

Now & Then in Ripon ...

Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Magician Heaney amazed people in Ripon and surrounding areas

The modern magician Doug Henning (1947-2000) noted that “The art of a magician is to create wonder. If we live with a sense of wonder, our lives become filled with joy.”

That’s exactly what Gerald Heaney (1899-1975) offered to Ripon and the surrounding communities. Heaney preformed magic and brought wonder to local county fairs, fundraisers, Boy Scout programs and other locations in the greater Ripon, Green Lake and Berlin areas for many years.

Heaney’s interest in magic began at age 15, when he met Henry Boughton (1885-1965). Boughton became later known as the famous magician Harry Blackstone Sr.

Blackstone was going to perform in Berlin and asked Heaney’s parents, who owned a local jewelry store, to create a piece of equipment for him. After his encounter with Blackstone, Heaney became interested in producing supplies for the magic industry.

His family’s jewelry store closed in 1922 and Heaney started a mail order business for magic books, tricks, novelties, and other supplies. Heaney maintained this mail order business for years after he stopped touring as a musician.

“He grew up riding his bike to Oshkosh to see the likes of Oaks, Howard Thurston (1869-1936), Harry Houdini (1874-1926) and others,” regional historian Dan Friemark said of Heaney. “... Every time he attended, he would take a poster in remembrance of the shows he’d seen.”

As a result, Heaney was known to have collected thousands of posters on magic and magicians. After meeting the magician Blackstone and marrying Viola “Vi” McCarthy (1904-1994) around 1925 or 1926, he worked for a short time as an assistant to Houdini.

He then took his act on the road as “The Great Heaney.”

Heaney preformed all over the United States, Mexico and Canada. His wife, whose stage name was “Princess Aloiv,” acted as Heaney’s stage supervisor and chief assistant.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH OF magician Gerald Heaney performing for a Ripon Rotary meeting was featured in the January 25, 1946 Ripon Commonwealth Press.

RCP file photo



THIS IS ONE of the posters of local magician Gerald Heaney. Heaney had a farm located between Berlin and Ripon. submitted photo

She also played the organ to provide music for their shows.

Being ambidextrous, Heaney became adept at playing card manipulation. He first used card tricks in a 15-minute vaudeville act and also became an accomplished illusionist, ventriloquist and hypnotist. Eventually, Heaney became a touring act in which each show required about 5 tons of equipment.

When traveling magician Thurston died in 1936, Heaney obtained his magical props and items. Heaney was quoted as saying that it took a 40-foot long railroad box car to ship the props and items to Wisconsin for storage at his farm.

The book “Home Town Ties,” published in 1998, contradicts this and states that the Thurston show was shipped to Berlin, Wis. in three box cars.

“Gerald never hit the big stage like the others, but gave local Rotary, Eagles and high schools a show for their money,” Friemark said.

After he stopped touring, Heaney still did performances in the greater Ripon, Green Lake and Berlin area.

“Eventually, he became ill and the entire show sat in the barn on his farm, which was located between Berlin and Ripon,” Friemark said.

This was on County Highway F, also known as the old Berlin Road and the old Ripon Road.

“While he was in the hospital, someone broke into his farm and ransacked all of the trunks full of his magic show gear, acts and costumes, and several were stolen,” Friemark said.

Some items and posters were left behind after Heaney died and his wife moved to Oshkosh. Those items were sold.

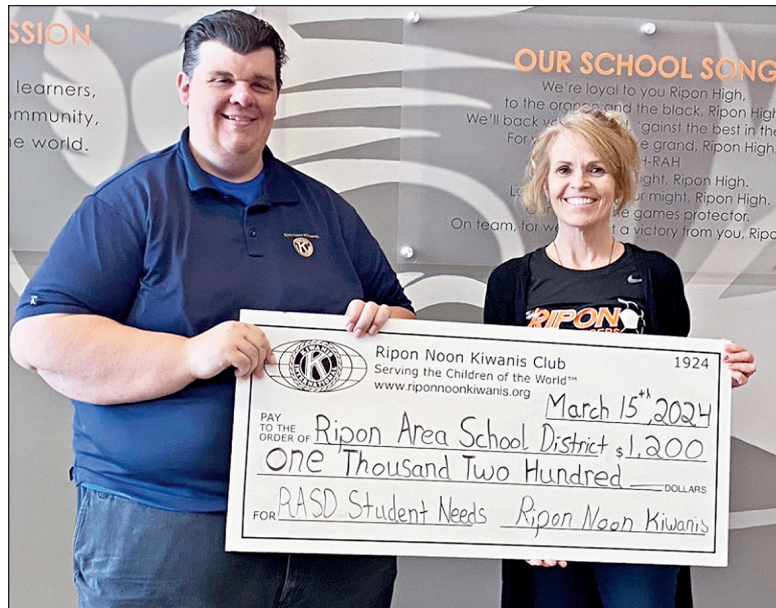
“The posters sell and are traded internationally in the millions by now,” Friemark said. “What was left of the act was sold and distributed all over the country ... much for exhibit in David Copperfield’s museum.”

Heaney is buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Berlin.

Two Oshkosh magicians performed a “Broken Wand Ceremony” using a golden wand at his funeral. This ceremony is one in which the magician’s wand is broken, indicating that as part of the magician’s death the wand has lost its magic. However, to commemorate Heaney’s long career, they left his wand unbroken.

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



RIPON NOON KIWANIS’ Brian Reilly present a \$1,200 check to fellow Noon Kiwanian and Ripon Area School District Superintendent Mary Whitrock for the district’s student needs fund. The money was raised March 3 at a Mystery Dinner. submitted photo

No mystery here: Dinner raises \$1,200 for RASD student needs fund

The Ripon Noon Kiwanis presented a check Friday, March 15 to the Ripon Area School District (RASD) for a donation to the district’s student needs fund, following its Mystery Dinner that was held Sunday, March 3 in partnership with the Ripon High School (RHS) Key Club.

Between ticket sales for the dinner, donations and a matching grant from the Webster Foundation, the Noon Kiwanis donated \$1,200 to the student needs fund.

Past President and Noon Kiwanis member Brian Reilly met with RASD Superintendent and fellow Noon Kiwanian Mary Whitrock to present the check to RASD on behalf of the Kiwanis.

The Mystery Dinner, during which guests were presented with a menu written in code and did not know what was being ordered until it was brought to

their table, was organized as part of the Ripon Noon Kiwanis’ 100th anniversary. To mark the centennial, the Noon Kiwanis has activities planned each month in 2024, including community engagements, additional fundraisers and initiatives that support the Kiwanis mission to serve the children of the community.

The Ripon High School Key Club is a student-led service organization dedicated to serving the community and is a sponsored leadership program of the Ripon Noon Kiwanis. Key Club members oversaw choosing a theme for the dinner, coming up with the menu, helped set-up for the dinner and served as waiters during the event.

To learn more about the Ripon Noon Kiwanis and its 100th-anniversary plans visit, www.riponnoonkiwanis.org/centennial.

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