

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

Ripon women played role in aiding displaced persons

March has been formally recognized as women's history month since 1987.

During this month, the accomplishments of strong and determined women who change our world for the better are recognized.

This March, the Ripon Historical Society honors Ethel Bryan (1894-1977) and Gerda Ingeborg Krause Thiele (1909-2002). First Bryan and then Thiele chaired the First Congregational Church of Ripon's World Service Committee, which played a key role in helping war refugees after World War II. They helped to place 63 people from European countries in Ripon and about 176 more throughout Wisconsin.

President Harry Truman signed the Economic Recovery Act of 1948. This became known as the "Marshall Plan," named for General George Marshall Jr. (1880-1957), secretary of state. Providing economic assistance for America's war-torn allies, this plan had a component which focused on aiding "displaced persons" (DPs).

These were people forcibly moved from their homes during the conflict and the plan allowed them to immigrate to the United States.

The Marshall Plan affected the lives of many people living in Ripon and the displaced refugees that they assisted through the efforts of Bryan and Thiele.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Bryan and Thiele became the prime movers in both Ripon's and Wisconsin's DP program. Most of these refugees came from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Eastern Germany and Hungary. A few of these refugees who came to Ripon settled in the community and over time most of them left Ripon for larger cities.

In a 2003 Commonwealth Press editorial piece written by Tim Lyke, Paul Dolata was quoted as saying that such non-English speaking folks came to Ripon with literally nothing "but their hope of establishing a new life in America."

Dolata recalled an immigrant training

in his father's Ripon print shop before becoming and accomplished printing specialist in Madison and Milwaukee.

Dolata went on to state that "Gerta was instrumental in finding housing, furnishings, clothing, jobs and teaching these folks English and our customs. She gathered the community together to provide for these displaced persons the nourishing that was needed to begin anew in a foreign place."

In 1951, Ripon was featured in a documentary movie about the displaced persons who settled in Ripon. The *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reported that "The picture will be two-fold in purpose. First it will be entertaining and second, it will present Ripon as a part of America, showing the many blessings which we take for granted. The picture will dramatize our abundance and our basic freedoms."

The July 14, 1951 edition of *Collier's* magazine printed an article on the Ripon DP program titled, "Wisconsin Welcomes the Wanderer." The reporter writing the article spent more than a month living in Ripon to get the full story. The article cited Bryan's and Thiele's work with the DP's as "an inspiring display of American democracy — and applied Christianity — at work."

Bryan was cited for distinguished service in 1952 by the general counsel of the Congregational Christian churches. The *Commonwealth* stated, "Through the efforts of Miss Bryan and a few others in the state, Wisconsin ranked first in 48 states in this project."

Well into her old age, Bryan saw the refugees she assisted at both large reunions and in private visits.

While in the nursing home, one refugee, then living in Green Bay, visited her "with tears in his eyes, he insisted on kissing one of her fingers because they had worked so hard for the refugees."

Bryan moved to Ripon with her parents in 1912. She graduated from Ripon College in 1918, never married



THE JULY 14, 1951 edition of *Collier's* magazine featured this photograph of Ethel Bryan, left, and her mother Lucy True Bryan. Bryan is shown in her parlor, which she turned into an office when working to place displaced persons in Ripon and other communities in Wisconsin between 1948 until 1952.

Collier's magazine photo

and lived with her parents at 215 Elm St. She taught English at high schools in Wisconsin and Florida and attended journalism school at the University of California before returning to Ripon to work at her sister's husband's family business, Triarch.

Thiele was born in Berlin, Germany and her obituary states that she was educated in Berlin and Cologne, Germany. She came to Ripon in 1944 as a German immigrant. Thiele worked as a lab technician at Triarch for 20 years.

Ripon has had many strong women throughout the years and some are documented in the 1981 book "When a Woman Wills, A Narrative History of Ripon, Wisconsin Women."

The book was written by Beverly Muiren Thomann (1917-1986) for the Ripon Branch of the American Association of University Women. Although out of print, the book is available to read at the Ripon Public Library and is sometimes found for sale at the Friends of the Ripon Library used book sale.

"When a Woman Wills" describes

Bryan as "a small, bright eyed energetic woman who was a kind, thoughtful, helpful friend." In the book, Bryan is stated as saying, "What I have to give of money, time and ability is not large, but that fact does not excuse me from doing what I can." The book went on to note that Bryan "continued to support worthy causes and to work for social action. She realized that she was only one voice, but she never failed to use it. Always convinced people must be persuaded to do things."

Lyke stated in his 2003 *Commonwealth* editorial that Thiele, "was among Ripon's finest humanitarians."

Look forward to another Now & Then in Ripon about the DPs that were assisted by Bryan and Thiele in April.

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.ripon-history.org.



THIS JULY 1950 *Commonwealth* photo shows 21 displaced Latvians who had just joined the First Congregational Church, 220 Ransom St. Seen second from the left in the third row is Ethel Bryan, who was known for helping to place 63 refugees in Ripon and 239 across Wisconsin. RCP file photo

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