

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

Before smart cars came smart horses

By Pat Grahn

Today, people drive cars and take their sophistication for granted. Cars feature technology such as artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced sensors.

Advanced driver-assistance systems use sensors, cameras and radar to actively help drivers to avoid collision. Cars have emergency braking, blind-spot monitoring, can park themselves, have Wi-Fi hotspots, connect to cell phones for communication and entertainment, and do much more.

Cars were invented in the late 1800s; however, they have only been a “commonplace” thing for roughly 100 years. By the end of the 1920s, 60% of American households had a car. Before this time, horses and horse-drawn vehicles were the main modes of local transportation.

Stories in past issues of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reveal that today’s modern cars were not the first intelligent mode of transportation. Several stories are found in the paper of smart horses that acted on their own.

Brothers O.E. Herman Zobel (1847-911) and Julius Zobel (1949-1925) owned a store from 1873 until 1900 in two locations on Watson Street. In 1878, they built a new store at 121 Watson St., the current site of Edward Jones. O.E. Herman’s daughter Lillian Zobel (1892-1985) wrote about the store’s horse in the 1965 Centennial Progress Edition of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press*.

“Groceries were delivered in a buckboard drawn by the horse ‘Billy’ ... known the town over as an unusually intelligent animal. Often the reins were wrapped around the whip-socket and Billy made trips along from store to home. After a dinner of oats



BILLY, THE ZOBEL Brothers’ store delivery horse is seen on the left-hand side of this undated photograph. A headline in a 1965 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* Centennial Edition claimed, “Zobel Bros. Grocery Had Educated Delivery Horse.” The store was located at 121 Watson St. from 1878 until approximately 1900. The building currently houses Edward Jones. *submitted photo*

and hay, he again made his way to the store, backing the wagon around accurately and took his place in the covered shed without mishap.”

Lillian continued, stating that “Eggs were often hauled over the rough and stony roads of that period, so father could call out ‘Eggs, Billy.’ If Billy had been jogging along at a brisk trot, he would calm down to a slow walk, and nothing could make him accelerate or alter his pace. Mrs. Weber, an old resident of Ripon, was often given a ride in father’s buckboard, from Ceresco up the stony hill of West Fond du Lac Street to the business section. Her rheumatism was very bad, and any jarring made the ride painful for her, so father would call out, ‘Eggs, Billy.’ And Mrs. Weber then rode in comparative comfort.”

The July 31, 1884 *Commonwealth* reported that “Last

Sunday night when the fire bell began ringing, Jack Kingsbury’s team began rearing in his barn, and as it happened, no one was there to hitch them up. One of them, however, got out of the stable and went alone to the fire, something like a mile distant. That is horse sense. This team goes to every fire and enjoys it.”

In the mid-1960s, former Ripon mayor John Wilson (1901-1990) wrote a column in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* on the history of Ripon. In his column from Sept. 9, 1965, he remembered the fire horses, stating “I can remember the horses from the livery barn opposite the north side of the auditorium when the fire bell would ring. The barn doors would open and the fire horses would run into the open doors of the north side of the fire station unattended, reverse their position to the fire wagons



HORSES WERE USED to pull Ripon fire equipment until 1922, when the first fire truck was purchased. Pictured, the Ripon Fire Department is shown around 1915 in front of the firehouse, which was located behind City Hall. This was located at the triangle between Scott and West Fond du Lac streets at Watson Street, where Hamilton’s now is located. The horses were known to go to the fire station when the fire bell rang and wait to be hooked up to the pumper wagons. *submitted photo* and wait to be hitched to the vehicle. This was quite a feat to behold.”

Horses were used to pull Ripon fire equipment until 1922, when the first fire truck was purchased. In 1874, the community’s first fire chief offered a \$2 prize to the first man who could hook up his team of horses to the fire pumper. This would be equal to approximately \$49 today.

Starting in 1885, the Ripon Fire Department was located behind City Hall at the triangle between Scott and West Fond du Lac streets at Watson Street. The City Hall and fire department building was razed in 1965 and a new city hall and fire department was constructed at 100 E. Jackson St. A mid-century, modern-style building was built in 1968 to house a bank on the site of the historic City Hall and fire department, which now is the current home of Hamilton’s.

Ripon’s newspapers also reported on educated horses in various sideshow or western

shows visiting the city.

The *Ripon Free Press* from Oct. 20, 1892 informed that “The audiences in attendance at the opera house Monday and Tuesday evenings witnessed the educated horse performance” and “went away highly pleased.”

The July 28, 1955 *Ripon Commonwealth* noted that the Ripon Junior Chamber of Commerce was sponsoring a wild west show with more than 30 horses.

“Seven-year-old Linda Gatewood will be featured in trick riding exhibition and will perform with her educated horse,” the article noted.

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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