

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

60th anniversary of JFK's assassination: How Ripon reacted

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the death of President John F. Kennedy.

At 43 years old, Kennedy — the 35th president — was the youngest to be elected to this office. He was also the first and only Roman Catholic president until current President Joseph Biden was elected in 2021.

Just before noon on Friday, Nov. 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated as he rode in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas.

The death of Kennedy filled the front page of the Thursday, Nov. 28, 1963 edition of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press*.

The paper noted “residents of the Ripon community listened with disbelief early Friday afternoon when they heard the report that President John F. Kennedy had

been shot and killed by an assassin. ... Mayor John P. Adamski (1913-1971) officially proclaimed a week of mourning for the late President Kennedy and called for closing of business places and all city offices Monday.”

In addition, all schools in Ripon closed that Monday, and most churches and Ripon College held memorial services.

Former Ripon resident Phyllis Rock (1927-2002) worked in Washington, D.C. and was the secretary to Sen. Wayne Morse of Oregon. She was one of the first to hear the

news of the assassination when it came over the “teletype wire.”

She gave the report of the assassination to the official senate messenger, who then informed Sen. Edward Kennedy, the president’s

youngest brother.

Rock attended school in Ripon until seventh grade and her father was superintendent of the Ripon School District for 20 years. The Rock family is buried in Ripon’s Woodlawn Cemetery.

Ripon High School students were told of the assassination over a public address system in classrooms by the school guidance counselor. A radio was connected to the system so that classes could hear the latest developments.

“At school we were concerned as to what reaction the assassination would have on the students,” Ripon High School Principal John N. Zei (1927-2021) told the *Commonwealth Press*. “We constantly talk about democracy and its proper procedures and then something like this happens.”

Many students recall school being cancelled and everyone going home early to be with their families.

The *Commonwealth Press* headline on the front cover proclaimed, “Assassination Stuns Ripon.” A commentary from the paper read, “As official newspaper of this city, the *Commonwealth Press* takes this opportunity of expressing on behalf of all its citizens the shock and sorrow of our late president’s passing. ... This vital and young leader’s death created an overwhelming spirit of reverence that arose throughout the land as some rich cord. ... Silently and to themselves, Americans seemed to rededicate themselves to the love of their country. This appears to be the remarkable and only rewarding phenomenon of Mr. Kennedy’s death.”

Lynn Heatley, Ripon High School class of 1971, remembers being in fifth grade at Central School (now the Central Park Apartments at 517 Newbury St.). His teacher told the class of the assassination and Heatley said, “everyone sat in shock. It was like a member of the family died.” He added that “the rest of the day was a blur.”



THE FRONT PAGE of the Nov. 28, 1963 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* features this photograph of Ripon’s City Hall with the American flag at half-mast. All flags in the community were lowered to half-mast for 30 days to mark the assassination of President John F. Kennedy the week before.

submitted photo

Ripon resident Chris Wiegand remembers thinking “how could that possibly happen?”

Ripon Historical Society President David Sakrison recalls his teacher crying upon the announcement, and his older sister — who was on the brink of voting age — feeling that Kennedy’s assassination crushed the political hope of many young people.

David Carley, a chemistry professor at Ripon College who lived at 529 Fairview Ave., was spending a year in Washington, D.C. at that time. Carley, along with his wife and two teenage children, was part of the large crowd of people who lined Pennsylvania Avenue

to watch the funeral procession in which Kennedy’s body was transported from the White House to the Capitol rotunda.

“It was an extremely impressive sight,” Carley said. “You felt you were living history. With 300,000 people watching there wasn’t a sound...This awesome hush is hard to describe.”

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



THE CAPTION ON this photograph from the front page of the Nov. 28, 1963 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reads, “Downtown Ripon was almost entirely deserted during memorial services for the president on Monday morning. Businesses closed and citizens attended services in city churches. This was the scene looking south on Watson Street from the intersection of Blossom Street.”

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