

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

Dress helps to imagine world that no longer exists

A relic worn to the 1893 Columbian Exposition, Chicago

Editors note: This is the first of three Now & Then in Ripon articles written by Ripon College students interning last semester with the Ripon Historical Society.

By Amanda Von Ruden

The Columbian Exposition took place from May 1 to Oct. 30, 1893. This event, also known as the “Chicago World’s Fair,” celebrated the 400th-anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the New World.

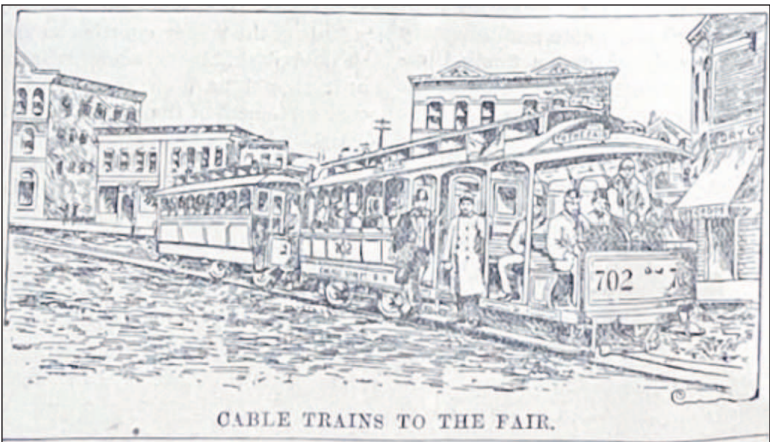
The fair covered 690 acres of land and approximately 200 new buildings were constructed for the grounds. Overall, 27.3 million visitors enjoyed the fair, which included 1,375 Riponites.

It is assumed that many of the Riponites may have traveled to and from Chicago by train.

The 1,375 Riponites equaled more than one-third of the city’s population at that time.

One visitor was Clarissa Tucker Tracy, remembered locally as the “Mother of Ripon College.” She was said to have brought back “a whole budget of news” about the Chicago people.

The Ripon Free Press from 1893 advised people to spend their first day viewing all the buildings to “get a lay of the



THIS ILLUSTRATION OF cable trains heading to the World’s Fair ran in the 1893 Ripon Free Press.

land.” It goes even further, saying that few people will “see all the exhibits of the exposition and each one should plan to see what suits his individual preferences.”

The newspaper explained that it would take a man 150 working days to see all 10,000 exhibits.

The journey to the fair for many would be the greatest outing of many peoples’ lives, so they would want to look good for this special occasion. Harper’s Bazaar magazine advised that people should not overdress and wear simple dark outfits, so as to not stand out among foreigners visiting the exposition.

Harper’s Bazaar magazine from May 13, 1893 also said, “Let me tell you in friendly confidence that if you want to be supposed aristocratic, wealthy, intellectual and in good form, you will dress in extreme simplicity.”

One dress worn to the Co-

lumbian Exposition is a part of the collection at the Ripon Historical Society. Owned by Riponite Otto Dittmer’s grandmother, it embodies the advice that Harper’s Bazaar suggested.

The fabric is a black wool with a pink floral pattern, and is said to have been worn with a green velvet purse, black hat and brown shoes. Imagine how excited the wearer must have been to have such a fanciful outfit. The dress is dark, and paired with a black hat would not stand out among people dressing garishly.

The dress shows signs of change throughout time; the ruffle white lace around the collar is believed to have been added at a later date. Judging by alterations and signs of repair inside the waistband, this garment was likely worn for multiple occasions.

Even today, when people go to an event where they are seen by hundreds of people, they want to wear something that reflects who they want to be. It is like a performance, in which people might participate only for a day. How do they dress for a special occasion? Is it different from normal daily wear? How do they want people to perceive them at special events? This dress invites people to contemplate these questions.

Individuals may stop by the Ripon Historical Society if they want to view the dress in person within “The Stories We Wear” exhibit until the end of 2024.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually



THE DRESS WORN to the Columbian Exposition by the grandmother of Riponite Otto Dittmer is on display at the Ripon Historical Society through the end of 2024 as part of its “The Stories We Wear” exhibit.

submitted photo

operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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THIS IS AN illustration of Electric Building and South Lagoon from the World’s Fair Album of Chicago 1893.

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Answers to the Crossword Puzzle  
from the January 24th issue of  
The Commonwealth Express

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