

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

From band wagons to bandshells: Concert tradition endures

By Pat Grahm

This year's Horicon Bank Ripon Summer Concert Series is celebrating its 33rd season.

The outdoor concert series is held Friday evenings from late May until early September on the Village Green at the corner of Watson and Seward streets. Local sponsors make the summer concert series free to the public.

The Village Green and bandshell are new additions to Ripon, being developed in the 1990s. However, having summer outdoor music in the summer is nothing new to the Ripon community.

It is believed that a city band was founded in 1880. The first mention of a community band in Ripon was found in a Sept. 29, 1881 issue of the *Ripon Free Press*. The band played in Ripon for various events, and throughout the years there were mentions in local newspapers of summer concerts by the band, who sometimes played alongside professional musicians. After almost six decades of entertaining Ripon, the city band disbanded in the late 1930s.

The Aug. 21, 1914 edition of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* stated that "An immense crowd gathered in Ripon last week Thursday evening to listen to the band concert. The local musicians were assisted by the band of the Bev-Ridge Players, a theatrical troupe who played Ripon last week."

Summer concerts on Thursday nights in the town square, located in the 100 block of Watson Street (now known as Rotary Square), were announced in the June 14, 1917 *Ripon Weekly Press*. The article informed that "The concerts have become more popular every year, and nearly every concert night during the past five years the square has been jammed by humanity all eager to listen to the selections as rendered by the Ripon band boys. Not only did people come from the surrounding community but flocked to here from nearby cities and villages."

This article also noted that

funding for the concerts was "easily forthcoming" from the downtown merchants. There was no mention of summer concerts in the 1918 newspapers. Perhaps this is due to America being involved in World War I and the Spanish flu epidemic being the most active that year.

The June 19, 1919 *Ripon Weekly Press* stated that "Those popular Ripon band concerts will commence for the season on next Wednesday and continue every Wednesday evening throughout the summer. The concerts will be held on the public square as usual, as this affords the best place for parking the large number of autos that visit the city every band concert night."

In the mid 1960s, former Ripon mayor John Wilson (1901-1990) wrote a column in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* on the history of Ripon.

In his column dated Sept. 30, 1965, Wilson wrote about summer concerts before World War II in Ripon saying that "Large crowds gathered on the street when the band played. It was always a happy occasion as people during those years had plenty of leisure and were not always in a hurry."

The musicians used a wagon as a makeshift stage.

"At one time, the band wagon was moved to the south block of main street, and it was always a special event when Eli Rice, the colored vocalist, would sing through his large megaphone to the accompaniment of the city band," Wilson wrote.

Under "City Briefs" in the June 26, 1919 *Ripon Commonwealth Press*, a sentence read, "The parties who took the steps from the band wagon are requested to return same at once, or legal action will be taken."

Wilson also noted in his column that "Once or twice during the summer, pavement dances were given on the city square, but dancing on the brick pavement was not the best. The music was played by the city band, and one steps, fox trots and waltzes were the popular dances of the day."



TODAY, VARIOUS BANDS perform each Friday night in the summer on the Village Green. Years ago, the city band and other groups performed in the street at the 100 block of Watson Street as shown in this undated photo.

submitted photo

Another mention of a summer concert season in the *Commonwealth* was found in the June 10, 1927 issue. The article explained that the high school band had gotten a new sousaphone and would loan it to the town band for the summer concert season.

The March 7, 1930 *Commonwealth* stated that "For some years the problem of financing the summer concert series has confronted the community. Subscriptions from the merchants have accounted for part of the expense and the city council has appropriated a sum of money for the purpose. Usually there has been a small deficit at the end of the year which the council has been asked to provide for through an appropriation. The council, desiring to get the sentiment of the public on the question, decided on the referendum for the April election."

In the spring election, the vote was a positive 714 to 455 to have the city help to fund the summer concerts.

The June 5, 1936 *Commonwealth* reported that "The Ripon city band will start the summer concert season next Wednesday evening, June 10, with a program to be presented on the public square. This



THE RIPON CITY Band, organized in 1880, gathers in 1902. Between the 1880s and late 1930s, the band played summer midweek concerts in the public square, now known as "Rotary Square."

submitted photo

concert will mark the revival of a custom abandoned several years ago. Stores in Ripon will remain open during the evening for the convenience of those who wish to shop as well as listen to the concert."

Whatever the year, summer concerts always have helped to foster a sense of community in Ripon. Both residents and visitors come together to enjoy performances, which bonds them together and creates new memories for people of all ages. Besides providing a sense of

local pride the concerts also contribute to the local economy as concert-goers utilize local restaurants, bars and retail stores.

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](https://www.facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety) or [instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/](https://www.instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/).

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