

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

Aerial innovation transforms how Ripon is seen

By Caron Sisko and Ian Stepleton

The Ripon Historical Society has an collection of aerial drawings and photographs that capture more than 150 years of Ripon history from a unique perspective. This collection continues to expand today with a new interactive display at the Pickard House Museum.

Interest in aerial views of Ripon began with hand-drawn views from a hilltop. Panoramic city maps, popular at the turn of the century, depicted United States towns from the perspective that came to be known as “bird’s-eye views.” These non-photographic old maps, depicted from oblique angles, showed street patterns, buildings and the predominant surrounding landscape in perspective. These maps were created during a time of rapid city expansion to showcase prosperity and growth.

Once completed by the artist, the view was printed and sold to residents who took pride in the depiction of their home city in all its individuality.

An 1867 Ripon city map by Albert Ruger (1829-1899) depicts an accurate and detailed map of the city, featuring Ripon College, residences, infrastructure and the Little White Schoolhouse.

Ruger was the first to achieve success as a panoramic artist. Born in Prussia in 1829, Ruger immigrated to the United States and worked initially



FRANK B. FARVOUR took this circa 1950 photo of Ripon from a plane looking northeast.

as a mason. While serving with the Ohio Volunteers during the Civil War, he drew views of Union campsites. He continued to draw after the war, and his prints include a famous lithograph of Abraham Lincoln’s funeral car passing the statehouse in Columbus, Ohio.

Urban communities in 22 states, ranging from New Hampshire to Minnesota and south to Georgia and Alabama, were sketched by Ruger. He also did sketches of places in Canada.

Riponite A.C. Jelleff (1847-1923) engaged in Ripon real estate in the 1880s and 1890s. He created an 1892 birds-eye view map of Ripon, featuring local businesses, schools, churches and hotels. For municipalities and businesses, birds-eye views provided a popular and positive way to promote themselves and the

city. From the 1880s to the early 1900s, bird’s-eye views were taken by camera from hilltops by amateur photographers by readily available Kodak Brownie box cameras and various folding bellows cameras.

The earliest known aerial photograph of Ripon by plane was taken somewhere between 1925 and 1930. While widespread, systematic aerial photography of Wisconsin by federal agencies began in the late 1930s, some isolated, commercial or municipal photos exist from the early 1920s and early 1930s. The earliest comprehensive, statewide aerial survey photography, covering most Wisconsin counties, was conducted between 1937-1938 and is available via the Wisconsin Historic Aerial Imagery Finder.

In the late 1940s, local, low-altitude photographs were taken for advertisements, such as those for the local airfield known as “Jack Gerrie Field,” which opened in 1946. The airfield was owned and operated by the Ripon Aviation Co. Frank B. Farvour was co-owner of the Ripon Aviation Co. in the 1940s and 1950s.

Farvour (1919-2006) was born in Ripon. He served in the U.S. Army, during World War II in the European Theatre and then in the Army Reserve, achieving the rank of lieutenant



STEVE DAVIS CAPTURED this photo from southwest Ripon looking northeast with his drone in 2017.

colonel. Frank was a partner in The Farvour Insurance Agency and was a registered land surveyor. He also was licensed as a small craft pilot. The society has a collection of aerial photographs taken by Farvour from his plane in the 1950s.

In 2016, a much more efficient way to view Ripon from the air became available.

A *Ripon Commonwealth Press* interview with Steve Davis by Ian Stepleton introduced the Ripon community to an affordable way to photograph Ripon from the air, utilizing a drone. Davis, a Ripon native, had just created his new post-retirement business called “Sky Shots Aerial Photography and Surveying.” In the interview, Davis, who began his career as a pilot and later an air traffic controller, said, “I have aviation in my blood. I’ve always liked things that fly.”

It is no surprise that Davis ran his business for a decade, offering aerial surveying at a fraction of what it once cost to obtain views of Ripon from the air. Davis used a 3D Robotics Solo drone with Go Pro camera, and later, a DJI Inspire 1 drone to capture photos and videos for real estate work, personal property photography, business advertising, construction surveying and more.

In the 2016 interview, Davis pointed out that drones “offer a unique solution to an old problem.” Obtaining aerial views was once much more

expensive, less safe and labor intensive.

Davis’ Sky Shots drones have made their final landing at the Ripon Historical Society after nearly a decade of compiling aerial videos and photos.

Davis retired his drones and generously donated them to the society. He also has gifted a laptop computer for public use, with a large collection of aerial photographs and videos of fire and police department events, building construction projects, community events, house fires, and search-and-rescue attempts.

Notable additions to the collection are drone photos taken from the same orientation as Farvour’s aerial photos by plane in the 1950s.

A side-by-side comparison of one view from southwest, looking northeast, reveals the superior detail of the drone photos and the changes over time to the Ripon landscape. Anyone is welcome to stop by the society during open hours, Fridays & Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., to look at these aerial views of Ripon.

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, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



STEVE DAVIS DONATED this drone that he used for his Sky Shots business to the Ripon Historical Society. *s ubmitted photo*



Ripon Area Preferred Business (RAPB) is a program developed by O’Rourke Media Group. RAPB features premier businesses throughout Fond du Lac and Green Lake Counties. These businesses are featured monthly in print, online, in social media and elsewhere.

To become a Preferred Business, please call 920-748-3017 or email office@riponpress.com

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