

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

A journey through Green Lake County's sheriff history

By Pat Grahm

The city of Ripon sits on the northwestern edge of Fond du Lac County. Its western municipal boarder sits on the Fond du Lac-Green Lake County line.

Many people in the community of Ripon over the years have had ties to Green Lake County and the city of Green Lake, which is located about seven miles west of Ripon.

Some people have wondered why Ripon is not located in Green Lake County. In 1859, Ripon petitioned to secede from Fond du Lac County to join Green Lake County and make Ripon the county seat. A referendum was held, but was defeated by 107 votes, leaving Ripon in Fond du Lac County.

Ripon College intern Jorge Verduzco researched the history of the sheriffs of Green Lake County this past spring. Verduzco, who majored in political science and minored in criminal justice at Ripon College, completed his project before graduating in spring 2026.

The Green Lake County Sheriff's website states: "This project drew upon numerous local sources, historical archives and personal stories that helped to illuminate the legacy of law enforcement in Green Lake County."

A volunteer from the Ripon Historical Society worked with Verduzco regarding how to access available local historical research sources. These included the Ripon Pedrick Genealogy Notebooks, historic regional newspapers, Find a Grave and Ancestry.com.

This volunteer also provided contact information for regional historical societies. The Berlin, Fairwater, Green Lake, Markesan and Princeton historical societies provided Verduzco any available information and photographs on past Green Lake sheriffs from their communities. Family members of more recent sheriffs also assisted with the project.

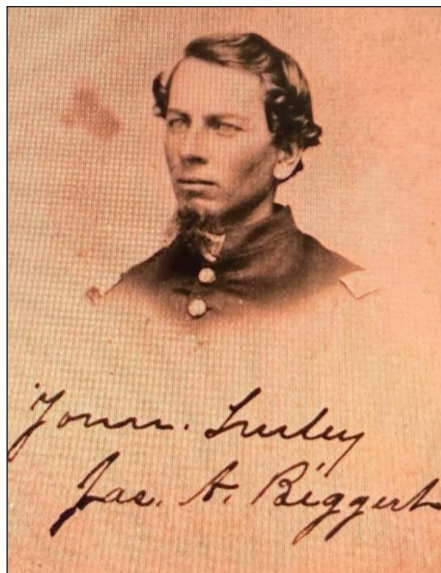
"Green Lake County has only existed since 1858, but its settlement started much earlier," Verduzco's paper stated. "Originally under the judicial jurisdiction of Brown County, the territory was established as Marquette County in 1836 and fully organized in 1848. ... Green Lake was separated from Marquette County in 1858."

The county seat moved a few times and in 1866 finally settled in Green Lake, formally known as "Dartford."

The election of sheriffs began before Wisconsin became a state in 1848. They remain as elected officials to this day. The state constitution mandates that sheriffs be chosen by the electors of each county on a partisan ballot.

The 1875 Historical Atlas of the Worlds Illustrated states that John B. Winchell (1815-?) was the first sheriff of Marquette County of which the present Green Lake County was a part. Winchell was appointed by Wisconsin's first governor until an election could be held.

The July 8, 1876 *Princeton Republic* notes that Winchell "was the first to settle in the town of Princeton in 1848." The March 29, 1906 issue of



JAMES A. BIGGERT (1838-1903), shown here in his Civil War uniform, was sheriff 10 years after Green Lake County was founded. He served as sheriff for two years from 1868 until 1870, as early state law allowed sheriffs to only serve only one two-year term. This changed to two consecutive two-year terms and today sheriffs are elected for four years with no term limits. *submitted photo*

the *Princeton Republic* stated that "The first house erected in the town of Princeton was three miles east of the village of Princeton. It was kept as a tavern by John Winchell. The first town meeting was held in this building."

An article in an 1875 issue of the *Princeton Republic* giving the history of Princeton in 1852 said that Winchell was a "irrepressible host of the Fox River House, seems to be a perfect encyclopedia of useful information and his capabilities were multifarious. Somehow he would manage to be deputy sheriff, serve on the grand jury and a witness in eight on 10 cases, all at the same time."

The Princeton Historical Society stated that Winchell had an early hotel and tavern outside of Princeton, which he moved to Water Street in the city. By 1855, he sold his business and moved to Crystal Lake.

When Green Lake County broke away from Marquette County in 1858, the first sheriff elected in the new county was Alfred W. Brown (1820-1891). At some point he moved to Minnesota, and in 1878 he moved to Moody County, S.D. In 1880, he helped to found Egan, S.D. and his occupation was listed as a shoemaker.

Other early sheriffs include Willis Gardner (1824-1900), who served from 1860 to 1862. The 1850 federal census lists Gardner as a farmer in Brooklyn. Isaac W. Morris (1828-1913) was sheriff from 1862 until 1864 and listed in the 1860 federal census as a farmer from Berlin. From 1864 until 1866, Lorenzo D. Olin (1818-1897) served as sheriff and is listed in the 1870 census as a "shoemaker and farmer."

Samuel S. Messervy (1842-?) was sheriff from 1866 to 1868. The book "History and Directory of Green Lake and Waushara Counties, and the City



THIS 1962 PHOTOGRAPH shows Ethel Lieske (1929-present) who was the Green Lake County sheriff from 1961 until 1962. At that time, state law did not allow her husband Frank Lieske (1930-1989) to serve more than two consecutive two-year terms. He served as sheriff of Green Lake County from 1957 until 1960 and again from 1963 until 1966. *submitted photo*

of Ripon, 1869" lists Messervy as an "agent for Wood's reapers, Esterly's seeder and Coe's horse rake." The 1870 census shows him living in Mackford with the occupation of "riverman."

Wisconsin had strict term limits for sheriffs and early legislation restricted them to a single two-year term. The law later allowed two consecutive terms.

This sometimes resulted in the sheriff's wife taking over the role of sheriff for her husband. After the husband's second consecutive term, the wife would run for election. If she won, she would serve for two years until her husband could then run again for sheriff. Sometimes wives took over the role of sheriff after the unexpected death of their husband.

This was accepted because at that time, the wife of a sheriff normally performed critical, day-to-day correctional and operatorial duties in the sheriff's office. This included cooking meals for inmates, responding to jail emergencies and the intake of prisoners.

Green Lake County has had three female sheriffs. These include Hazel Christensen (1895-1984), who took over as sheriff from 1944 until 1946 for her husband Alfred Christensen (1891-1970). Ruth Walker (1915-2017)

served as sheriff from 1950 until 1952. Her husband, Joseph Walker (1904-1978), was sheriff from 1946 until 1950 and again from 1952 until 1954. Ethel Lieske (1929-present) acted as sheriff from 1960 until 1962. Her husband, Frank Lieske (1930-1989), had two different terms as sheriff.

Earlier term limit laws changed in 1970, removing the provision that restricted sheriffs to two consecutive terms in office. Today, there is no limit on how many terms a sheriff may serve. In 2002, a constitutional amendment extended the term a sheriff was elected to serve from two to four years.

A Green Lake County Sheriff department Facebook post thanked Verduzco for his work on the project and expressed their "sincere gratitude to Ripon College for facilitating this internship." The completed project may be found at bit.ly/4xGlm8m.

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/.

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