

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

# Ripon business owner Milt Werdin bled green and gold

With the Green Bay Packers kicking off their regular season Friday against the Philadelphia Eagles in Brazil, the Ripon Historical Society remembers one of Ripon's biggest Packers fans.

Milton "Milt" Werdin (1912-1998) was born in Ripon and was a member of the Ripon High School class of 1931.

He married Clarabelle Souls Werdin (1913-1983) in 1938. After serving in World War II Werdin came back to Ripon and drove a laundry truck for Ripon Laundry for 17 years and also was a constable in Ripon.

Starting in 1949, Werdin became the custodian of what is known as the "Selfridge Apartments" at 602 Watson St. He lived in the building until he passed away. He is best known in Ripon for owning Milt's Liquor from 1947 until 1993.

Werdin was a diehard Green Bay Packers fan and started attending Packers games in the early 1930s. Werdin remembered that at that time, it cost \$3.50 to attend a game and Curley Lambeau was the coach.

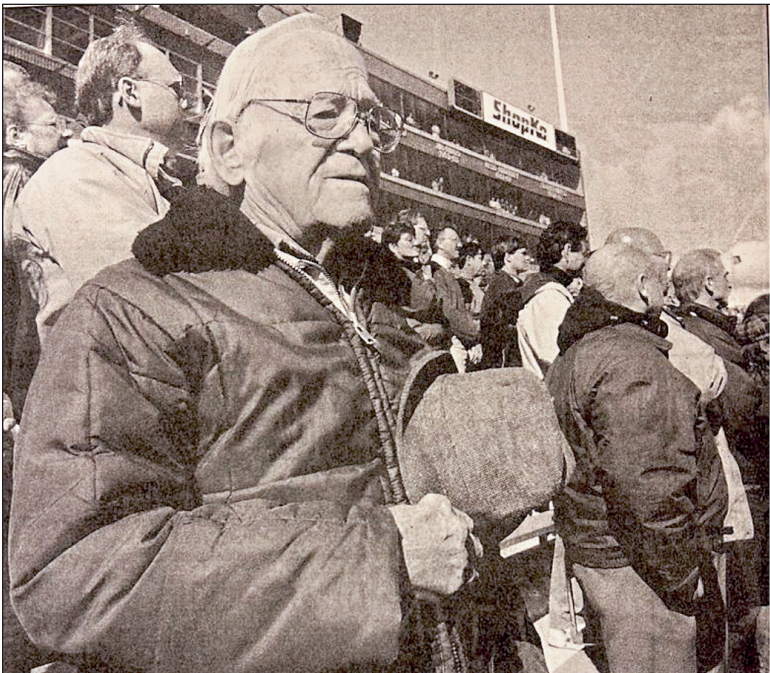
Earl "Curley" Lambeau played tailback from 1919-1929 and then coached the Packers to six NFL championships in 1929-31, 1936, 1939 and 1944.

Brent Hensel, the Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame curator, reported that at that time game tickets cost \$.40, \$1.10 and up to \$3 each. (Approximately to \$8.53, \$23.43, and \$66.03 today.)

Werdin purchased season tickets in 1938 and over his lifetime only missed seven home games. Obtaining tickets to Packers games was a bit harder when Werdin became a fan.

"The Packers set up a ticket office in 1936 at the Legion building, which faces Walnut Street and stood closer to the northwest corner of the property known as 'Legion Park,'" Hensel noted. He went on to say, "The ticket office operated out of the building until 1949. Prior to this, the Packers only 'unofficial' ticket office was in the older *Green Bay Press Gazette* building on Walnut Street. The office staff would sell tickets while also handling want ads or legal notices in the newspaper."

In the fall of 1991, Werdin had a heart attack and was hospitalized



THIS CIRCA 1994 photograph shows Milt Werdin at a Green Bay Packer home game. Werdin started attending Packer games in the 1930s and obtained season tickets in 1938. *Tim Lyke photo*

at Theda Clark Hospital in Neenah. While in ICU, Werdin received a letter from then Green Bay Packers coach Lindy Infante (1940-1991).

The letter read in part: "Just a short note to let you know we are thinking about you. It's always a bummer to be sidelined with an injury or illness. We hope that you will be feeling better soon. We know that you have been a loyal Packer fan for many, many years. It's because of people like you that we have been able to remain as one of the best known clubs in the world."

Werdin told the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* that "I worship that letter. I kind of think that's what put me back on my feet."

Werdin decided to sell his liquor store in 1992, his 54th year of owning Packers season tickets.

He noted in a *Ripon Commonwealth Press* article from that year, "the doctors told me if I want to see any Packer games I better give up the store. That's the only reason I'm giving it up."

Up until his heart attack in 1991, Werdin only had missed three Packers home games. He sat in section 22 near the 35-yard line and 25 rows up.

The Sept. 2, 1976 *Commonwealth* reported that "Over the years, he's met distinguished people in the stands such as Richard Nixon, Miss America, astronauts, Hollywood celebrities, etc."

Perhaps the most famous game that Werdin attended was the 1967 Ice Bowl when temperatures were 13 degrees below zero. Athletes weren't the only ones to sustain injuries at Lambeau Field that day due to the cold weather.

Ripon's most prominent Packer backer froze his right ear at the game, leaving it permanently numb.

"It's deader than a doornail," Werdin told then-*Commonwealth Press* publisher Tim Lyke. "You could stick a pin in there."

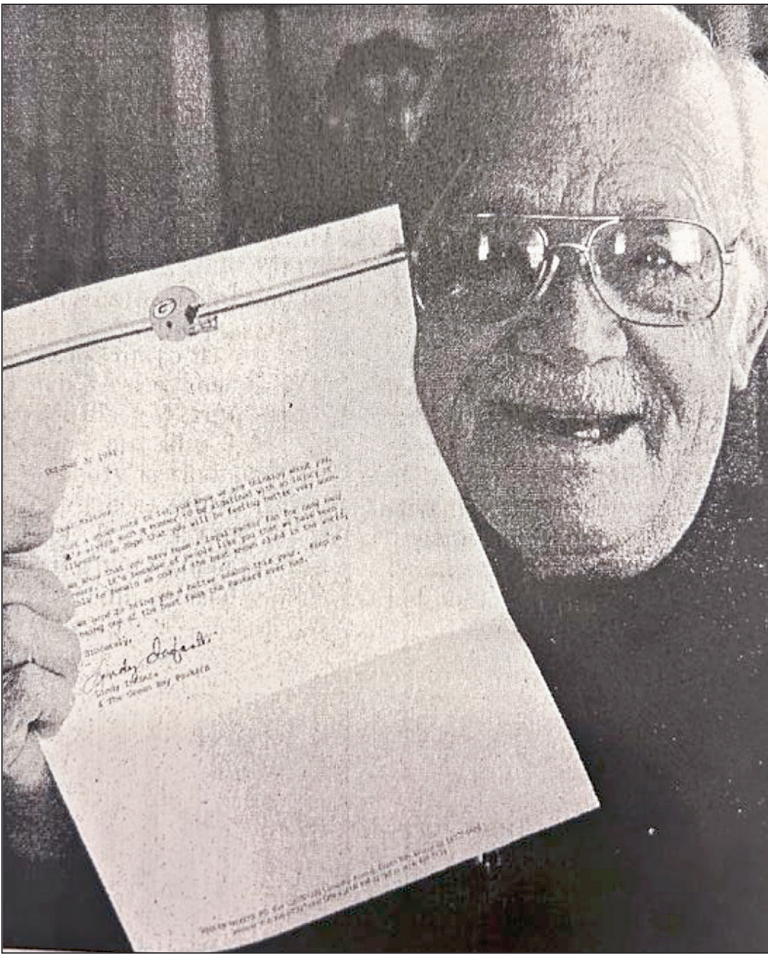
The 1945 Ripon Telephone Directory was the first year to list the "Ripon Liquor Store," located at 111 Blossom Street with Joseph H. Rake (1897-1965) as the owner. In August 1947, Werdin purchased the store from Rake.

A 1952 *Ripon Weekly Press* had an advertisement celebrating the grand opening on Dec. 6 for "Milt's Ripon Liquor Store" at its new 119 Blossom St. location.

Werdin noted that he was never robbed, but that he had three attempted break-ins over the years. He also said that he kept a very clean store and maintained a family atmosphere, handing out candy to children.

His wife worked alongside him until she passed away.

Since approximately 1949, Werdin featured liquor under his own brand label. "Milt's" brand included bourbon, brandy, whiskey,



MILT WERDIN SHOWS the letter he received from Green Bay Packers coach Lindy Infante in 1991 while he was recovering from a heart attack. *Tim Lyke photo*

gin and scotch.

The Ripon Historical Society has a bottle in its collection which contained Milt's whiskey.

The *Commonwealth Press* reported that there was one bottle in his liquor store that Werdin would not sell. It was autographed by Packers' legend Ray Nitschke (1936-1998), to "The World's Greatest Packer fan."

Nitschke, who was a liquor salesperson for a short time, was a linebacker for the Packers and is in the NFL Hall of Fame.

Werdin officially retired on Jan. 1, 1993 and Milt's Ripon Liquor Store was sold to John Cujak, who then closed the store in 1996. The building then sat vacant until 2000, when the city of Ripon razed it to create more parking behind the 200 block of Watson Street.

Many customers remember Werdin for the rocking chair in the rear of his store with the football games playing on the TV near it. Some recall his high pitched greeting of "What'll it be, boys?" Others remember the store's drive-through window, and some recall an "air-mail" mailbox positioned near the top of his building. However, only a few remember attending a Packer game with Werdin.

"I had the privilege of accompanying Milt to a game in 1994," Lyke said. "When most others

were dressed in green and gold, this unflashy man wore grey slacks, an old blue coat and his fedora. The former liquor store owner didn't drink and rolled his eyes as he told me a cup of beer at the time cost \$2.50, noting that he could buy two six packs at Milt's for that amount."

A 1976 *Commonwealth* noted, "If they ever make a Hall of Fame to enshrine Packer fans, surely Milt will be one of the first candidates up for canonization."

The year that Werdin died the Green Bay Packers started the FAN Hall of Fame to honor one devout and longtime Packers fan each year.

In his four and a half decades of owning Milt's, Werdin took only three vacation days.

"He told me that he and Clarabelle would get as far as Pickett and then turn the car around," Lyke said. "... Milt's vacations were always to Lambeau on Sundays. For that reason and many others, the Packers FAN Hall of Fame should induct Werdin posthumously."

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.



ABOVE, THIS UNDATED photograph shows Milt Werdin in his liquor store at 119 Blossom St. Many people from Ripon remember him asking, "What'll it be today, boys?" Right, the Ripon Historical Society has this circa early 1960's bottle in its artifacts collection. The bottle came from Milt's Ripon Liquor Store, which operated for 46 years. *submitted photos*



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