

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

Green thumb helped Leone Hoffman live to 101

The Ripon Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring a Twilight Garden Tour Saturday, July 19 from 4 to 7 p.m.

The Ripon Historical Society will open the 1856 Pedrick-Lawson House along with its barn and gardens at 515 Ransom St., as well as its museum at 508 Watson St. for the event. The society museum will feature a special display of floral-related items.

One group of artifacts that have been stored in the Pedrick-Lawson House barn are the gardening tools of Leone Hoffman (1904-2005).

The Spring 2007 *Ripon Magazine* from Ripon College informed that Hoffman “was a master gardener and helped reconstruct the Pedrick-Lawson House bed for the Ripon Historical Society. Into her late 80s she walked the distance from her home to the Ripon Historical Society, often carrying tools, to maintain the many beautiful flower gardens on the society’s large grounds. Her philosophy of natural gardening, which she initiated at the society, became the standard which still is used there.”

Hoffman contributed living to 101 years old to eating healthy foods grown in the organic garden behind her family’s house at 521 Liberty St. She was born and raised on a farm outside of Ripon, moving into the city in 1919 at age 15. She stated in a 1977 *Fond du Lac Reporter* article that “In those days every home had a double lot. The back was the garden filled with berries and vegetables of very kind.”

The Ripon College magazine of Spring 2007 featured a two-page article on Hoffman and gave her educational background. It noted that she “graduated from Ripon High School in 1922 and Ripon College in 1926. Her majors were Latin and Spanish, her minor was history. She went on to earn a master’s degree in library science at Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve University) in Cleveland, Ohio.”

Hoffman first taught Latin and history, along with coaching declamation and dramatics in Forreston, Ill. from 1928 until 1931. From 1938 to 1946, she was the assistant librarian at a high school and junior college in Jackson, Mich. and then became a high school librarian in Waukesha from 1946 until 1954.

In a May 1983 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* interview, Hoffman noted that she “Didn’t turn to the earth for her health until she became sick with a



LIVING TO 101 years old, Leone Hoffman contributed her longevity to healthy and natural living. *submitted photo*

viral pneumonia when she was 47 years old. She had to quit her teaching job in Waukesha because she was absent so much. She was pumping her body with antibiotics, but it wasn’t doing any good.”

Hoffman revealed in a 1999 interview with the *Fond du Lac Reporter* that she believed that DDT sprayed in the school where she worked caused her immune system to become compromised. DDT was a pesticide that at one time was widely used for insect control. It was banned in the United States in 1972 due to concerns about long-term effects on human health, wildlife and birds.

In 1951, Hoffman moved back to Ripon and started living a more natural lifestyle.

She and her brother, Orville (1908-1997), joined the Natural Foods Associates (NFA) in 1960. This organization was founded in Texas in 1952 and was organized in Wisconsin in 1958. The FHA promoted organic foods and natural health practices. It believed that chemically treated, refined, processed foods grown from treated soil did not provide the human body with the essential vitamins, minerals, enzymes and other nutrients necessary for good health. The NFA disbanded in 1997 and the Wisconsin organization was dissolved in 2018.

Hoffman was secretary of the Wisconsin NFA for four years and set up or helped to run several state conventions. She also wrote for the Wisconsin NFA bulletin for years. In addition, she became active in the Ripon Food Mill Cooperative.

After moving back to Ripon Hoffman never worked again.

Instead, she took care of her aging mother until she passed away at age 90 in 1965. She also took care of her brother as he aged. She grew her own food and told the *Fond du Lac Reporter* that “The more you grew, the more [money] you saved.”

“I guess all of us used to chuckle at Leone’s mode of dress — multi-patched jeans,

layers of faded cotton tops and sweaters (always long-sleeved, even in the summer) — fashion from the local thrift shop,” Hoffman’s friend Ann Marie Godfrey was quoted saying in the *Ripon College* magazine. “But her signature style made sense — just as she always did. It was [a] garden dress, and that’s where Leone spent the major portion of her day — in her garden plot amongst the measured and tidy browns of thriving plants.”

Hoffman spoke to both Ripon College students and the general public in 1977 about “natural living.” A *Fond du Lac Reporter* article reported that Hoffman stated more than one time during her talk, “Read the labels, if you can’t pronounce it, it’s not food.”

A May 1983 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* described Hoffman as leading “a sensible, no frills lifestyle. Her food, dress and house have one thing in common. They are all functional. Leone’s garden is her medicine chest. The herbs she grows provide most of her vitamins. She also used the herbs for medicinal purposes.”

Hoffman was 80 years old when the article was printed and the writer stated that “Leone doesn’t deny the attributes of conventional medicine. But she has found that much of her good health comes from eating right, staying active and getting proper amounts of rest.”

When Hoffman was 95 years old in 1999, she was interviewed by the *Fond du Lac Reporter*. The article informed, “at 95, the Ripon native works her garden with a strength that seems to come from within. Using no power tools, not even a rototiller, she hand-cultivates three large gardens in the backyard of the house in which she grew up.”

The article continued by noting that “Hoffman grows almost all her own food, eschewing grocery stores except for soap, tissue and non-food items. She gets a few staples like sprouted wheat bread and sea salt from a local organic food cooperative.”



LEONE HOFFMAN, AN avid organic gardener, is featured around 1990 outside her home at 521 Liberty St. *submitted photo*

Hoffman did not like cooking, so she relied on rice with vegetables as a staple in her diet. She cooked most foods simply and each day she ate home-grown fruits and vegetables with a few ounces of organic meat or chicken.”

The 2007 Ripon College magazine article noted that at her Victorian-trimmed Liberty Street home past the pretty flower beds and ground the back porch was an iron pump, which provided water from one of Ripon’s few remaining turn-of-the-century artesian wells.

“Leone until her late 90s, worked the handle each summer day, carrying buckets full of non-chlorinated water to her organic vegetable garden,” the article informed.

Although her house on Liberty Street had running water, one newspaper reported Hoffman preferred to bathe in the water she pumped herself from the well.

Hoffman never owned a car and walked everywhere, only utilizing a senior citizens van or taxi as she aged to conserve energy for her gardening. She shoveled her own snow until she was 93 years old.

Hoffman didn’t have a television set but liked to listen to the radio. Bob Uecker (1934-2025) broadcasting a Milwaukee professional baseball game was one of Hoffman’s favorite things to listen to.

When Hoffman inherited money after her brother passed away, she gave it all away to what she thought was worthy causes.

The Ripon College magazine noted that her friends were grateful “for that sweet, quiet generosity that Leone showered on all

of us. Whatever your age, being your friend was easy for Leone. She delighted in the neighborhood children playing in her yard and there was always time to sit and chat with the teenager who mowed her lawn. Adults of every age were her peers.”

The July 1999 *Fond du Lac Reporter* summed up Hoffman’s life by saying she “entered the world in the days of horse-drawn buggies, country schools and wood burning stoves. She saw horses replaced by Model Ts, ice boxes with refrigerators, turn-crank washing machines with electric spin-dry models. She has watched American food evolve from simple, wholesome fare to prepackaged, highly processed stuff whose shelf life could outlast the mummified remains of an Egyptian king. Hoffman predates the concept of junk food and she managed to avoid acquiring the fast-food habit that has snared millions of Americans. Her quiet way of life could even be called ‘voluntary simplicity.’ It’s a lifestyle she maintains enthusiastically. And, it might be said, it enthusiastically maintains her.”

The Ripon Historical Society is looking for volunteers to work in its gardens to help maintain Hoffman’s legacy. The work can be done at any time that is convenient for the volunteers.

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](https://www.facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety) or [instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/](https://www.instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/).