

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

## Historic Ripon: A city of music and craftsmanship

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

By Raquel R. Potter

While Ripon often is associated with the founding of the Republican Party in 1854, it also boasts a rich musical history that has shaped its culture.

Ripon's musical legacy is reflected in the talents of both Ripon College's famous alumni, as well as local residents and students.

In the 1930s, the Zobel Family Music Studios on Scott Street became a hub for musical talent.

Among the many instruments displayed were violins crafted by Frank P. Farvour of 932 Woodside Ave. Farvour was a Ripon resident for more than 50 years and a second-generation violin maker spanning over the course of three decades. Farvour, also a well-known contractor and builder,

had his violins marketed by Edgar and Lillian Zobel at the Zobel Studios.

The Zobel Music Studio featured several skilled instructors, including Phillip A. Laffey, who studied under some of the most renowned violinists of his era.

On April 7, 1929, Edgar Zobel hosted a recital in which Laffey gave a public performance using one of Farvour's handcrafted violins. Though the violin was unvarnished, its sound was comparable to the finest instruments Laffey had encountered throughout his training under Carrados and Leopold Auer.

This event is captured in "The White Violin," a memoir written by Farvour's grandson, Franklin B. Farvour, documenting his "Gramps" surprise.

"As I amused myself gazing about, I was startled to see the unfinished violin, strung and ready to play, on top of the piano. I just couldn't contain myself, excitedly I poked Gramps and striving to keep



**PHILLIP A. LAFFEY** was a Band Master in the 2nd Wisconsin National Guard.

*submitted photo*



**THE NELLIS VIOLIN** was handcrafted in 1900. *submitted photo*



**PICTURED IS THE** Zobel Studios storefront on Scott Street circa 1928.

*submitted photo*

from talking out loud said, "Guisepppe Guarnerius model 1690" violin crafted by Nellis in 1900. The instrument, donated by Earle Gibson, shows discoloration and wear of the varnish along the neck and upper bout of the body, fading from a burnt orange to a pale golden white, along with fraying of the bow hair, indicating it was frequently played, as all well-loved instruments are.

The unexpected use of the violin, brought to life in the hands of Laffey, left a lasting impression on the lives of both Franklin and his grandfather.

The full story of the White Violin is on display at the Ripon Historical Society at the "Melodies in Time: A History of Music in Ripon" exhibit.

According to the 1900 U.S. Census, Ripon's musical history also includes another notable violin maker in Daniel G. Nellis.

Born in Lyons, Wayne County, N.Y., his family relocated to Kenosha, Wis., in 1855. He enlisted in the band for the 4th Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry in July 1861, but was discharged in October of that same year only to be reenlisted in Company F of the 4th Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry. He was discharged again a few months later due to disability. He eventually settled in Ripon, where he lived until his death in 1902.

Currently on display at the Ripon Historical Society is a

"Guisepppe Guarnerius model 1690" violin crafted by Nellis in 1900. The instrument, donated by Earle Gibson, shows discoloration and wear of the varnish along the neck and upper bout of the body, fading from a burnt orange to a pale golden white, along with fraying of the bow hair, indicating it was frequently played, as all well-loved instruments are.

A 1898 *Ripon Commonwealth* article reported that not only did Nellis create one violin like the one on display at the Ripon Historical Society, multiple violins existed that he sold in a single week — suggesting that this was an important part of his life. Notably, he named one of his daughters Viola, perhaps as a nod to his connection with the stringed instruments that he created.

Today, Ripon's musical

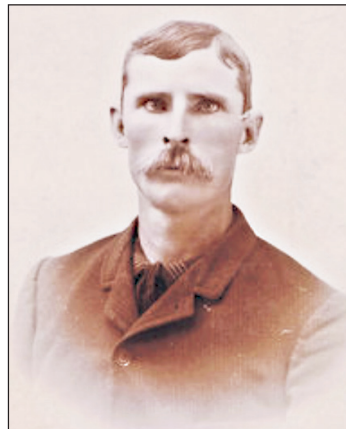
heritage remains significant as it showcases the continued value of local craftsmanship and the arts in shaping its identity.

In an era where mass production often overshadows individual artistry, the legacy of figures like Frank P. Farvour, Laffey and Nellis highlight the importance of preserving and celebrating traditional skills, honoring not only the past but also inspiring

current and future generations to engage with their community's artistic and cultural life.

*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.*



**FRANK P. FARVOUR** is pictured on what is believed to be his wedding day in 1890.

*submitted photo*

### ORTHODONTICS



(920) 748-7130

sensationalsmileswi.com

### ORTHOPEDIC SURGEON



(920) 560-1000

osifv.com

### PROPANE



(920) 748-5005

coleoilandpropane.com

### WELLNESS



(920) 894-1374

Pathwaystoabetterlife.com



**R**ipon 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](mailto:office@riponpress.com)

