

# Now & Then in Ripon ...

Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society



**THE RIPON COLLEGE** Mask and Wig organization performs "The Dressing Gown", in March 1919.  
*Ripon College Crimson Yearbook photo*

## Ripon College Mask & Wig organization had strong reputation

Throughout history, Ripon College and the city of Ripon have enjoyed cultural events including public entertainers and activities such as street fairs, holiday events, opera house variety shows, live theater plays, orchestral music and bands.

Since the early 1900s, Ripon College offered their students the opportunity of participating in a glee club, orchestra, general music, oratory speaking and elocution, and drama club.

In 1917, the college founded the "Mask & Wig" organization. Its charter describes this group as "the honorary branch of the Ripon Dramatic Club. It establishes a higher standard of workmanship and promotes a real appreciation of one of the greatest of modern arts. A play will be given each semester. Parts are obtained through competitive tryouts."

Founded on the purpose of studying and presenting the best in acting within the college's department of public speaking, the live plays became a commencement favorite, as well as a ritual for first-year student participation.

Early Ripon College Mask & Wig plays included "The Merchant Gentleman" by Moliere, "The Witching Hour," by Augustus Thomas and "A Midsummer Night's Dream," by William Shakespeare, among others.

This local production of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was so popular there are vintage photographs of Ripon residents and students wearing fairy costumes to lawn parties between 1917 and 1918.

In 1922, the Ripon College *Crimson* yearbook stated that "two plays are produced for viewing every year, however it is doubtful if the club can follow such a conservative program in the future because

of the growing popularity of Mask & Wig productions with both town and college people."

The Mask & Wig organization was held in high regard throughout Ripon and noted as having a reputation for first-class plays locally and regionally.

In 1946, Mask & Wig celebrated its 101st production with the play "The Little Foxes," written by Lillian Hellman.

Under the direction of Ripon College English Professor Henry Phillips (H.P.) Boody (1881-1964), 10 main characters were played by enthusiastic college students.

The play's scenery was created by notable artist Lester Schwartz (1919-2003), head of the Ripon College art department, and costumes were created by Ripon College Dean Margaret Cunningham, who served at the college between 1943-1946.

In 1947, the Mask & Wig was dissolved and the department became a member of Theta Alpha Phi, a national honorary dramatic fraternity with chapters throughout the United States. Although chartered as a fraternity, both men and women were initiated as members with proof of their major and minor roll participation in live theater plays.

Later, Theta Alpha Phi apparently dissolved as the college's drama department established a chapter in Alpha Psi Omega in 1970 and that membership still continues today.

At its peak, Mask & Wig plays were performed in Ripon in the Little Theatre and Memorial Auditorium. Ripon College plays were also performed at the city auditorium and armory.

There may be a vague outline of the Little Theatre where Spencer Tracy performed still

located in East Hall at the Ripon College campus. Other theaters mentioned here are no longer standing and the former Ripon armory building is now Déjà vu Boutique and Home Resale shop at 323 Watson St.

Today, Ripon College offers a major and minors in theater with Department of Public Instruction certification for public school teachers of theater, K-12. The theatre department offers instruction in design, technical theater, acting and directing through courses and production experiences.

Plays are performed in the Benstead Theatre of the Rodman Center for the Arts, across from the Willmore Center.

The Ripon College theatre department and production program were led by professors of theatre Robert Amsden and Kenneth Hill from 1991 until their retirements in 2018 and 2021, respectively.

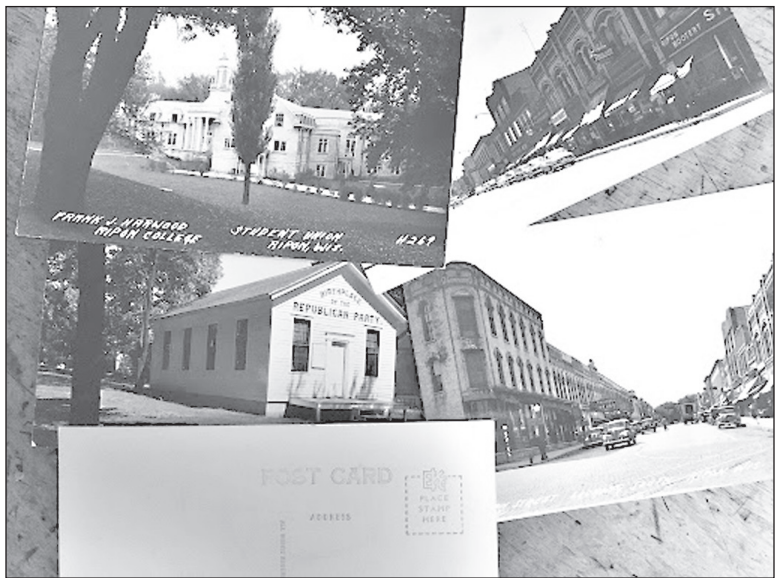
During that time, the department participated in the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival each year and won various awards for directing, ensemble acting and design.

The department is now led by professor John Dalziel, Ripon College class of 2002, who holds the Chermerow Chair in Theatre. Its newest member, assistant professor Lillian Brown, teaches acting, acts professionally and directs in the production program.

She will be featured in Next Act Theatre's production of Agatha Christie's *Mousetrap* in December in Milwaukee.

*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.*



**VINTAGE RIPON POSTCARDS** sit on a table. The Ripon Historical Society will host its first-ever vintage postcard swap meet Saturday, Sept. 16.  
*submitted photo*

## Historical society will host vintage Ripon postcard swap meet

The Ripon Historical Society will host its first-ever vintage Ripon postcard swap meet Saturday, Sept. 16, from 1 to 3 p.m. at 508 Watson St.

People may bring their vintage or antique Ripon photo postcards to swap, trade or sell.

The historical society also will be able to scan and email photo postcards for \$4 per image for those postcards whose owners do not wish to part with their copies.

Tables for viewing postcards will be set up in the large event

room at the historical society, and a slide show of vintage Ripon postcards may be viewed on a large flat-screen television.

Many postcards include images of Ripon College, downtown Ripon business buildings, and various street views, including residential areas and scenic locations.

This event is free of charge to attend. Donations to the historical society will be accepted.

For questions or more information, call 920-748-5354, or email [riponhistsoc@gmail.com](mailto:riponhistsoc@gmail.com).

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