

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

The story behind the barn at 404 Ransom St.

By Pat Grahn

Ripon has grown and changed quite a bit since it was founded almost 180 years ago. Sometimes it's hard to imagine what the community looked like at one time, but there are a few clues left.

Someone recently contacted the Ripon Historical Society wondering why there was a barn behind the Veterans Memorial Walkway on the west side of the 400 block of Ransom Street.

This barn once was part of the property of John E. Fenelon (1849-1943) and Ophelia Bloom Fenelon (1949-1919), whose house stood at 404 Ransom St. This now is the location of Steel Magnolia Hair and Nail Salon.

John was born in Ireland and came to America with his parents around 1854. His wife, Ophelia, was born in Pennsylvania, and her family were some of the early settlers to Ripon. The two married in 1876 and had two children, Lillian Fenelon (1875-1968) and Daisy Fenelon (1881-1957). John's obituary stated that he was "engaged as a stock buyer for 70 years before retiring in 1936." The family first lived at 545 Newbury St.

An article in the Feb. 22, 1951 *Ripon Weekly Press* gave the history of their Ransom Street house. It noted that the corner lot was purchased in 1890 and the 13-room house was built in 1893, designed by architect Marcus Radway (1841-1917). Radway moved to Ripon from Berlin in the mid-1870s. His obituary reads, "He was a designer and architect and many homes and public buildings here were made from his plans."

The *Ripon Weekly Press* wrote, "When a small boy, Mr. Fenelon lived in Princeton, and on occasions of visits to the



THIS 1911 PHOTOGRAPH shows the Fenelon family on the front porch of their house at 404 Ransom St. Pictured are, clockwise, from bottom left, Daisy Fenelon, Violet N., Ophelia (Lilia) Bloom Fenelon, Lillian Fenelon and John E. Fenelon. The house was demolished in 1969.

Photo courtesy of family member Linda Budnick

city of Ripon always admired the huge apple orchard near the college campus. He walked by the place every time he came to town, and it was his boyhood desire and ambition to have a home on this lot."

The article went on to inform that "The lot was low and after the grubbing and removal of the trees, considerable filling was necessary. It was about this time that the Cold Storage, Seelig and Kussman buildings on Watson Street were erected. In the excavation for these buildings there was much surplus dirt. This Mr. Fenelon purchased — 1500 loads of it, and the lot was brought to the desired street level."

The *Ripon Weekly Press* ended the article by exclaiming, "The Fenelon home is a most delightful one and in a most desirable location."

When John died in 1943 at age 94, his daughter Daisy became the sole occupant of the family house. His other daughter, Lillian, had lived in New York City for most of her adult life, returning to Ripon in approximately 1947 or 1948.

An Oct. 1957 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* noted that the property was accessed at \$3,000 for the land and \$3,250 for the house for a total property value of \$6,250. This is equal to approximately \$73,500 today.

When Daisy died at age 76, she left the family property at the corner of Ransom and West Seward Street to the Schultz-Klemp-Wentland Post No. 4278 of the Ripon Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) for use as a clubhouse and meeting hall. She wished the house to be a living memorial to Company D of the Wisconsin National Guard. The will included a trust fund for the upkeep of the house.

In 1899, Company D, Second Wisconsin Infantry of the U.S. National Guard included 87 Ripon men. They served in

the Spanish-American War in Puerto Rico. In 1916, they also served in the Mexican War. More than 150 men from the company served in France during World War I.

The VFW is a nonprofit organization founded in 1899 and is the nation's oldest major war veteran organization. It consists of U.S. military veterans who served in overseas conflicts. It was founded by veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902).

The Ripon VFW was founded in 1946 after the end of World War II. It was named after four service members who gave their lives during World War II: Lt. Victor Schultz (1919-1944), two brothers Sgt. Arthur Klemp (1918-1943) and Sgt. George Klemp (1906-1945) and Cpt. Roy Wentland (1913-1942).

Daisy's sister, Lillian, was not included in her will and contested the gift of the property at 404 Ransom St. to the VFW. In the Dec. 19, 1957, *Commonwealth Press* Lillian's lawyer noted that Daisy's will "was not executed in the manner provided by law." It also stated that at the time the will was executed, Daisy was "not of sound mind and had not sufficient mental capacity to make a will."

The legal paperwork contesting the will went on to say that "The execution of said instrument was procured by undue influence exercised over and upon said Daisy E. Fenelon by Eugene A. Bitters and other agents of Schultz-Klemp-Wentland Post 5278 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars." Lillian claimed that Daisy's will was "procured by fraud." Bitters (1922-1989), who was named in the legal paperwork contesting Daisy's will was a World War II veteran and an attorney in Ripon.

A front-page article in the March 12, 1959 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* carried the



IN 1958, DAISY Fenelon left her family home at 404 Ransom St. to the Schultz-Klemp-Wentland Post No. 4278 of the Ripon Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) for a clubhouse and meeting hall. This August 1959 photograph from the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* shows VFW members putting a fresh coat of paint on the 1893 house.

headline "Fenelon will case settled." It noted that a compromise settlement had been reached regarding Daisy's will.

The VFW would retain the house for its clubhouse as well as the trust, but give \$5,000 (worth approximately \$57,000 today) to Lillian "and turn over a number of items inventoried as household contents."

In 1959, the Ripon VFW Post 5278, which up until that point had been meeting at various locations, took over the Fenelon house as their clubhouse. A photograph in an August 1959 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* featured VFW members putting a fresh coat of paint on the house.

A war memorial, which had stood since 1913 in a small triangular shaped street corner of Blackburn Street south of Fond du Lac Street (the current location of Central Park Offices), was moved in 1961 to the VFW site on Ransom Street. It still is found on the corner of Ransom and West Seward streets. (*For more information on the memorial, see the May 23, 2023 Now & Then in Ripon, "Origins of Ripon's Soldiers' Memorial and its Evolution."*)

In the late 1960s, the site of the Fenelon House-VFW was one of three locations being considered for a new public library.

The VFW razed the 76-year-old Fenelon house in the late summer of 1969 and built a new clubhouse on the same location. The new 1,500-square-foot building had a bar, a meeting room and a kitchen on the lower level.

The original barn, which was located to the south of the house, remained on the property. Barns, sometimes called a carriage

house, were prevalent in 19th century Ripon. They housed horses, the family carriage and sleigh, and sometimes a family milk cow, chickens and other stock such as pigs. Some of the barns had housing on the second floor for family servants.

Many of these city barns over the years have been turned into garages or were razed.

An example of an early barn remains behind the 1856 Pedrick-Lawson House at 515 Ransom St. Owned by the Ripon Historical Society, the barn is a living museum and retains two horse stalls and a stall for a cow. Housed inside is a sleigh, horse tack, tools and other items once found in barns in the 1800s within the city of Ripon. Both the house and barn are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

A Veterans Memorial Walk of Honor was added on the VFW property in 2001. This memorial commemorates those who have served in the U.S. military. Ripon-area military veterans from all branches are listed on paving stones.

Due to declining revenue and membership, the Ripon VFW sold the original Fenelon property in 2015. They moved their meetings to the American Legion Brown-Parfitt Post 43 located at 113 E. Fond du Lac St.

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/).



THIS BARN FOUND in the 400 block of Ransom Street is the only thing remaining from the Fenelon family home, which was located on the corner north of it. The house was left to the Ripon VFW who razed it in 1969 and built a new building now occupied by Steel Magnolia Hair and Nail Salon. *submitted photo*