

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

A decade ago, Salas' 'Long Way Home Mural' uplifted Ripon

*Editor's Note: This Now & Then in Ripon article was written by Ripon College professor Travis Nygard.*

Almost 11 years ago, Ripon faced a tragedy. A fire broke out downtown on Watson Street in the coldest part of December, destroying one building and damaging two others, with four businesses and five apartments affected.

In the aftermath, Ripon artist Rafael Salas decided that he wanted to do something positive for the traumatized downtown, so the following summer he painted a mural titled "The Long Way Home." The painting remains displayed on the side of 218 Watson St.

Looking back on the project, Salas noted that "I conceived and designed the mural as a response to the fire in downtown Ripon and it was my hope that the mural would visually 'lift up' our community. This was the goal, and this was on my mind as I worked. Being visited, greeted and waved at by passersby helped give me encouragement along the way."

As it was being completed, the mural was the talk of the town, and many people had opinions.

The subject of the mural also is idealistic as it shows one of Ripon's most distinctive buildings — a Long House that once existed on the south side of Ceresco Park. Rather than depicting the building on the ground, he showed it up on a scaffolding that made it look like a triumphal arch. This is a traditional architectural symbol, used by countless communities since ancient times to celebrate their accomplishments.

The Long House was erected in 1845 by the utopian community called the "Wisconsin Phalanx," which followed the ideals of socialist Charles Fourier.

A different Long House survives, on the west side, which was erected in 1847 and then dismantled and reconstructed from 1933-1934 as a Civil Works Administration project.

The followers of Fourier were



**RAFAEL SALAS' "THE** Long Way Home" mural is painted on the side of 218 Watson St. It was created in 2014 with the hope of uplifting the community following a downtown fire in 2013. *submitted photo*

among the first European settlers of the area that became Ripon, and many of them lived, worked and ate communally.

"As the Longhouse was built by a utopian society, I feel the optimism and goals of unification and sharing ... are values we can continue to aspire to in our community," Salas said.

The building has been an anchor of thinking about both the community of Ripon and the greater region, but its meaning has changed over time. Each generation of Riponites have thought about the city's utopian history in their own ways. In the 19th century, the building was a symbol of successful experimental living. When the commune disbanded in 1850, many of the investors benefitted financially.

By the early 20th century, the buildings that had been erected by the Wisconsin Phalanx had fallen into disrepair and the community began to rethink its past. The *New York Times* ran a human-interest story about it, with the headline "Communism Once Tried on Wisconsin Prairie: The Phalanx,

Founded by Disciples of Fourier, Had a Brief Life a Century Ago and the Last Traces of Its Buildings Are Now Disappearing" (*March 24, 1929, p. 6*).

Later, during the Cold War, socialist ideals made Riponites uncomfortable and it was looked down upon.

The Ripon Community Art Center featured the Long House in one of its screen print art works in 1957. The history of the building was included with each screen print, which stated that "the experiment failed socially because of man's inherent desire for individuality." Although a kernel of truth exists in this assessment, it also reflects the ways that Americans of the 1950s celebrated personal liberties, in contrast to the collectivism of the Soviet Union. This screen print may be found in a new book available at the Ripon Historical Society or on Amazon.com, titled "Eve Faustman's Ripon, Wisconsin: The Heritage Prints."

Still later, during the 1960s, communal living and free-thinking seemed to resonate with the moral standards of the free-thinking youth of the time.

An article published in the *Oshkosh Northwestern* in 1962, for example, said that the Long House was rumored to have been a "love hut" where people had been "conducting nothing but a mass orgy," although the author backtracked, denying the rumors because "records prove that the moral standards of members in the Phalanx group remained high" (*Thomas L. Kohl, "Fourierism in Ripon," Oshkosh Northwestern, April 23, 1962, p. 17*).

Although controversial at the time, it is known that these "love-hut" rumors were not entirely unfounded as several members of the Phalanx were advocates of "free love." That said, community

scandal about this did not break out until five years after the commune disbanded. At that time, books were circulating in town about free love, resulting in condemnations and a mass meeting on July 11, 1855, held in downtown Ripon. The *Ripon Herald* dedicated its July 21, 1855 issue to the proceedings of this meeting, providing a scintillating near-verbatim transcript.

More recently, the Ceresco community has been a point of local pride. By the nation's bicentennial celebration in 1976, it was recognized as part of America's collective heritage, with the Ceresco Site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Then, in preparation for or concurrent with the 1994 observance of the 150th anniversary of the Phalanx, an archaeological dig, exhibit and series of newspaper articles celebrated the history.

Salas' mural is the culmination of more than a century of thinking about Ripon's utopian past.

Like all artworks, this mural evolved over time. Salas initially had considered placing an abstract image of the Ceresco Prairie on the top of the arch — with toys standing in for trees.

This sketch is now in the collection of the Ripon Historical Society and may be viewed in its museum. He also made a painting of what this could have looked like, which is part of the Ripon Historical Society's collection.

Ultimately, however, he wanted the mural to be more approachable, so he opted to depict the Long House as a more recognizable subject that could make a bigger impact.

"The mural, titled 'The Long Way Home' is of course a pun on the Long House itself, but more so I think it speaks to the work that it takes to create a positive and con-

structive community," Salas said. "... This fulfillment is a journey and it takes commitment and time to achieve it."

Before the mural was painted, a professional painter prepared the background, Salas began painting in mid-May 2014. It was completed in only six weeks, ahead of the schedule that Salas set for himself.

Most responses to the mural were positive and never written down, but a handful were critical. Former *Ripon Commonwealth Press* reporter Aaron Becker ruminated on other subjects that could have been painted, from "a collage of Ripon High School and Ripon College athletes, a Norman-Rockwell-type scene inspired by a favorite city festival, a steam engine pulling into the bygone Ripon depot, a sunset over the mill pond, or a pleasing tribute to 'Cookietown USA' or the early founding of Ripon."

The mural has since withstood some damage from water and the elements, and its longevity is now uncertain. We can be sure, however, that even if it is painted over that the community can take pride in Ripon's utopian and artistic past.

Looking to the future, a new historical marker that focuses on the early utopian history of Ripon, especially its founder — Warren Chase — is under development for Ceresco Park. Funding for this new marker was given in part by retired Ripon High School history teacher Al Mortenson. He is considered a local expert on the Phalanx and wrote his 1967 master's thesis on the subject. This may be seen in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society or at Ripon College.

While Salas believes the mural accomplished its goal of uplifting the people of Ripon and those visiting the community the last 10 years, he is open to someone who wishes to replace it.

"While I am proud to have painted this artwork ... I think the mural has served its purpose," Salas wrote in a 2022 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* letter to the editor. "... As we know, nothing lasts forever. Here's hoping downtown Ripon remains vital and thriving for many years to come."

The creation of Salas' mural was documented through photographs and may be found at his professional website: [www.rafaelsalas.com/portfolio/2014/](http://www.rafaelsalas.com/portfolio/2014/).

*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.*



**COMMISSIONED BY THE** Ripon Community Arts Center, this 1957 print by Eve Faustman depicts the "Original Long House."

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