

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

Gift of TV enabled Belle Lawson to watch 1968 election

The eyes and ears of America have been tuned to the presidential election on Nov. 5, 2024.

Years ago, people had to read the newspaper to find out information on candidates. Parades, rallies and stump speeches by surrogates also happened throughout America.

In addition, people read printed campaign materials, listened to political songs, looked at posters tacked up around their community and — if they were lucky — saw the candidate themselves give a speech, perhaps from the back of a stopped train.

This changed when radio became prevalent throughout the



BELLE LAWSON LIVED at 515 Ransom St. from 1919 until her death in 1973. She left the house to the Ripon Historical Society in her will.

country in the 1920s and 1930s and people could listen to the

news and speeches. Today, we get the news in multiple ways in real time as it happens.

During the 1968 presidential election, one elderly Ripon woman was happy to watch the news for the first time on television. That year the election was also held on Nov. 5 and Republican nominee Richard Nixon defeated the Democratic nominee and incumbent Vice President Hubert Humphrey along with the Independent party nominee, former Alabama Gov. George Wallace.

Louisa LaBelle “Belle” Lawson (1874-1973) was honored by the Ripon Historical Society on Oct. 27, 1968 for her 94th birthday. A special event was held in the afternoon called “Belle Lawson Day.”

At the event, Lawson was given a pink chrysanthemum and a new television, her first.

The June 6, 1968 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reported that “Miss Belle Lawson” was “a pretty little lady in her nineties who resembles Grandma Moses and is just as cute and spry.” The article went onto say, “Miss Lawson, somehow, has managed to function without TV but she does treasure a talking box that occupies a prominent spot in her drawing room. One little boy, a product of the computer age, recently visited Miss Lawson. When he saw the funny ‘box’ with the round shoulders, he stood and stared at it for a long time and then asked her what it was. Miss Lawson chuckled and said it was a Philco radio. ... Tran-



THIS UNDATED PHOTOGRAPH shows Belle Lawson, left, with her mother Melissa Adams Lawson in front of their home at 515 Ransom St. They lived in the house from 1919 until their deaths.

sisters are nifty and streamlined but they don’t come in loud and clear like Miss Lawson’s 40 year old Philco!”

Philco was the brand name of the radio that was housed in a large wooden case and sat on the floor. This article might have prompted the idea of a gift of the television.

Lawson was a former school teacher and librarian and had purchased the house at 515 Ransom St. in 1919. Lawson was only the third owner since the house was built in 1856.

After she passed away in 1973, she left the house and the barn, which sit just west of the Ripon Historical Society headquarters at 508 Watson St., in her will to the historical society. It remains in almost original condition and is listed on the National Register of Historic places as the Pedrick-Lawson House.

A 1968 advertisement found in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* for Bernie’s TV-Radio, 107 W. Fond du Lac St., shows that televisions sold from \$99.95 to \$189.95 which is equal to \$905 to \$1,715 today.

In a hand-written thank you note to the Ripon Historical Society dated Nov. 11, 1968, Lawson noted that Truman Heatley (1914-1976) “was kind enough to fix the electric outlet for the set.” To this day, the house only has two electrical plugs and no overhead lighting.

Lawson also noted that “The Johnson man did good work putting up the antenna.”

She further wrote in the thank you note that, “I was glad to have a TV before the election as it was interesting and exciting.” She also stated, “I have not known anything about a TV, so I am just getting acquainted with this one and I think I shall enjoy it very much this winter as I have to stay quite closely at home, when cold weather comes.”

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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THIS 1968 ADVERTISEMENT found in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* for Bernie’s TV-Radio show that televisions sold from \$99.95 to \$189.95, which is equal to \$905 to \$1,715 today. *submitted photo*

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