moved across the street to 212 Watson St. in

1980 and recently expanded to include the storefront to the north.

Farrell's Fine Furnishings occupies 214 Watson St. This location was first home to the Kohl Hardware Co. The building which first stood on the site burned in 1894, and a new building was built and occupied by the Barlow and Seelig Co. hardware store. This company started making washing machines in a tin shop behind the store. It grew to become Alliance Laundry Systems, an internationally known company producing washers and dryers that still is located in Ripon.

Barlow and Seelig decided to concentrate their business on washing machines and sold the hardware business at 214 Watson St. to an employee, Fred Kohl Sr. (1884-1971). Kohl's Hardware Store burned in 1922 and it was rebuilt to be the store seen today. It remained a hardware store until the late 1970s and was occupied by Haase Shoe Store until the 1980s.

The southern end of the 200 block is anchored by Knuth Brewing Co., 230 Watson St., at the corner of Blossom Street. Originally occupied by the 1869 Pedrick Opera House building which burned in 1904, a new building was built the same year to house the Strauss Brothers Store. Various retail ventures occupied the building until Chipman's Federated Store took over the building from 1938 until 1965. The building then became a Schultz Variety Store, which closed in 1984. The American House, which housed senior citizens, occupied the location until 2008. It then sat vacant for more than a decade before the building was renovated. Knuth Brewing Co., which started in 2015 at 221 Watson St., moved across the street to 230 Watson St. in 2024.

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, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH OF the 200 block of Watson Street looking north was taken after 1949. The Grand View Hotel burned to the ground in 1949 and would have been visible on the north end of Watson Street in an earlier photo. The building shown on the left at the corner of Blossom Street now houses Knuth Brewing Co. *submitted photo*

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