

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

Maxwell Street Days once was popular event in Ripon

In late July or early August, many people remember going to Maxwell Street Days on Watson Street in Ripon.

The first Maxwell Street Days in Ripon was in July 1958. The event was first sponsored by the Ripon Chamber of Commerce and later the Ripon Business Association. The event was held every summer for a little more than 40 years.

The origin of Maxwell Street sales goes back to the late 19th century in Chicago. Centered at Maxwell and Halsted streets, peddlers sold goods in the open from sidewalk stands and pushcarts, offering a variety of items from clothing to food. The Maxwell Street Market officially was recognized in the city of Chicago in 1912 and lasted for about eight decades.

The idea of having a Maxwell Street Days and a special day that merchants could place discounted items on the streets for sale was brought to Ripon by Norman Benson, who was a Chicago native and owner of Western Auto Store and Benson's Hardware Hank. He co-chaired the first Maxwell Street Days with Russell Schenke (1924-2003), who owned Ripon Variety and Schenke Printing.

Ripon's main commercial street, Watson Street, was shut down for Maxwell Street Days.

A 1958 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reported that, "Store clerks dressed up in bowler hats, overcoats, mustaches and sideburns, like the original Maxwell



SHOPPERS FILL WATSON Street during the 1962 Maxwell Street Days event. This photo is a screenshot from a YouTube video featuring Maxwell Street Days titled "Ripon, Wisconsin 1962."

Street in Chicago." The paper also noted, "Sales were good and women were in their glory as they searched for bargains at special reduced prices at colorful sidewalk 'shops' in front of regular stores."

In addition, the *Commonwealth* wrote in the first year that "Some of the advertised specials included a men's 'slightly soiled' sport coat for sale for \$4.88 and sport shirts for \$2.48 at Arthur's Men's Store; \$3 dresses at Kathryn's; and Johnson's was selling pots and pans, two for a quarter. Ronnie's Super Market gave away 45 watermelons to lucky shoppers. You could pick up a pair of tubeless tires for \$10.93 at Gambles 1/2

price sale."

Food was available from organizations such as the Lions, American Legion and Rotary. For years, the event featured a children's "anything on wheels" parade down Watson Street. Children's games, pony rides, and activities including a "kiddie train ride" were offered in the early 1970s, costing 10 cents per ride. Live music was featured many years and sometimes ended with a music concert. Some years out-of-town vendors sold flea market-type items. Over the years, there were bake sales and a library used book sale.

Some people remember participating in the Jaycee's Jail during the 1970s. Members of the Ripon organization, which focused primarily on leadership and business development through social service and was for people younger than 40 years, would roam Watson Street during Maxwell Street Days and pick out people and place them in a wooden "jail." This person had their friends and family make donations in order to raise "bail" to get them out of "jail." The donations would then be used towards Jaycee charitable projects.

"Maxwell Street Day was the end-of-the summer big deal



CAMPBELL STORES ADVERTISES its Maxwell Street Day sale in this 1960 ad that ran in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press*.

in Ripon," Sue Japuntich Silber recalled. "All of the stores would put out tables of whatever they didn't sell all year, along with deals. ... Sweet Corn was trucked in, cooked and served at make-do counters with butter and salt for free. I'm sure we ate our weight in sweet corn, along with getting new school shoes and supplies."

At first, Maxwell Street Days in Ripon was a two-day event over a Friday and Saturday. At some point, it changed to Friday only. However, in 1996, Maxwell Street Day expanded to a two-day event once again.

An August 1996 *Commonwealth Press* reported that this was done, "to meet the needs of two-income families too busy to break away to Ripon on a weekday" And so that "People would find it more convenient than ever to shop Ripon stores for clearance items and deeply discounted merchandise and services."

In 1996, the Saturday of Maxwell Street Days also shared billing with the first-ever Cookie Daze event. This event featured a cookie bake-off, cookie auction, bands, games and a "cookie

drop," from which children snatched cookies dropped 50 feet from a Wisconsin Power & Light boom truck.

By the summer of 2004, Maxwell Street Days had been replaced by the "Duck-tona \$500" event and the street sales were known as "The Duck-tona Daze city-wide street sale."

For this event, numbered rubber ducks were dumped into Silver Creek and traveled down the creek. The first duck passing under the finish line won a grand prize with other lesser prizes being awarded.

Those who want to relive the heyday of Ripon Maxwell Street Days may watch a 1-minute video on YouTube titled "Downtown Ripon, Wisconsin 1962," which shows the 100 and 200 blocks of Ripon on Maxwell Street Days.

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 follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.



DURING MAXWELL STREET Days in the 1970s, members of the Ripon Jaycees organization would roam Watson Street and pick out people and place them in a wooden "jail." This person had their friends and family make donations in order to raise "bail" to get them out of "jail." The donations would then be used towards Jaycee charitable projects. This sign from the Jail is now in the collection of the Ripon Historical Society. submitted photo

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