

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

Hillside Cemetery: Grave encounters & hidden stories

The Ripon Historical Society will host a walking tour Sunday, Oct. 19 at 1 and 3:30 p.m. This tour combines storytelling, historical insights and a touch of the macabre to create an immersive experience. Whether a history enthusiast or a thrill-seeker, this tour offers a blend of education and chills.

Tickets are needed for the event and are available online by going to www.riponhistory.org and clicking on "Events" in the main menu, or by clicking on the "find tickets" link under "Events" on the society's Facebook page. A link to ticket purchases also is in the Ripon Chamber calendar. The rain date is Oct. 25.

The first burial in Ripon was in 1849. The community's first cemetery was located on a hill along Ransom Street near the intersection of Blossom Street. Ripon College's East Hall was built in 1851 in the general area of the first cemetery. Hillside Cemetery was then established three blocks west.

One *Ripon Commonwealth* article stated, "most of the burials were removed to Hillside Cemetery."

This leave people wondering why the word "most" was used. It is believed that the Ripon Cemetery Association was founded in 1852. Full records started to be kept in 1863, so it is not sure if all grave sites have been recorded and many remain unmarked.

Two monuments that will be featured on the tour are from the Bailey family. Aaron Bailey (1815-1897) has a headstone which reads, "Cavalryman Blackhawk War 1832, Wounded by a Tomahawk Thrown by an Indian."

At age 16, Bailey enlisted in the U.S. Cavalry and was in this brief, yet bloody conflict between the United States and Native Americans. He received six wounds during this conflict including the tomahawk blow which left a scar on his forehead. He was an early pioneer settler to the Ripon area.

Aaron's son, Aaron "Frank" Bailey (1844-1864), is buried next to his father. He contracted typhoid during his service in the Civil War. Two thirds of the approximately 750,000 soldiers that died during the Civil War died from disease.

In a letter to his parents dated Aug. 6, 1864, his brother, Andrew



THE GRAVE SITE of Aaron Bailey (1815-1897) will be featured in a new tour of Ripon's Hillside Cemetery on October 19. His headstone which reads, "Cavalryman Blackhawk War 1832, Wounded by a Tomahawk Thrown by an Indian." *submitted photo*

(1842-1906), wrote, "I have done all I can for Frank. If he dies I shall have him embalmed, which will cost \$10 (equivalent to \$204 today), and a coffin will cost \$30 (equivalent to \$614 today). He will turn one way or the other in two or three days." Aaron died Aug. 8, two months to the day after he enlisted. He was brought home to Ripon and buried here near his parents.

Medical and scientific advances often arise from wars and other crises. With the high number of dead soldiers during the Civil War, changes were needed in the way the dead were handled.

Before the war, most people died near where they lived. Families arranged a burial relatively promptly, and there was no need for the body to be preserved. When the war began, this changed. Families who could afford it, wanted their loved ones' bodies brought home for burial and corpses needed to be preserved to travel.

Depending on where the soldier died, a trip by rail could take two weeks and the railroads did not want to deal with the smell and issue of a



AARON "FRANK" BAILEY (1844-1864) contracted typhoid during his service in the Civil War and died only two months after he reenlisted. His body was embalmed and sent home to be buried in Ripon. Medical and scientific advances often arise from wars and other crises. With the high number of dead soldiers during the Civil War, changes were needed in the way the dead were handled and the use of embalming fluid to preserve bodies was one of these. *submitted photo*

decaying body that was not preserved.

Dr. Thomas Holmes (1817-1900) worked as a coroner's physician in New York during the 1850s and read about the arterial embalming process used in France. He created and bottled a fluid that would be used for embalming. The chemicals used during the Civil War were a mixture of arsenic, zinc and mercuric chlorides, creosote, turpentine and alcohol. (Formaldehyde which became the primary ingredient, was not in use at the beginning of the Civil War.)

During the war, embalming physicians followed the action setting up a barn, shed or tent near the battlefield to embalm bodies. However, the number of people who were embalmed was small as bodies were often difficult to identify and getting in touch with their family could be difficult.

The June 27, 1862, issue of the *Ripon Weekly Press* featured an article about embalming during the Civil War. It stated: "The body is placed on an inclined platform, the mouth, ears, nose, etc., are stopped with cotton. If wounded, cotton is put in the wound, and a plaster is put on. An incision is made in the wrist, the attachment is made from an air-pump and fluid is injected into the arteries. The wound is then sewed up and the body is hoisted to dry. To save the eyes from sinking in, wax is put under the eyelids. The hair is found to come out very easy, but after the embalming it could not be removed. ... The bodies appear as lifelike as if they were asleep."

The article continues, noting that up to that point in the war, which had been going on for one year, Holmes had made \$30,000 embalming bodies. This would be equal to \$1,167,543 today. The *Weekly Press* informed "The charges are \$56 for an officer and \$25 for a private." This is equal to \$2,179 and \$451 today.

The *Berlin Courant*, dated Feb. 25, 1862, talked about the embalmed body of Joshua Smith being sent home from the Civil War to Wisconsin: "The body arrived here on Wednesday evening last. It was taken to the residence of his father, in the town of Seneca, where the coffin was opened to the inspection of all during the day. The countenance looked quite natural, wearing much the appearance of other corpses, except a darker appearance."

Before embalming during the Victorian period, the fear of premature burial led to the invention of "safety coffins."

These coffins had a string on the inside which led to a bell on ground outside of the burial spot. This allowed a person who might awake in the coffin to signal for help. This is where the expression "saved by the bell" came from.

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/.



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