

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

Zobel's mystery instrument and connection to Shriners

Editors note: This is the second of two Now & Then in Ripon articles written by Ripon College students interning last semester with the Ripon Historical Society.

By James Branski

During the installation process of the Ripon Historical Society's "Melodies in Time" exhibit, which opened Nov. 7, the artifacts on display needed to be researched so that labels could be created for them.

Most of the research for the exhibit was straightforward with some exceptions for instruments that lacked maker marks or a detailed history of provenance. No instrument was as difficult to research as a brass, reed instrument once owned by Edgar Zobel.

Zobel is one of Ripon's most prominent musicians; he helped lead multiple bands and teaching the citizens of Ripon the art of music for decades.

The markings on the instrument indicated that the manufacturer was Holton. A resource listing every type of instrument that the company sold did not include the instrument.

This raised some questions. What was this instrument and why was it a part of the Zobel family's music collection?

The appearance of the instrument is similar to another one in the society's collection, also belonging to Zobel, called a "suona." The traditional suona is often made of wood and brass, which was different from how this instrument was constructed. The suona has existed since the third century, gaining popularity in parts of China.

It is commonly used in funerals and orchestras in China because of its distinct tone.

After further research, an instrument was discovered called a "musette," which looks exactly like the mystery instrument. The only notable difference between the musette and the suona is that the musette is typically made for and used by the Shriners, an organization closely connected to the Freemasons.

The Shriners describe themselves as "a fraternity based on fun, fellowship and the Masonic principles of brotherly love, relief and truth." The group also is philanthropic in nature helping support Shriners Hospitals for Children. The hospitals focus on helping children with physical disabilities like clubfoot, scoliosis and other orthopedic issues.

A closer inspection of the instrument revealed markings on it that read: "Model: Tripoli."

When searching through a timeline of Zobel's life, it was discovered that he was a member of the Tripoli Shriners for more than 40 years. The

Tripoli Shriners are the Milwaukee-based temple of the Shriners' organization. The musette was primarily used for the group's marches and parades, particularly the oriental bands.

This may explain why Zobel had this instrument in his collection, as he was an avid participant in the group and would have participated in its parades and philanthropic efforts.

Zobel also was a member of another Shriners' temple, called the "Nile Shriners," which he was a part of during his time in Washington in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

A 1923 *Ripon Press* article de-



EDGAR ZOBEL'S MUSETTE likely was used during his time with the Tripoli Shriners during parades. *submitted photo*



THE NILE TEMPLE Band marches in a June 1920 Portland, Oregon parade. Ripon's Edgar Zobel was part of the group and likely was in attendance or marching in this parade. *Ripon Historical Society photo*

scribes how Zobel toured across the West Coast participating in parades and conventions with the organization in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Seattle and Portland.

The Ripon Historical Society has a photograph in its collection of a Shriners' parade in Portland dating back to 1920 during Zobel's time in Washington and Oregon.

According to a 1965 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* article, Zobel in his early days wore a pedometer on his belt whenever he participated in Shriners' parades to keep a record of the miles traveled, which would end up totaling 60.

An article from *Ripon Weekly Press* from 1949 reported that the city of Ripon had multiple members of the Tripoli Shriners among its population, including an ambassador to the Tripoli Shriners, Omar Sund, who would help lead local Shriners events in Ripon and Oshkosh. Zobel joined the organization in the 1910s, becoming the Tripoli Shriners' first-chair trombonist.

The Holton company did not move from Chicago to Elkhorn until 1918, so this instrument was likely manufactured in the late 1920s after Zobel got back from Washington and Holton moved to Elkhorn. Currently Holton operates in Eastlake, Ohio, moving

there in 2008.

As a result of the research, enough information was obtained to assemble the label, giving a brief description and history of the instrument.

Writing these labels is one of the most important aspects of installing an exhibit because they can help visitors understand the significance of objects on display and why they are significant.

Today, the Tripoli Shriners have different units with their own themes, most of which aren't related to music; some of these units include animals, clowns, band and antique auto. Most of these units help in the Shriners' hospitals as entertainment for the patients, although some like the antique auto unit focus on participation in parades.

Those who would like to know more about the history of music in Ripon may visit the "Melodies in Time" exhibit at The Ripon Historical Society.

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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