

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

The stories of Watson Street's 100 block

By Pat Grahm

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of articles about the Watson Street commercial district which runs from the 100 to 300 blocks of Ripon's downtown. Articles on the 200 and 300 blocks will follow in the coming weeks.

The Watson Street Commercial Historic District is comprised of most of the buildings on the three blocks of modern-day Watson Street and some buildings on the streets immediately next to it. The district was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

Of the three blocks of Watson Street in the historic district, the 100 block is perhaps the best known as it features a town square, now known as "Rotary Square." An open public gathering space, Ripon's town square throughout the years hosted summer music concerts, carnivals, celebrations and other various activities — which drew not only city residents, but also people from the rural area surrounding the city.

Ripon's square was an open roughly triangular space on the north end of Watson Street, which ends at West Jackson Street. Today this space has a center plaza featuring two lit pergolas and benches with parking surrounding it.

The national register paperwork for the Watson Street Commercial Historic District informs that the first stores were opened on Watson Street in 1849 and 1850, but that today most of the buildings in the 100 block date to 1870. The paperwork notes that the east side of the 100 block of Watson Street "Was built as the result of a fire in 1869 that destroyed all but 121 and 123 Watson St. These two blocks, though, burned in



THIS WORLD WAR II-era photograph shows the west side of the 100 block of Watson Street with the Grand View Hotel, which looked south from Jackson Street. The hotel was built in 1872 and was destroyed by a fire in 1949, which killed six people. The lot sat empty until 1965 when Ripon built a new city hall and fire department on the site. At the time of this photo, the town square did not have a plaza in the middle as it does today. submitted photo

an 1875 conflagration and were rebuilt in 1878 and 1875 respectively. They all are built of cream brick."

The north end of the 100 block at Jackson Street once featured the five story Grand View Hotel, which faced south down Watson Street. The hotel was built in 1872 and underwent several name changes before taking on its final name. The hotel had 75 rooms, and it was considered one of the most elegant hotels in the area. The hotel was destroyed by a fire in 1949, which killed six people. The lot sat empty until 1965, when Ripon built a new city hall and fire department on the site.

The 100 block of Watson Street is a large part of Ripon's mid-1900's Scoop the Loop tradition. Cars would drive north from the 300 block along the eastern side of the street. They would then go around or "scoop" the center plaza in the 100 block to head south down the western side of the square. This loop of three blocks then was repeated.

Scooping the Loop was banned in 1992 due to traffic congestion, street safety, incidents of street fights and other issues. After a 27-year absence, this popular tradition became an official city event in 2019 and is held once during the summer.

Several notable addresses exist along the east side of the 100 block. These include 101-103 Watson St., which was built in 1872 as the Pettibone Block to house a dry goods business and drug store. The building then housed one of Ripon's larger department stores, the Mattice-Foster Co.

This building is cemented in Wisconsin history because it became the first movie theater in what would become a chain of 78 Marcus Theaters across 17 states in 1935. Ninety years later, movie goers still enjoy the Campus Theatre, which is found in the same location.

The building at 109 Watson St. once was a three-story building that housed a hardware store from the time it was built in 1870 until the early 1960s. This address was the middle building of the O.J. Clark Block. The top floor was removed and is now slightly lower than the buildings that flank it. In recent years, it housed Traded Treasures & Community Food Pantry and today

New Hope Family Life Church occupies the building.

One of the longest-operated saloon buildings in Ripon's history is found at 119 Watson St. Built in 1870 as a saloon, it was turned into a confectionery store during prohibition in the 1920s and early 1930s. After prohibition, it once again became the site of a bar. Many people today remember it as Dos Gringos, which closed in 2012. It now houses The Public House.

The Zobel Brothers Block, which housed a grocery and dry goods store at 121 Watson St., replaced a smaller store that had survived the 1869 fire, but not the 1875 fire. Around 1909, it then became a drug store until the mid-20th century. The building now has a second-generation owner who operates an office of Edward Jones.

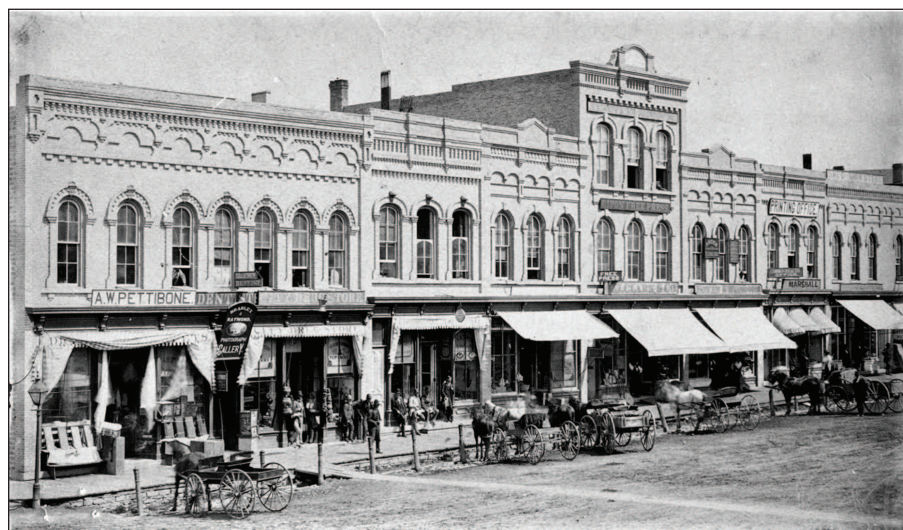
Built in 1875, the building at 123 Watson St. housed drug stores until it was remodeled in 1909 for the First National Bank. The bank moved across the square in 1930 and the retail space then housed an IGA grocery store. In 1983, it became Timmon's Corner Tavern and then Suds on the Square, which closed in 2012. It now houses a retail store, Soul Patina. This building often shows up in historic Ripon photographs as a photography business, Lockwood Temple of Photography, which occupied the second floor.

On the west side of the 100 block, the most notable building is the massive Art Deco building at 114 Watson St. The building was built by the First National Bank in 1930. Before the bank opened, it advertised that the new building and their banking practices were modern and efficient. In more recent history the bank building housed a restaurant called "The Treasury." However, today it sits empty ready for its next phase in Ripon's history.

Probably the best-known address on the west side of the 100 block is 102 Watson St. due to its current occupant, Roadhouse Pizza. This building has housed a saloon, battery shop, piano store and an ice cream parlor. In 1959, it became Mill's Grill and then the Maple Lunch Restaurant, the Hopp Inn and in the 1970s Gus's Pizza Place. It has been the home to Roadhouse Pizza since 1978. From 2009 to 2010, Roadhouse Pizza underwent a renovation and added the building at 104 Watson St. to create a larger restaurant.

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.

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THE EAST SIDE of the 100 block of Watson Street is shown in this undated photograph. The 1872 Pettibone block on the left at 101-103 Watson St. housed a dry goods business and drug store before one of Ripon's larger department stores. In 1935, it became the Campus Theatre — the first in a chain of 78 Marcus Theaters across 17 states. Further south is 109 Watson St. shown as a three-story building. At one point, the third floor was taken off and it is now slightly shorter than the buildings on each side of it. submitted photo

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