

Now & Then in Ripon ...

Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Henry shares boyhood memories of Sam Pedrick

By Dennis C. Henry

Residents and newcomers to Ripon in the first half of the 20th century, such as my parents and I were in 1952, would naturally become aware of the name Sam Pedrick (1868-1963). It was inevitable in our case since my father, Robert Henry, had been hired as the new chairman (and then only) physics professor at Ripon College, and also because our family of five had joined the First Congregational Church.

When I mentioned these connections to Ripon Historical Society Administrator Steve Arbaugh, he urged me to pull together and share my recollections of Pedrick, in a timely connection with the ongoing restoration of Pedrick's ancestral home — the historic Pedrick-Lawson house located at 515 Ransom St.

I am sure that there are longer-term residents of Ripon who are in a far better position than I to recall Pedrick.

With that disclaimer, and my encouragement of people to step forward, I humbly offer below what lawyer, historian and author Pedrick would almost certainly point out is "not best evidence."

For much of his long life, Pedrick was a leader, volunteer, chronicler and benefactor to numerous Ripon organizations and institutions, starting with his alma mater (Ripon College Class of 1891) and nearby First Congregational Church.

I remember seeing him first after a Sunday service at church, where he went out of his way to introduce himself and welcome our family. It wasn't long before I started seeing his photo in the *Ripon Commonwealth* and college publications, as well as again in person.

My most regular sightings of Pedrick were during the services at "First Congo" after I had been "drafted" into the Junior Choir in the fall of 1953 by Alice Rhein (1910-1995), the wife of the Rev. Victor M. Rhein (1909-1959).

The Ripon civic event that



**SAM PEDRICK WORKS** at a desk. He was a founding member of the Ripon Historical Society, attorney, historian, published author, multiple organization volunteer and Wisconsin State Historical Society curator.

submitted photo

remains most vivid in my memory was the parade and later ceremony at the Little White Schoolhouse on March 20, 1954 to celebrate the centennial of the founding of the Republican Party.

The *Commonwealth* reported that "during the parade, there was no specific mention of the Republican Party — just the founding to withhold slavery from being expanded into the Northwest Territory of the United States ... And there was a live elephant (on loan from the Hagen Circus) as a symbol or mascot of the GOP — plus a live donkey for the Democratic Party — both included in the parade."

Now, I can't swear that Pedrick was one of the notables present. He was a Democrat according to "Ripon College: A History," which was written by Robert Paul Ashley and George H. Miller and published in 1990, but I can't imagine that he wasn't. There were more than 10,000 people in Ripon for this event including local residents.

The highlight of the evening was the lighting of the gas lantern in front of the Little White Schoolhouse, when President Dwight Eisenhower closed a

telegraph switch in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Western Union Telegraph Co. I remember asking my father how long it would take the electricity to travel that great distance. He said it would take less than a second.

My last recollection is a childish confession that, for a brief period during our Ripon years, I thought Pedrick (or perhaps a brother of his) was a movie star, appearing as American actor and producer Charles Coburn (1877-1961). To my young eyes, there was something of a resemblance between these two famous men, even though I never saw Pedrick with a cigar or wearing a monocle. Fortunately, I kept that misimpression to myself, at least until now.

*Editor's note: Dennis C. Henry is a professor emeritus of physics at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn.*

*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.*



**WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY** Director and CEO Christian Overland, left, presents the Reuben Gold Thwaites Trophy to Ripon Historical Society President David Sakrison, right, last year as Wisconsin Historical Society Board of Curators President Angela Bartell smiles.

Jonathan Bailey photo

Ripon Historical Society is returning the Reuben Gold Thwaites Trophy

Almost one year since it was recognized the Wisconsin Historical Society's Reuben Gold Thwaites trophy, the Ripon Historical Society readies itself to return the traveling award.

Similar to the NHL's Stanley Cup tradition, the winner of the Thwaites Trophy has its name engraved among prior winners and is allowed to hold the award for one year before it must be returned to Madison for presentation to the next winner.

The Ripon Historical Society was presented the Reuben Gold Thwaites Trophy at the end of last summer for its continual commitment to discover, preserve and share Ripon's history.

The historical society's work includes rotating exhibits at its museum buildings at 508 Watson St. and 515 Ransom St., free public events and community partnerships with grade and middle schools, as well Ripon College.

In addition, the historical society partners with the *Commonwealth*, Ripon Rotary, the city of Ripon, the Ripon Public Library and the Ripon Chamber of Commerce, among others.

Thwaites (1853-1913) was a librarian, historian and editor. He attended public schools and after moving to Oshkosh in 1866 paid for his own college education by working on local farms, teaching in schools and writing for newspapers. He eventually enrolled in Yale University in 1874.

Following this, he settled in Madison, where he became editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal* and assistant to the Wisconsin Historical Society executive officer.

Thwaites was later granted the state historical society's title of executive officer in 1887, but decided his role would not be limited or tied to a desk. Instead, he "took to the rails" and began traveling by train in 1898 to encourage local communities to begin preserving their history.

One of his first stops was in Ripon. Thwaites was so compelling that he influenced Ripon to charter its own historical society in 1899, making it today the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin.

The Thwaites Trophy was created to honor the energy, guidance and contributions that Thwaites brought to the state, including balancing the past and present throughout his work.

During 2022, the year that the Ripon Historical Society received the award, a record number of more than 1,000 visitors toured the historical society's museums and attended events, which was a 65% increase over the prior year. Facebook and media posts reached more than 70,000 individuals, a 60% increase over the prior year, and the website was visited by 5,500 individuals, a 99% increase over the prior 12 months.

The age ranges for social media and website audiences included both males and females ages 18-65+ years-old.

For more information about the Ripon Historical Society, go to [www.riponhistory.org](http://www.riponhistory.org) and [www.facebook.com/riponhistory](https://www.facebook.com/riponhistory) or visit in person Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at 508 Watson St. in Ripon.



**INDIVIDUALS GATHER AT** the Little White Schoolhouse in 1954 for a 100th-anniversary celebration of the founding of the Republican Party.

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