

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

## What is it? Identifying historical Ripon objects

History shapes, inspires and informs the present. The Ripon Historical Society shares and preserves a collection of artifacts that help to tell Ripon's history.

Some of these objects document the technological development and the evolution of materials that impacted the domestic lives of previous generations so that present and future generations can learn about the ties the objects represent.

The collection at the historical society

even has a few thought-provoking items that cultivate peoples curiosity even in perhaps a peculiar, bizarre, unique or unconventional way.

The Ripon Historical Society collection policy states that it accepts "Objects that have enduring and evidentiary value, that tell stories, convey interpretations and lend themselves to multiple points of view regarding Ripon's history and culture, and its place within the his-

tory of Wisconsin and the nation. These include historical, cultural, aesthetic or natural objects that have been made and/or primarily used in the city of Ripon or surrounding area; are associated with a person, place or event in the city; and for which the society can care under standards acceptable to the museum field at large."

When school children visit the Ripon Historical Society they play a game of

"what is it?" They are asked to identify various objects from the historical society's collection. They guess what the item is, how it was used and are asked if you can still purchase the item today.

This is the first article of two highlighting some artifacts housed at the historical society that the general public might not be familiar with.

*Look forward to seeing a another Now & Then in Ripon on additional artifacts.*

### Salesman sample washing machine

The Barlow & Seelig hardware store was started in 1896 and located at the site of the present day Farrell's Fine Furnishings, 214 Watson St.

In 1908, the company bought the manufacturing rights to a hand-operated clothes washing machine and started to build the machines in a tin shop behind the retail store.

The washing machine business eventually outgrew its Watson Street location and the hardware store was sold. In 1917, Barlow & Seelig, which now exclusively made washing machines, relocated to Shepard Street, where it remains today.

The company later was renamed "Speed Queen," and today it is known as "Alliance Laundry Systems." One hundred and twenty years after its founding, Alliance is the world's leading manufacturer of commercial laundry equipment, and it also produces residential machines. In addition to Speed Queen, the company has four other brands and its equipment is sold in countries all over the world.

In the early days of the company, a miniature version of a Barlow and Seelig clothes washing machine was used by salesmen. Maxine Carter-Lome of *The Journal of Antiques and Collectables* noted that "Salesman samples are scaled-down versions of real commercial



**SECOND GRADERS FROM** Barlow Park Elementary School look at a salesman sample of a circa 1910 Barlow and Seelig washing machine.

products used to demonstrate their features and functionality to retailers or potential customers."

The Ripon Historical Society has two salesman-sized Barlow and Seelig washing machine samples and Alliance also has one in its artifact collection. A fourth known salesman sample is owned by descendants of the Barlow family.

These salesman samples were most likely produced between 1908 and 1912.

The first washing machines worked by people heating water on a stove and pouring it into a tin basin on the machine. Items that needed washing and soap were then added into the basin. The machines had a hand crank, which when pumped, moved an

agitator up and down, basically mimicking the scrubbing motion of hand-washing by lifting and churning the laundry items to remove dirt. Once the laundry items were clean, the water was removed via a plug on the backside of the machine and the clothes run through a separate wringer to remove most of the moisture. Items were then hung on a clothesline to dry. The company's first washer powered by an electric motor was built in 1911.

Students and adults alike have a hard time identifying what the salesman-sized washing machine is even when told that it is a miniaturized version of the original object. Many people guess that this artifact is a coffee or food grinder.

### Toaster

People visiting the historical society often think that a stovetop toaster is a cheese grater.

This type of toaster is placed on hot stove or over a fire. The toaster cooks one side of a bread slice at a time. Once one side of the toast is done, it would be turned over to toast the other side.

This type of stovetop toaster still can be purchased today. The Amish who live just south of Ripon and others who live off the electrical grid still use a stovetop toaster. Toasters such as this one also are used for camping. Several types of stovetop toasters are available on Amazon for around \$10.



**A STOVETOP** toaster sits on the top right-hand side of the wood stove in the historic kitchen of the Ripon Historical Society museum. *submitted photo*



**THIS FEED BAG** holder was given out by the Ripon Roller Mills, which was one of the many mills once found in Ripon. *submitted photo*

### Feed bag holder

Many times, the artifacts donated to the Ripon Historical Society are hard to identify. Recently, the society received a wood and metal object that was given out as a promotional gift by the Ripon Roller Mills.

This object had the look and size of a clothing hanger. The donor of the artifact utilized social media and Google Lens to identify the use of this item as a feed bag filler. The bag filler was hung on a wall and a feed bag was hung on its arms holding it open. This made the bag easy to fill with oats or other types of animal feed.

Various types of feed bag holders still are available for sale today.

The Ripon Roller Mills was just one of the many mills once found in Ripon. At one time, several mills were located on Silver Creek in Ripon. The creek provided vital water power to operate flour and grist mills, which were one of Ripon's first industries.

The first Ripon Mill was built in 1850 and was located where the Ripon Public Library is found today, 120 Jefferson St. In approximately 1866, a new Ripon Mill was built in the same location. This building burned to the ground in 1879. When a new mill was built, it was changed from a stone-grinding process to a roller process.

The mill was renamed the "Ripon Roller Mill" in 1891 and was enlarged to become the biggest flour mill in Ripon. In 1925, the Ripon Roller Mill discontinued milling flour and instead concentrated on feed and grains. It was the last mill to still be located on Silver Creek and it burned to the ground in 1962.

*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](http://www.riponhistory.org), [facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety](https://facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety) or [instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/](https://instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/).*

### Portable curling iron heater

While the first electric curling iron for hair was invented in 1959, curling irons date back to the mid-1800s.

Early curling irons had wooden handles and the round metal barrels were heated over open flames on stoves, in oil lamps and on specially made curling iron heaters.

The historical society has a collapsible curling iron heater. Wooden handles of a curling iron would have sat on folding supports on the one side of the heater.

Lighter fluid was added to the other side and lit to create heat to warm up the metal barrels of the curling iron which sat above it. The heater folded into a 4.25-by-2.5-by-1-inch rectangle for easy storage.

Many times, modern identification methods such as Google Lens are used to determine what an obscure object like the curling iron heater is and how it was used. Google Lens is a smartphone feature that enables someone to scan an item and then image



**THIS COLLAPSIBLE CURLING** iron heater is found in the collection at the Ripon Historical Society. It came from the first beauty salon in Ripon which operated from 1912 until 1965. Electric curling irons were not invented until 1959. *submitted photo*

recognition technology matches the photo with like items for identification.

The historical society portable curling iron heater came from the first beauty salon in Ripon. It operated from 1912 until 1965 at 508 Watson St., the current location of the Ripon Historical Society.

Today, butane operated curling irons are available for people who do not have access to electricity.