

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

Catlin’s last will, testament took nine years to probate

Richard Catlin (1809-1874) first came to Ripon in the mid-1840s at the encouragement of his sister, Elizabeth “Eliza” Catlin Dart (1798-1865), who was the wife of Anson Dart (1797-1879).

Anson Dart was credited with the founding of Dartford, which later became Green Lake. The Darts left Rome, N.Y. and arrived in what was then the Wisconsin Territory as early pioneer settlers.

While visiting his sister and husband in the Ripon and Green Lake area, Richard Catlin also met David P. Mapes (1798-1890), one of Ripon’s founders, who shared a vision for what would become the city of Ripon.

This compelled Richard Catlin and his wife, Darwina Fayette Barstow Catlin (1815–1870) to immediately purchase 110 acres of land and make plans to relocate permanently.

The Catlins hired local lumber dealer and stone mason Marcelus Pedrick (1828-1899) in 1855 to build their house at 522 Ransom Street, where they resided for four years.

Richard Catlin established the first-ever Bank of Ripon (there were only 14 banks in the Wisconsin Territory at that time) with partner Edward Payson Brockway (1832-1912).

He set up a personal business to subdivide and sell housing lots within his acreage located between Woodside Avenue, Ransom Street and Howard Street, titled “Catlin’s Addition” within Ripon plat maps.

The bank and land business enabled Richard Catlin to sell people lots to build their houses upon and, if they qualified, lend them money to construct their buildings. He benefited financially from both of these transactions.

In 1857, at his wife’s urging, Richard Catlin once again hired Pedrick to build a much larger house at 512 Woodside



THIS IS A picture of the Catlin Family Home at 512 Woodside Ave. as it appeared in the 1870s.

Ave., which they, along with orphaned nieces Anna Catlin (1841-1931) and Leah “Lizzie” Catlin (1845-1865), moved into in 1860 according to the U.S. Federal Census.

The Catlins resided on Woodside for 10 years during which time Richard continually operated businesses and served as a trustee to Ripon College.

Darwina contributed volunteer work plus sponsored education for young women in Oshkosh.

In 1870, Darwina died of typhoid fever at age 55. Richard remarried Phoebe Ellen Burling Catlin (1845-1933), but died in 1874 at age 65 after suffering a debilitating stroke.

Last will and testament becomes news

News of Richard Catlin’s death in 1874 was immediately reported in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* and *Princeton Times*, citing him as “the wealthi-

est person in Ripon.” His worth was speculated at \$300k to 500k (which equals \$7.9 to \$13.2 million dollars today) in cash and property holdings.”

No children were produced from either of Richard Catlin’s two marriages and he hand-wrote his own last will and testament in approximations of money held in stocks and bonds, plus real estate mortgages that he personally lent to individuals.

Eighteen people including his brothers, nieces and nephews were named in the will to inherit, however Richard Catlin’s will took nine years to probate.

First reason being there were five federal lawsuits filed against the estate by nieces and nephews who inherited stock only to find current market values were lower than the purchase or face-value. These family members were seeking the full face-value for stocks and bonds and refused to settle for less.

Second, Richard Catlin’s wid-

ow was forced to file a lawsuit to make certain that her own inheritance would be secure against her husband’s family members’ claims. Notably, his widow was to inherit \$10k in cash (which equals \$264,768 today); the house at 512 Woodside Ave.; a horse, buggy and sleigh; plus acreage. The house occupied the entire city block of land bordering Woodside Avenue, Oak Street, Lincoln Street and West Thorne Street, totaling 38 acres.

The third reason was that there were 30 probate claims against the estate from individuals holding mortgages that Richard Catlin independently financed, requesting that their obligations be forgiven as “free,” per a verbal agreement held between them and Richard Catlin.

The *Commonwealth Press* periodically printed updates in the newspaper about the lawsuit claims over nine years.

When lawsuits and claims were finally settled, all mortgages

remained intact, stocks and bonds were cashed in for whatever their current market values and individuals inheriting received only half of what they would have originally received due to years of ongoing legal fees and court costs that were paid for out of the estate.

Rumors about the value of the estate then ranged from \$168k to \$225k. No itemized statement reflecting the estate’s final amount of stocks, land valuations and cash payouts to individuals was ever shared or documented to the historical society’s knowledge.

Unexpected Outcome

Richard Catlin’s widow received her inheritance, but was told by her attorney that two of her husband’s items were not included in writing within the will. These were an expensive pocket watch that Richard Catlin’s nieces and nephews were competing for and his personal business safe with contents.

Both of these final two items were taken away by the widow’s attorney. No record of whatever became of the watch or the safe has ever been found or told.

Today

Both of Richard Catlin’s residences still stand in Ripon. No surviving photos of Richard’s first-wife, Darwina, or second-wife, Phoebe Burling Catlin are available. If anyone has information relating to the Catlins, email the Ripon Historical Society at riponhistsoc@gmail.com or call 920-748-5354.

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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