

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

Tabbert recalls memories of the Great Depression

The Ripon Historical Society recently received the donation of a book written by Robert “Bob” Leland Tabbert (1928-2022), along with other memories of him from his family.

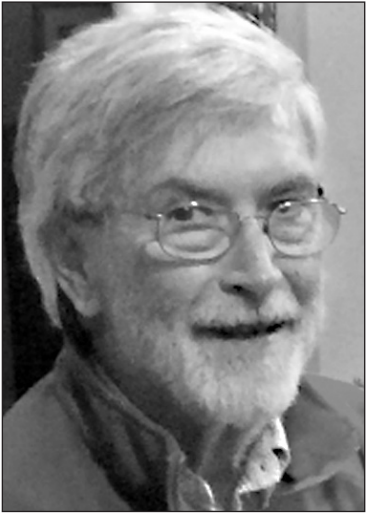
The book, “The Great Depression & Alaska Fly Fishing,” was published privately in 2020 and has 13 short stories about Tabbert and his life.

The introduction and first chapter in the book gives a look into the era of the Great Depression in Ripon — the longest and deepest economic downturn in the history of the United States, which existed from 1929 until 1939. Full recovery to the U.S. economy did not happen until after World War II started in the 1940s.

Tabbert was born to Ripon natives Laurretta Eckert Tabbert (1905-1958) and Leland Tabbert (1904-1977). As a watch maker, his father had moved the family to Elgin, Ill., to work at the Elgin Watch Co. Tabbert’s book noted that in 1936, during the Great Depression, his father lost his job.

Unable to support his family, he sent his wife, their son and sister Betty back to Ripon to live with his paternal grandparents.

Ripon historian Sam Pedrick (1868-1963) noted that Tabbert’s mother separated from her husband also moved back to Ripon for this reason. Pedrick added that Tabbert’s parents never reconciled and therefore his mother was “for many years been a sales lady at King’s Frock Shop in this city.” Research from Ancestry.



Robert “Bob” Leland Tabbert

com shows that Tabbert’s father divorced his mother and later remarried two more times.

Tabbert’s paternal grandparents, Edward Eckert Jr. (1871-1963) and Agnes “Gertrude” Busse Eckert (1875-1954), were married in 1900 and lived in Ripon at 334 Eureka St. When

Tabbert moved back to Ripon, two of his uncles also were out of work due to the depression and they, too, lived in the Eureka Street home.

His grandfather was a carpenter and had steady work during the depression at Barlow and Seelig, which today is known as Alliance Laundry Systems.

“As a 10-year-old boy growing up in a small, rural town ... I was oblivious to the serious economic events that had seized the U.S. economy by the throat,” Tabbert wrote.

He stated that “My grandmother’s two brothers farmed outside of Ripon. The combination of my grandfather’s earnings and grandmother’s brothers furnishing weekly farm food meant that we never lacked for money or food during that time.”

Tabbert graduated from Ripon High School in the 1940s.

Childhood memories

Tabbert noted in his book, “it was the summer of 1938. A loaf of bread cost 20 cents, a bottle of pop cost 5 cents and a dozen eggs went for a quarter.”

He also noted that the National Recovery Act (NRA) brought a group of artists to Ripon to give free harmonica and tap dancing lessons.

“It is to that program that I owe my expertise on the harmonica ... the tap dancing I quickly forgot,” Tabbert wrote.

In the mornings, Tabbert would run errands for his grandmother. He’d walk downtown to pick up and pay for a day’s worth of groceries at Herman’s Grocery Store. Refrigerators were small or not available and ice boxes were still in use. Not much food could fit into them, meaning there were more frequent trips needed for fresh groceries.

On his way, he’d stop in front of Ripon Printing Shop where his Uncle Ray worked. He would knock on the window to wave at his uncle. Then he’d stop at Hertzhoff’s Tavern to study a painting that was on display in the front window.

“It took up most of the front window,” Tabbert wrote. “It was framed in a magnificent craved wooden frame, with a polished brass plate inscribed: ‘Presented by Anheuser-Busch: Custer’s Last Stand’ by Alfred Gregory.”

Tabbert counted everything in the picture from the number of men and horses, to guns, flags, canteens and bugles.

Silver Creek ran through the back of the Eckert home on Eureka Street and much of Tabbert’s childhood revolved

around it.

“Silver Creek had started out a small glacier spring pond north of Ripon that flowed south over Ordovician outcrops of limestone through Ripon into a mill pond that powered a mill,” he wrote.

As a child, Tabbert not only swam in the Silver Creek Mill Pond, but also fished for brook trout, hunted, explored and snowshoed across it in the winter.

Tabbert commented on the hobos that camped in Ripon near Silver Creek under the Chicago Northwestern Railroad Bridge, near to where the Ripon Public Library is located today.

Hobos were mostly made up of homeless men during the Great Depression. These men moved around the country looking for jobs by hitching rides on freight trains.

The Eckerts’ house on Eureka Street was not far from where the hobos camped and Tabbert’s grandmother fed them warm meals on the back porch. Tabbert noted that many of them chopped kindling wood for use in the family’s kitchen stove in exchange for the food.

One day while snowshoeing on the Silver Creek, Tabbert ran into “Normie Olson, the old hermit, a World War I hero who had been gassed in the war. He lived in a shack out near Rush Lake, he poached deer and lived off the land.” Olson was described as being more than 6-feet tall with a gray beard and wearing a fur hat and coat.

“He carried an old Trapdoor Springfield slung across his back,” Tabbert wrote. “... There was a belt rope tied around the fur coat at his waist, with a hand axe stuck down one side. Two red-ribboned army medals were pinned to his coat.”

Tabbert noted his grandmother had warned him to stay away from Olson, and that he was too frightened to move or talk when he saw him. The man said ‘hello’ and snowshoed away, leaving Tabbert “cold and staring.”

Tabbert also mentioned that he would see Native Americans camping on Silver Creek when he looked out of the back window of his house.

“This small band of Winnebago’s lived over near Rush Lake and would travel the creek bottoms to reach their fishing area on the Green Lake inlet,” Tabbert wrote. “... They would camp overnight by the freshwater spring, and my grandparents would frequently visit and trade with them.”



ROBERT L. TABBERT holds a stick of fish in 1947, the year after he graduated from Ripon High School.

submitted photo

Ways to Make Money

“The word ‘allowance’ was not in my family’s vocabulary,” Tabbert wrote, so on Sunday mornings he delivered movie bills for the two movie theaters in Ripon. He then was able to go to any movie for no cost. The only restriction on the free movies is that Tabbert had to sit in the front row. At that time a movie cost \$0.15, which is equal to \$3.20 today.

In 1940, when Tabbert was 12 years old, he started a paper route, delivering two different papers — first by walking and later by riding a used bike.

His paper route paid him about \$1.30 per week which is equal to about \$26 today.

Tabbert distinctly remembered the start of World War II on Dec. 7, 1941 as he wrote “when the news came over the radio that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor I immediately went down to Burnside’s Drugstore on Watson Street and picked up extras of the *Chicago Northwestern* newspaper that

had come over on the evening train from Oshkosh.”

He then went outside to sell the papers on the street to the general public.

Eventually, Tabbert became a geologist.

Tabbert’s book is not available on the open market or at the Ripon Public Library. People may look at it by visiting the Ripon Historical Society Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at 508 Watson St.

More stories about Tabbert and wife Phyllis, plus his life in and around Ripon, will run in future *Now & Then* in Ripon columns.

*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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