

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

Wahoske Jess shares stories about one-room schoolhouses

With school in session for the 2023-24 year, the Ripon Historical Society reflects on simpler times when children attended one-room schoolhouses.

One-room schoolhouses started throughout the countryside around Ripon because at first there was no public school system in the United States.

At one time, approximately 6,200 one-room school houses were in operation in Wisconsin. By 1900, in Fond du Lac County, there were 158 rural schoolhouses in 21 townships.

Platted in 1835 by the U.S. Government Survey Department, a land ordinance stated that a schoolhouse was to be placed in Section 16 of each township. And every township needed to raise the money to support the school themselves.

One-room schoolhouses had only one teacher for first- through eighth-grade levels. In the beginning teachers only had an eighth-grade education, themselves. Later, teachers were required to have achieved their high school diploma, as well as two years at a teacher training-school also known as a “normal school.” Normal schools could be found in nearby Oshkosh (which started operating in 1871 and eventually developed into University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh) and in Berlin (opened in 1909.)

Teachers were responsible for more than just teaching. They had to keep the school clean, light fires in coal- or wood-burning stove to keep the school warm, pump water from a well for a drinking container, fill ink bottles, shovel snow surrounding the school and bring firewood into the school building for use and more. Sometimes older students assisted with these chores.

Students walked or rode horses to school. Teachers sometimes boarded with nearby farm families. Students ate homemade lunches carried in tin pails (many were empty lard containers) and food was sometimes warmed on the school’s cast iron heating stove.

Outhouse bathrooms were the only restrooms available. In later years some rural schools did have running water and inside restrooms.

Lorraine Wahoske Jess graduated from Ripon High School

in 1947 and from the Wisconsin Rural Normal School in Berlin in June 1949. Her five-year teaching certificate, issued by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, enabled her to educate students in “rural schools and elementary grades.”

After five years, when her teaching certificate would expire, she was required a third year of elementary training to continue teaching.

Jess first taught at Round Prairie School on Highway 49 on the way to Brandon. In an oral history recorded in 2018 Jess stated, “I loved that school. I had seven or eight students, two first graders, two second graders, one fifth grader and I had a ball. ... I’d go out on Sunday night to start the fire so it would be a little warmer. The neighbor brought in the water.”

The school had no running water and an outhouse bathroom.

Jess’ 1951 Rural School Teacher’s Contract (housed in the Ripon Historical Society Archives permanent collection) states that she made \$275 for nine months of teaching (the equivalent of approximately \$3,265 in 2023).

In October 1950, she married her high school sweetheart, Eugene Jess (1929-2005). They first lived in a trailer beside Jess’ parents’ garage on Hamburg Street.

Later they moved across the street, and in 1966 moved to 648 Emerson Ave., where they lived for the rest of their married life.

At one time, teachers who married were forced to quit teaching, causing the average tenure that a teacher was in the classroom to be only two years. By the time Jess became a teacher they were allowed to marry, however if she became pregnant she had to quit teaching.

“I thought I was pregnant, so I quit teaching, but then I wasn’t pregnant,” Jess said. “... I then found they needed a teacher at another school out northeast of Ripon.”

In the fall of 1952, Jess started teaching at Locust School, located east of Ripon on Highway 44.

At that same time, Jess did not know that she was truly pregnant with her first child — and when she discovered this she did not want to quit her new job. Instead she decided to wear a large “art smock” over her dress each day to hide her pregnancy.



TEACHER LORRAINE WAHOSKE Jess, back middle, is shown wearing her “art smock” with students at Round Prairie School — a one-room schoolhouse south of Ripon. Jess hid her pregnancy the entire 1952-53 school year by wearing this smock. Among the students in the photo are Arden Theune, Delwin VanderSlunt, Richard Ruenger, Orland Bly, Sharon Kaatz and Carol Jantz

submitted photo

This smock was cream-colored with a brightly colored collar and three brightly colored pockets. She noted that since the school was in the country and most of the parents were busy working on their farms she never saw any adults who might notice she was pregnant.

If the School Board or parents knew she was pregnant they would not have let her finish the school year. Her son, Cooper Jess, was born in June 1953 one month after school ended.

The smock she wore to hide her pregnancy during the 1952-53 school year was recently donated to the Ripon Historical Society along with a photo of her wearing it.

A year after having her son, Jess had a daughter and became a stay-at-home mother while her husband worked 44 years at Speed Queen (now Alliance Laundry Systems). Well known for her volunteer work in many Ripon organizations, Jess is quick to tell stories of her early teaching years and life in Ripon during and after World War II, and into the 1960s and 1970s.

Most one-room schoolhouses closed between the late 1950s and the early 1960s due to school consolidation and the development of public school systems.

Small rural schools were sold and today many of them have been torn down or converted to houses or meeting halls.

Round Prairie School is gone, however, the Locust School still stands next to a modern ranch home on the north side of the road just west of Pickett on the way to Oshkosh and is owned by a private individual. Several years ago, the Locust School was lifted using modern jacks and a new foundation was placed beneath it, helping save the building for the immediate future.

The most famous one-room schoolhouse in Wisconsin still stands today in Ripon at 1074 W. Fond du Lac St. Known as the “Little White Schoolhouse” and built in 1854, this one-room school is also the Birthplace of the Republican Party. Thousands of people have visited this building and national recognition has been given to anniversary events surrounding the Republican Party’s founding in that one-room building. This schoolhouse is open for tour Memorial Day through Labor Day every year.



LORRAINE WAHOSKE JESS taught for two and a half years at the Round Prairie Schoolhouse, which was located on the way to Brandon on Highway 49. Her father’s 1947 Plymouth automobile is parked alongside the building.

submitted photo

For more information about one-room schoolhouses, the book “One-Room Country Schools, History and Recollections from Wisconsin,” by Jerry Apps is available at the Ripon Public Library. Copies of the book also may be ordered by going to www.amazon.com/One-Room-Country-Schools-History-Recollections/

dp/0870207520.

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.



THIS PHOTO WAS taken during the fall of the 1952-53 school year at the one-room Locust Schoolhouse located east of Ripon on Highway 44 toward Oshkosh. Front row are, from left, Douglas Hargrave, Billy Waltenberry, Jimmy Waltenberry, John Hargrave; second row, Michael Smoody, Joanie Clausen, Norman Asmus, Sharon Smith; back row, Donald Cerney, Charles Siewert, teacher Lorraine Wahoske Jess, Jeanette Clausen and Johnny Waltenberry.

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