

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

Football has grown in Ripon since the early years

As the football season starts again, the Ripon Historical Society takes a look back at the sport in Ripon.

Football was first played at Ripon College in 1891. Charlie Dunbar (1868-1959), an original member of the first college team and a Ripon native noted in a memoir that, “We used a bit round ball similar to the modern basketball. We had no gymnasium, no coach, no trainer and our paraphernalia consisted of our ball, a bottle of witch hazel, and one or possibly two substitutes.”

Uniforms were called “suits” and cost \$3.25 each (approximately \$110 today). Each player had to purchase their own uniform, which did not include any padding or protective devices.

At that time, American football was relatively new and many people did not know about the sport or understand it.

“Probably our greatest handicap was the woeful lack of football education,” Dunbar wrote. “Fans had to be made; they weren’t born that way. The general impression seems to be that the game was too rough and brutal.”

He also remembered that, “The newspapers were mostly inclined to be ‘contrary’ — playing up every injury or accident for its full news value and adding hostile editorial comment. The clergy were unanimous in their condemnation. One local ‘eminent divine’ pounded his pulpit and declared the game ‘bloodier than war, more brutal than the prize ring.’ Parental opposition, especially from the mothers, sometimes had to be reckoned with.”

Few college or high school football teams were available to play against Ripon College in the late 1890s. Wisconsin did not fund public high schools until 1901, so before the turn of the century, Berlin High School, founded in 1860 and funded by the city of Berlin, and Wayland

Academy in Beaver Dam, a private high school founded in 1855, provided football teams that Ripon College could play against.

The first year that Ripon College produced a yearbook was in 1907. The early college yearbooks showed the football “first team” playing area colleges and the “second team” playing Ripon High School (RHS), as well as high schools from Beaver Dam, Berlin, Fox Lake, Oshkosh, Omro and West Bend.

The first mention of an RHS team in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society is a 1903 school publication called “The R.H.S.” It reported that “During the fall term a football team was organized. Games were played with Berlin, Waupun and Omro.”

An RHS paper, *The Spectator* from the 1915-16 school year mentions the football season, stating that the football banquet “was the best in several years.”

The first RHS *Tiger* yearbook was printed in 1917 and featured the 1916 football team. No football team played in the fall of 1918 due to the fact that in the fall Wisconsin shut down all schools for five weeks due to the Spanish flu epidemic. This is not unlike the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

The 1921 *Tiger* yearbook reported that “The football spirit at Ripon High awoke after four years of undisturbed sleep. Head-gear and shoulder pads were furnished by the school.”

The first game of the 1920-21 school year was against Ripon College.

In 1926, RHS joined the Little Ten League. This was nicknamed The Holiday League due to various school colors. Ripon was known as Halloween due to its school colors of orange and black, having red and green school colors Berlin was known as Christmas and Mayville’s school colors were white and red, so they were Valentine’s



THE RIPON HIGH School football team of 1916 was featured in the first *Tiger* yearbook of 1917. Ripon High School has been playing football since the early 1900s. submitted photo

Day.

Since the Little Ten League was founded in 1926, RHS has played in many different conferences. Berlin High School is the only school that has consistently been in the same conference as RHS. This year, both schools will play in the South Central Conference.

In the early days of football, both the college and high school teams and fans would travel to away games via train when possible.

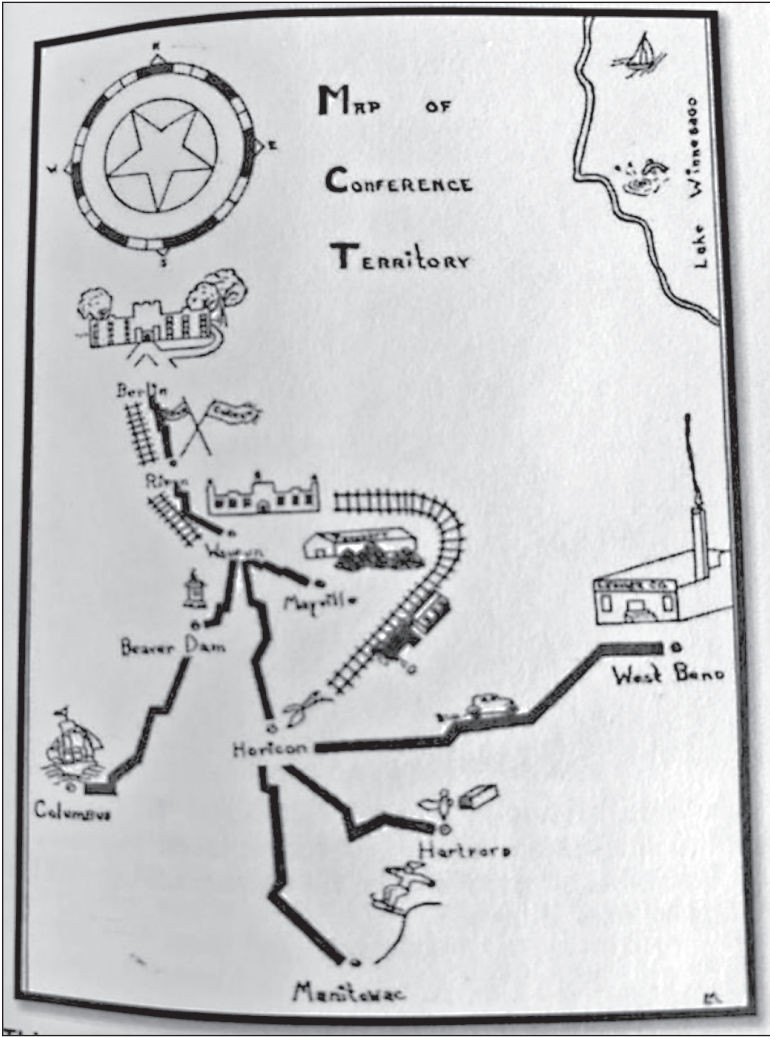
The college team first played football on a field where Great Hall now is located near the corner of Woodside Avenue and West Seward Street. It is believed that games also could have been played at the Ripon Fair Grounds, which was located north of East Oshkosh Street near Shepard Street.

Ingalls Field, located at the corner of East Fond du Lac and St. Wenceslaus streets, was established around 1890 for track and field events. Before and after he graduated from Ripon College in 1892, Dunbar headed a campaign to fund Ingalls Field for football.

For decades both Ripon College and Ripon High School played football games at Ingalls Field. Last year, Ripon College opened Hopp Stadium on the corner of Union and West Thorne streets. The first football home opener at the new on campus stadium was played Sept. 16, 2023.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays 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.



THIS MAP OF Ripon High School’s athletic conference was featured in the 1935 Berlin High School yearbook. Ripon has played in many conferences over the years and this year will move to the South Central Conference. Berlin is the only team that has been in the same conference as Ripon since 1926. submitted photo



THIS UNDATED PHOTO shows a football game at Ingalls Field. Both the Ripon College and Ripon High School football teams played on the field until Ripon College built Hopp Stadium on campus in 2023. Seen in the background is the former St. Wenceslaus Catholic Church and school. submitted photo

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