

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

Ripon firefighter died after spectacular explosion and fire

National Firefighters Day is today (Thursday) and National Hospital Week runs May 7-13.

This year, the Ripon Historical Society recognize both with a story about the only firefighter from Ripon to ever die as the result of injuries caused by a fire.

Perhaps with today's modern Ripon Area Fire District firefighter training, practices, and equipment, emergency medical technicians, and the SSM Heath Ripon Community Hospital, this firefighter would have lived. Firefighters and health care professionals give of themselves everyday so that the rest of our community can stay safe and healthy.

On May 26, 1930, William "Willie" Harris (1865-1930) died due to injuries caused in what the *Commonwealth Press* called "the most spectacular fire in the history of Ripon."

Harris was a volunteer firefighter in Ripon for 34 years, a former deputy sheriff for Fond du Lac County and held the office of constable in Ripon for several terms. As a full-time job, Harris worked at the Ripon Packing Co. for more than 30 years as a plant foreman and superintendent.

The *Commonwealth Press* reported Saturday, May 24, 1930 that "a runaway horse broke a small pipe leading into one of the seven large gasoline and oil tanks of the Wadhams Oil Company bulk station."

The Wadhams Oil Co. was

located on the north side of Fenton Street near the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific railroad station.

The newspaper went on to state that "it is believed that a spark from the (horseshoed) hooves of the runaway horse striking the supply pipe line caused the explosion, which occurred at about 9:15 a.m."

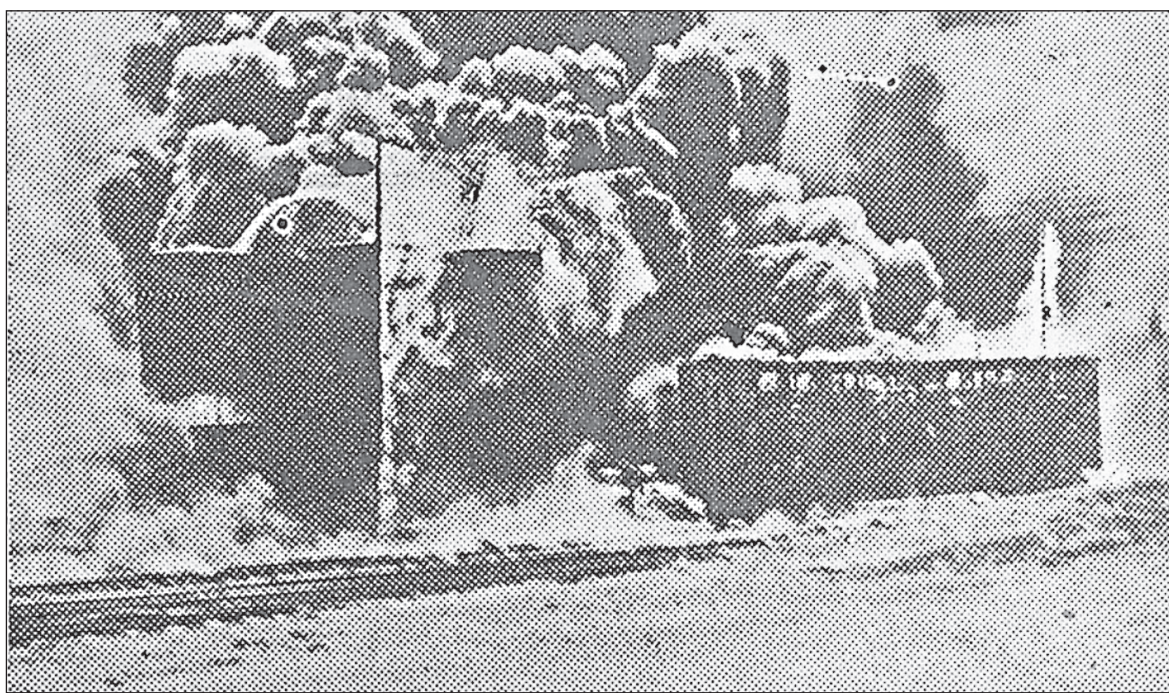
The first explosion wrecked the office and warehouse of the oil company.

"The later subsequent explosion of the tanks caused the burning of the Acme Handle Company, manufactures of wooden parcel carriers, the warehouse of the Ripon Knitting Works and the residence of Mrs. Edward Williams," the *Commonwealth* reported.

The explosion was heard in the Ripon Watson Street commercial district and surrounding areas and windows near the vicinity of the railroad station were shattered.

After the fire was first noticed, the manager at the Wadhams Oil Co. ran to shut off the main oil valve. However, as he was closing the valve, there was an explosion and the room burst into flames. His face and neck were burned as he ran for safety.

"The fire as it emerged from the top vat of the 15,000 gallon tank caused large clouds of thick, black smoke to surge skyward for hundreds of feet and were lighted from beneath by the surging flames," the *Commonwealth*



BLACK BILLOWING CLOUDS of smoke could be seen for miles following an explosion in May 1930 at Wadhams Oil Co. as chemicals continued to burn until extinguished on its own. *RCP file photo*

read. "The heat in close proximity to the fire was intense, and as one after another of the oil containers let loose the hundreds of spectators were forced back to safer positions."

The paper also reported, "Fire Chief Dodge sensed the futility of fighting the burning gasoline and oil with water and the efforts of the fire department were confined to the work of preventing the destruction of nearby buildings."

The fire encompassed five tanks of gasoline, one tank of kerosene and a tank of oil, all combined totaling 90,000 gallons of fuel. The vents on the large metal tank blew off and the fluids inside "bubbled over, running down the sides of the tanks, adding to the blistering heat and destructive force of the flames." The fire caused approximately \$150,000 in damages, which would be more than \$2.6 million today.

When the sixth tank exploded, it injured six firefighters

when they were showered by flaming gasoline.

The *Commonwealth* reported Harris's burns "were especially severe about his face and arms. His trousers were torn off as a result of the explosion, and he received bad burns on his legs. The outer skin was completely burned from his hands and arms."

Although having a hospital had been talked about for years in Ripon, the community did not have a hospital until almost six years later following this tragic incident.

The Ripon Municipal Hospital between Metomen and Griswold streets opened in 1936.

Instead, Harris and the others injured in the fire were treated at local doctors' offices.

The *Commonwealth* reported that on Sunday, Harris was moved to his own home on Scott Street. It is unknown why the 65-year-old Harris was not taken to a hospital in nearby Oshkosh, Fond du Lac or Berlin.

Harris died on Monday, the following day he went home.

Harris was the son of John T. Harris (1834-1915), who was the former Ripon postmaster, mayor and city treasurer. The family had moved to Ripon in 1873.

William married Ida Mumpy Harris (1863-1950) in 1888 and they had four daughters.

The funeral for Harris was held at his house on Scott Street on Wednesday, May 28, 1930 and fellow Ripon firefighters acted as his pallbearers. Firefighters from both Ripon and Fond du Lac had a special ceremony for Harris at the funeral. Flags throughout the city were flown at half-mast to honor firefighter Harris. He was buried at Hillside Cemetery.

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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