

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

Sign collection reveals history of Ripon

The Ripon Historical Society collects many artifacts that reflect Ripon's history.

One group of artifacts is going on display for a year starting Nov. 6 at the society's museum at 508 Watson St.

The new exhibit "Gimme A Sign!" showcases the society's sign collection, reflecting some of Ripon's history in the places and events they represent.

These signs reveal shifts in culture, commerce, economic growth and evolving identity over time. Many of the signs in the collection reveal economic and commercial trends.

On display will be many industry and trade signs for local businesses like the 19th-century sign, "Dr. Bosanko's Cough & Lung Syrup." This sign would have hung in front of a pharmacy, and the name of Otto H. Lichtenberg (1861-1926) is listed at the bottom of the sign. Lichtenberg was a druggist in both Ripon and Princeton.

Consumption, a historically medical term for tuberculosis (TB), once was a widespread and feared disease in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The development of an antibiotic treatment for TB in 1943 significantly reduced the mortality rate. During the time this sign hung on Watson Street, people would have been using various remedies to help prevent or improve the symptoms of disease.

Dr. Bosanko's Cough & Lung Syrup consisted of low-grade honey, syrup of tar, morphine, alcohol, chloroform and a dead fly. This era was known for popular patent medicines that were not regulated for safety and often contained opiates and alcohol to reduce pain, but were not necessarily safe or non-addictive.

The Bosanko sign is shaped like a druggist's apothecary mortar and pestle. Many signs of this era were shaped like the items available in the store as immigrants might not have been able to read English, but could discern what the store sold from the shape of a sign.

For example, a jewelry store that sold watches that have a sign shaped like a watch.

German immigrants who settled in Ripon and opened businesses would sometimes feature both German and English on their signs.



PUNCHED METAL SIGNS, such as this one advertising John Haas Lager Beer, became more popular at the turn of the 20th century.

Ripon Historical Society photo

For instance, a 19th century sign in the collection, made of wood and hand lettered in silver paint, reads, "Undertaking, Deutsche Leichenbestatter." The word "leichenbestatter" translates in English as "undertaking."

In the 19th century, it was common for cabinet makers to also make coffins, as the skills for building wooden furniture translated easily to making them. The term "undertaker" arose from the fact that these cabinet makers would "undertake" the various tasks associated with arranging a funeral.

Many signs in the mid- to late-19th century were hand-painted on wood, but advertising methods changed over time. The turn of the century saw the phasing out of the hand-lettered wood sign to punched metal signs in bright colors. The society's Haas Brewery sign is a good example, with its bright red lettering and the colorful, Haas rabbit logo. This sign dates from between 1907 and 1917.

Emerging in the late 19th century, this type of sign quickly gained traction due to advancements in metalworking technologies. Manufacturers utilized these techniques to create decorative and detailed signs that could withstand outdoor elements. Unlike painted wood signs, which were prone to weathering, punched metal signs offered a long-lasting alternative that resisted fading, chipping and rotting.

Some signs in the collection represent more than just a bygone era or business. They conjure up feelings of nostalgia.

For example, the society's Rippin' Good Cookie Outlet represents a shared community

memory.

Many Riponites share fond memories of the cookie factory and the smell of baking cookies wafting throughout Ripon.

The cookie outlet was opened at the factory, which made Ripon a popular Midwestern destination for people seeking specially priced cookies. At the time of the factory's closing in winter 2016, the cookie outlet store was Ripon's biggest tourist attraction.

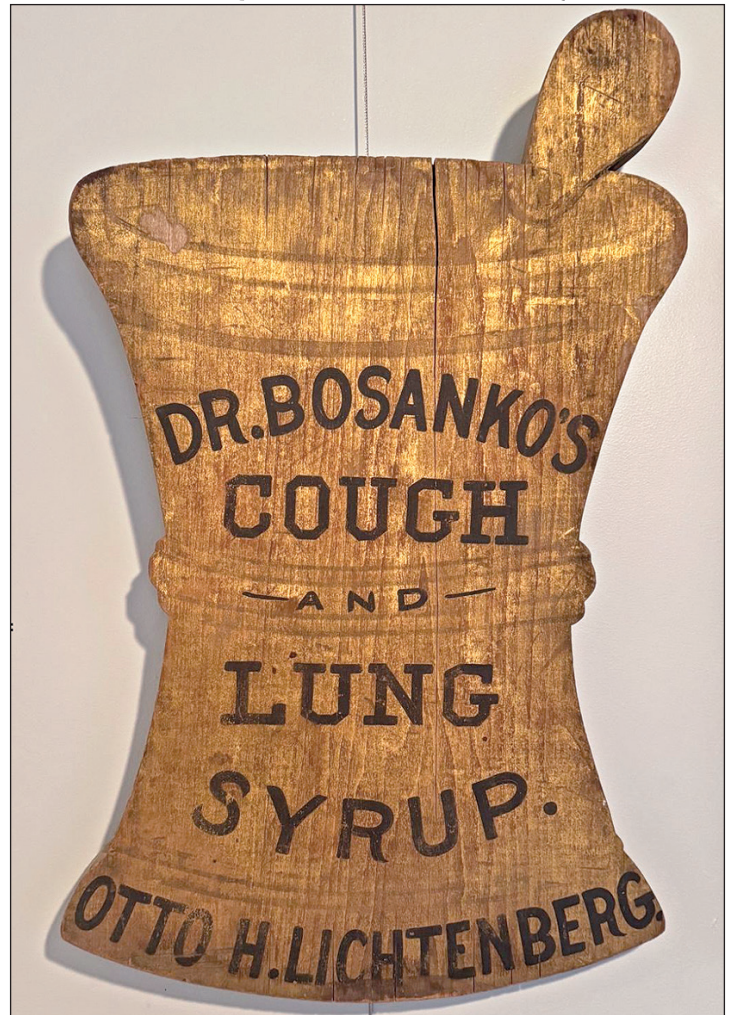
Other signs in the collection connect to events on a larger scale. A sign which reads, "Tur zu!" is a small and simple wooden sign, but it connects to a significant period in Ripon's history and the nation.

"Tur zu!" is a contraction of "Machst du die Tur zu!" freely translated meaning "Close the door!" The donor of the sign removed it from an outhouse located next to the Central Wisconsin canneries where he was doing summer employment in 1946. The sign was nailed to the door. A German prisoner of war camp existed at that location on the east side of Douglas Street during World War II, known as "Camp Ripon."

An "Air Raid Warden Post" sign stands as a reminder of life on the home front during wartime. In a June 11, 1942, *Ripon Weekly Press* column, it was reported that Fond du Lac County was divided into sections with a different civil defense warden for each section. Air raid wardens were put in place to advise people about how to proceed if an air raid from an enemy overseas were to take place.

The "Gimme A Sign!" exhibit will open Thursday, Nov. 6 at 7 p.m. at the Pickard House on 508 Watson St., with a reception. Also included in the display are signs on loan to the society from local businesses.

To make the exhibit even more interesting, local artists



SIGNS OFTEN WERE shaped like items the store sells to help immigrants who may not have been able to read English.

Ripon Historical Society photo



THIS SIGN, FREELY translated to "Close the door!" was nailed to the door of an outhouse at a German prisoner of war camp in Ripon.

Ripon Historical Society photo

of Art MidWisconsin have created art pieces inspired by some of the signs in the collection. Interpretation was left up to the artist. The art works will be displayed within the sign exhibit, near the sign that inspired the piece. The art also will be for sale with a percentage of the sales prices going to the society. This is the first time the society has chosen a hybrid format that is both artifact display and art show.

Ripon Historical Society Administrator Caron Sisko believes that the signs are important and worthy of celebration and display.

"The very presence of a sign in a museum collection signifies that it was considered historically important enough to be preserved and shared,

providing a physical remnant of shared heritage for future generations," she said.

The Nov. 6 event is open to the public. Snacks, beer and wine will be served and the art pieces in the exhibit will be available for purchase at the event. A recommended donation of \$10 to attend is sought.

For more information, email the Ripon Historical Society at riponhistsoc@gmail.com.

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/.



SIGNS SOMETIMES featured both English and German.

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