

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

Back Porch Gatherings' building has interesting history

In a community like Ripon, there is history to be found everywhere — even underground.

This week's article is the fourth in a series about underground Watson Street.

Currently, many people visit Ripon to shop for interior furniture and decorative items at Back Porch Gatherings, a shop located at 217 Watson St. The store's vintage-vibe and unique items also make people curious what might have been housed in this location in the past.

In the beginning

The 100, 200, and 300 blocks of Watson Street are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as being in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District, making 217 Watson St. a contributing building within the register.

All the buildings on this block were built after the first major fire in Ripon destroyed buildings in 1868. As the block changed over the decades, 217 Watson St. was at one time two separate storefronts, numbered 215 and 217. In 1963, a wall was removed between these two buildings

creating one larger store space now known as 217.

According to the national register, the first-known business at 215 Watson St. was the Hill Brothers Saloon from approximately 1876 until after the turn of the century.

The Hill Brothers Saloon was owned by John (1840-1902) and Andrew Hill (1845-1929).

Their father, Asa (1810-1895), and mother, Philena (1816-1866), came to Ripon in 1849 and built and resided in only the second house in the new community.

John and Andrew's brother, Charles (1851-1936), was recorded as the second white child born in Ripon, and their other brother, Hazen (1836-1903), grew up to become Ripon's first fire chief.

The Hills also had a brother George (1847-1926) and two sisters: Sarah (1843-1864) and Rhoda (1838-?).

In 1901, the Ripon city directory shows that an A. Ogden operated the saloon during that year. Later, by 1909 and 1913 Andrew and Harry Hill were listed as the proprietors. (Harry might have

been George Hill's son.)

During prohibition (1920-1933), the building was reinvented as a soda fountain, which happened to many bars across America. After prohibition, a number of drug stores occupied the site, the longest being the Ripon Walgreen Agency Drug Store from 1948 to 1971.

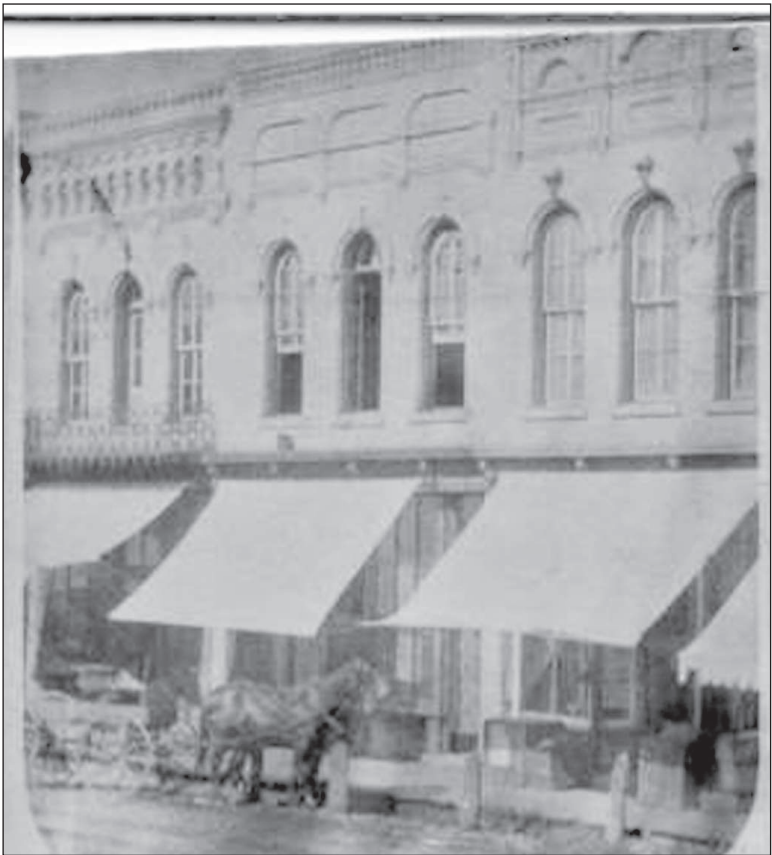
The store prior to its current renovation as Back Porch Gatherings was Imagineers Screen Printing products. Imagineers moved to 213 Watson St.

Handwritten Clues

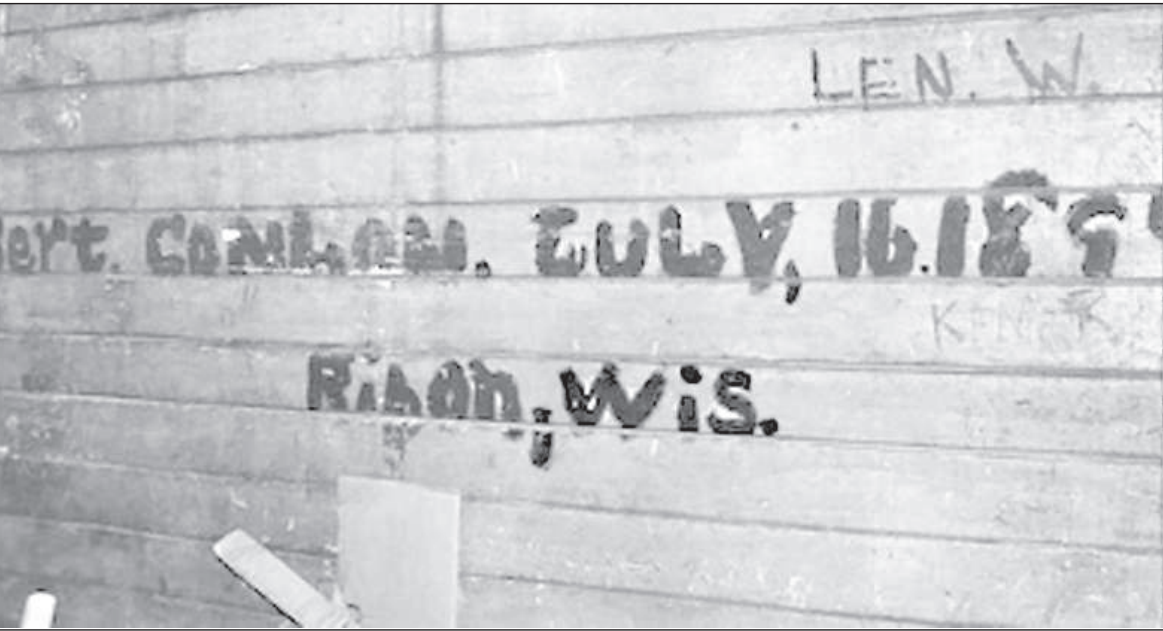
On an underground wall in the basement, "Bert Conlon, July 16, 1894, Ripon, Wis" is handwritten. This is believed to be James H. Conlon, who was born in Ireland in 1838.

Conlon came to Wisconsin in 1855 and served in the Civil War. On May 6, 1862 he was wounded in the thigh at the battle of Williamsburg and lost his leg and later he became a harness maker and moved to Ripon in 1892.

By the turn of the 20th century, this location became a clothing store, a shoe store and



AN EARLY 1800S photo shows the 215, 217 and 219 Watson St. storefronts. Back Porch Gatherings now occupies what was 215 and 217 Watson St. *submitted photo*



"BERT CONLON, JULY 16, 1894" is written on an underground wall in the basement of Back Porch Gatherings. Conlon served in the Civil War and became a harness maker. *submitted photo*

after prohibition ended it became a tavern and remained one until the wall between 215 and 217 Watson St. was removed and it became a large drug store.

There are more names on the walls of the basement of 215 Watson Street that the Ripon Historical Society are researching.

Look forward to another Now&Then in Ripon article about those names.

Does your building or home

have something interesting in the basement? Let the Ripon Historical Society know at riponhistsoc@gmail.com or call 920-748-5354.

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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