

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

The building that houses Red's Bar has a long history

Some businesses in Ripon are well known to everyone including visitors and residents. Red's Bar has become an institution in the community for decades.

The building at 111 E. Jackson St. was constructed in 1870 and always has been a bar.

August Zinth (1830-1901) owned the property and ran it as the Zinth Saloon. Zinth arrived in Ripon sometime after he married in 1857 and lived on north side of Scott Street between Blackburn and Houston streets. He also operated a foundry in Ripon.

After August Zinth died, his son, Herman Zinth (1868-1933), took over the saloon. It was remodeled to add a second story to the building in 1910. It is about this time that Otto Lietz (1872-1933) purchased the business.

The 1912 Ripon telephone book lists the saloon as the "Sample Room." From 1913 until 1922, it is listed as the "Lietz Brothers Sample Room."

Lietz had two brothers named John (1870-1928) and Gustave (1874-1941). It is uncertain which of the brothers might have been involved in the Sample Room, but perhaps it was John who lived in nearby Rosendale and worked as a farmer. Gustave lived further away in Milwaukee and worked as an engineer.

After passing the 18th Amendment, the country went "dry" at midnight on Jan. 17, 1920 as part of American prohibition.

This amendment prohibited the "manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors." This law would not be repealed until Dec. 5, 1933. During the 13 years of prohibition, the bar became a soda fountain, sometimes called a "soda parlor."

A 1923 *Commonwealth Press* shows that Lietz applied for a non-intoxicating liquor license from the city, but no business was listed in the phone book for 111 E. Jackson Street that year.

Lietz must have sold the "soda fountain" as the telephone book then lists a business called the "Sample Room" under the name of name of Steve Wahoske (1890-1949) from 1924 until 1944.

The *Commonwealth* reveals that during prohibition a license to sell non-intoxicating liquor was sometimes issued to Mrs. S.F. Wahoske. This would be Mina Wahoske (1894-1978), Steve's wife.

During prohibition, Ripon was known, as stated in one newspa-

per, as being "notoriously wet."

Being "wet" meant that one supported the selling of alcohol and community establishments had illegal alcohol available for sale. Many arrests and raids took place in Ripon during prohibition at "soda fountains" selling alcohol.

Lifelong Ripon resident Lorraine Wahoske Jess, Ripon High School class of 1947, stated in an oral history recorded in 2018 that "My Uncle Steve Wahoske ran Steve's Tavern, which is now Red's Bar. I can remember as a little girl my mother and dad would go down on Friday and Saturday night and fry fish and chicken with my Aunt Mina who was Steve's wife."

Wahoske recalled that her aunt and uncle "had a beautiful apartment above it" and that "we often thought that he must have been in the mafia."

"He was in the liquor business. No one's ever said it, but it just seems odd that whatever he did it just turned into money for him. That was the time of bootlegging (liquor)."

Jess added that "the bar was really nice. I would go down there and dance on the table and I always drank beer and ate chocolate bars as a little girl. My mom and dad would be tending bar, so I would go down there whenever I wanted to."

Wahoske's obituary on the front page of the July 21, 1949 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* was titled "Prominent Citizen Was a Lifetime Resident of the Community." His obituary noted, "For many years Mr. Wahoske was engaged in the tavern business retiring a few years ago because of ill health."

No telephone listing for a tavern at 111 E. Jackson existed in 1946 and 1947, but in 1948 it was listed as the "Arnold W M Tavern." The 1949 to 1952 Ripon Telephone directories list William Splitt (1920-2003) at 111 E. Jackson St. as operating Bill's Tavern. In 1953, Splitt's brother-in-law Quintin "Red" Williams (1910-1970) joined him in the business, changing the name to "Bill & Red's Tavern."

A *Ripon Commonwealth Press* article from October 1953 stated that the two men "are doing a splendid business. Fish and chicken lunches are served Fridays and Saturdays. The 40-foot bar with 20 stools is one of the busiest in this area."

Splitt became a truck driver for Speed Queen (now known as Alliance Laundry Systems) in 1956



RIPON COLLEGE FRATERNITY Sigma Alpha Epsilon had their 1967 yearbook photograph taken in front of Red's Bar. Seen in the middle is Quintin "Red" Williams (1910-1970), who owned Red's Bar from 1953 until 1970. His son Johnny, who lived above the bar with his parents, remembers looking from a window as this photograph was taken. *submitted photo*

and exited the tavern business.

It was in 1956 that the tavern became known solely as "Red's Bar." A lifelong Ripon resident, Red's son, Johnny Williams, noted that he believed his father got the nickname "Red" because he was of Irish descent.

Whatever the name of the business over the years, its phone number was "Red 95" from the early 1900s until telephone operators were eliminated in the early 1960s and Ripon started using the prefix 748 for phone numbers.

Williams and his wife, Violet Splitt Williams, (1909-1974) had four sons and first lived at 648 Watson St. Youngest son Johnny said that "in around 1966 we moved above the bar after the apartment had been remodeled."

When his parents died, Johnny, a 1967 Ripon High School graduate and 1971 Ripon College graduate, lived above the bar for a while. Since that time, the apartment has been rented out.

Johnny and his brother, Mike, purchased the bar from their parents' estate in 1974 or 1975.

Mike, a former Ripon mayor, left the business in 1977, leaving Johnny as sole owner to this day.

Having grown up in the business, Johnny has many memories from his childhood and his almost 50 years as the owner of Red's Bar.

One of his childhood memories was from around 9 or 10 years old. He would stand on an upside down wooden soda pop case to reach the cash register while helping his father at the bar.

He also remembers a city ordinance, which kept the bar closed until Sundays at noon and when the polls were open on election days. The bar always closed from noon until 3 p.m. on Good Friday.

Johnny noted that he had been told that in the late 1950s or so, the fish fry cost 25 or 35 cents (approximately \$3 today.)

"People received two pieces of fish, a pickle and bread on a small paper plate," he said, noting he believes fish and chicken stopped being served in the late 1960s.

Johnny recalled visiting with many World War II veterans and



THIS EARLY PHOTO of East Jackson Street shows a one-story building, right, that is now Red's Bar. The second story was added in 1910. *submitted photo*

farmers who stopped into the bar.

"On Fridays nights, people would come to town and the wives would go to DuBois or Roger Splitt's grocery store to shop, so their husbands would wait for them at Red's," Johnny recalled.

In addition, Johnny said that "everyone would come into the bar on Fridays to cash their payroll checks."

The bar once opened at 8 a.m. until Johnny had third-shift workers asking to come in after their night shift work was finished earlier in the morning.

"We started opening at 6 a.m." Johnny said. "It was really busy in the mornings. We had three bartenders working and sometimes a DJ playing music."

He also remembered that the bar received two shipments a week of 15 half-barrels of Pabst and Old Style beer. Half barrel kegs hold about 165 12-ounce glasses of beer, so 30 half barrels a week would be approximately 5,000 large glasses of beer.

Johnny also recalled the many softball and bowling teams the bar sponsored, and the donations made to many Ripon area charities — a long-term tradition started when Wahoske owned the business.

Ryan Williams, Johnny's son, has been working at the bar for about the last six years. Johnny is happy to see the third generation of his family taking over the bar, which has been a gathering place for the people of Ripon for more than 150 years.

The building at 111 E. Jackson Street, which now houses Red's Bar, is located in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and is listed on the National Register or Historic Places.

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.



A PHOTO FROM 1975 shows Red's Bar, located at 111 E. Jackson St. The building has been a salon and then bar since 1870. *submitted photo*

Ripon ELECTRIC, INC

Master Electrician • State Certified Journeymen
• Industrial • Commercial
• Residential • Farm Rewire Certified
Aerial Work - up to 50' • Data & Voice Cabling
Free Estimates ~ 24 Hour Emergency Service

510 ASPEN

748-6606

RIPON