

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

Farvour recalls ‘Nostalgic Noises’ in Ripon and beyond

“Nostalgic Noises” is the title of a story written by Franklin B. Farvour (1919-2004).

Farvour wrote several self-published books, which he called “Potpourri; Things, Feelings and Thoughts.” Copies of these books may be found in the Ripon Historical Society research library at 508 Watson St.

“Nostalgic Noises” recalls the sounds of a bygone era in Ripon and appears in book four, which was compiled in 2004.

Farvour wrote about his life in Ripon and fondly remembered what he heard around the community over his 85 years.

“I believe one of the greatest thrills I can recall was the sound of the pitched whistle on Bill Wagner’s steam tractor which he pulled his threshing machine from farm to farm,” Farvour wrote. “How he loved to blow the whistle and see the kids come running to watch him steam down the street.”

To hear this sound today, people may attend one of the area’s steam machine and tractor shows sponsored by the nearby Pickett Steam & Pickett Pullers Club.

Another memory of Farvour’s was the drone of an airplane.

“Few and far between in those days, maybe once or twice a summer, the barnstormers would come to town selling airplane rides from a nearby pasture,” Farvour wrote. “They advertised their presence by circling over town and everybody, old and young alike, were out in clear spots to look up at that.”

After World War II, Farvour was a partner at the Ripon Aviation Co., which had an airfield east of Ripon off Highway 44. This also brought the sounds of airplanes to Ripon.

Today, especially at the end of July during the EAA AirVenture convention in Oshkosh, the community hears the sounds of many airplanes overheard.

At other times in modern day Ripon, one hears the training runs of F-35 fighter jets, which are part of the Wisconsin Air National Guard 115th Fighter Wing, which fly out of Truax Field in Madison.

Farvour noted in his memories that “electric sirens were unheard of.” He went onto write “because the local generating station supposedly always had steam up, the town’s fire whistles were mounted on their smoke stack.” He added that “The whistle was built like toy slide whistles kids play with, the pitch was varied by changing the length of the chamber.”

This generating station was



A STEAM TRACTOR is used for threshing during a Pickett Steam & Pickett Pullers Club event. The events are perhaps the only way people can hear the same sound that Franklin B. Farvour heard as a child living in Ripon.

Pickett Steam & Pickett Pullers Club photo

located near the present day Selfridge Park on Spring Street.

“There were times when there wasn’t steam ‘up’ and then the fire bell was used instead,” Farvour said. “The bell was fixed in position and the clapper swung instead. Two ropes hung from a slot in the fire tower wall and pulling them alternately produced a ‘clang-clang’ ... sound that was unmistakable.”

This fire bell was located in a tower above the fire station at the 1885 city hall, today the location of Hamilton’s at 125 Watson St. The building was razed in 1965.

Today, a fire bell or siren is no longer needed as modern ways of communication, such as cell phones, are used to contact firefighters when necessary.

Over the last several decades, every Saturday at noon the community heard the emergency weather siren being tested from the top of City Hall at 100 E. Jackson St. However, this sound also will soon fade in memory as the siren recently was moved.

Farvour went on about the sounds of Ripon writing that, “In the winter it was the squeal of the steel runners of farm bobsleds on the hard packed snow, and the clop clop of the big horses’ hooves as they drew the bob[sleds] down the street. More sounds lost in the limbo of days forever gone by, but memorable for how it beckoned the kids to hop aboard the runners and hitch a ride for a block or two.”

Farvour remembered that years ago, the sounds of “The neighborhood roosters greeting the break of day. Just about every household had a few chickens and each flock had its king. Each one had his own voice and we always knew whose rooster started the day for the rest.”

Farm animals have long been gone in Ripon, and for a long time keeping chickens in the

city was banned. However, as of 2023, chickens can be kept at single-family homes in Ripon. After receiving a permit and paying a fee, homes may keep up to six hens, but roosters are not allowed.

“Wherever you went were train whistles, all steam of course,” Farvour also remembered. “Virtually every city, village and town was served by rail and trains were many. Yet each locomotive had a voice of its own that we learned to know. One could almost set his watch by the passenger train from Milwaukee whistling for the Ripon station each evening.”

While passenger trains to Ripon were eliminated by the 1960s, and one train track has been turned into a walking trail, Ripon still hears the sound of train whistles coming through the city.

Farvour wrote that his world for most of the year consisted of living in Ripon, however “during the summer brief periods of time were spent at Green Lake.”

He wrote about hearing “The ‘chuff-chuff’ and deep-throated bellow of the whistle on Norton’s steam launch Queen of the Lake, long gone to her watery resting place, but with her unforgettable sounds still ringing in my ears these many years later.”

The Queen of the Lake has been replaced with the much quieter Escapade Yacht, available for tours of the lake starting at the Heidel House.

Although speed boats still may be heard on Green Lake, Farvour remembered the speed boat named “Miss Ripon.”

“Howled like a banshee she did,” Farvour wrote. “You could hear her from one end of the lake to the other. Hearing her coming, young and old alike flocked to the shore to see her pass.”

The Miss Ripon was first seen on Green Lake in 1924, but it



FRANKLIN B. FARVOUR remembered the sound of the fire bell found on the top of the tower of Ripon’s City Hall. Built in 1885, the building was razed in 1965 and now is the site of Hamilton’s. Today, a fire bell or alarm is not needed as firefighters are notified of fires in more modern ways.

submitted photo



MISS RIPON OWNERS Alvin Weingarten and Herbert Habel test the course in the only known photo of the boat. Visiting Green Lake, Franklin B. Farvour remembered hearing the sounds of Miss Ripon, the whistle on the Queen of the Lake and Chris Craft wooden boats. Today, the Queen of the Lake is gone, but speed boats and Chris Craft boats still are found on the lake.

Mystic Seaport Museum, Rosenfeld Collection photo

is unknown what happened to the boat.

Farvour added that “The roar of an early day Chris Craft drew the kids to the shore to watch its majestic passing. This didn’t happen all that often and was an incident to remember.”

Today these historic wooden boats still may be found on the lake and still draw interest from people seeing them.

Also remembered by Farvour are the bird songs around Ripon.

“Robins, Baltimore orioles, wrens, purple martins, chickadees, mourning doves, killdeer, blackbirds and crows ... all sounds I shall never forget,” Farvour wrote in his book.

For a while in Ripon, the sounds of birds were not heard as often. After the 1940s, the chemical DDT was used across America to control mosquitos, flies and other disease carriers. DDT caused the eggshells of

many birds to be thin, leading to a decline in the bird population.

The chemical was banned in Wisconsin in 1970 and today many varieties of birds once again may be heard and observed.

Farvour ended his thoughts about the sounds around Ripon by writing that, “Many of these sounds are stilled forever.

“I suppose the cacophony of today’s sounds will live with the kids of today just as those of my childhood live with me. ... My generation has indeed been blessed with a heritage of sounds to remember, the likes of which are never to be repeated.”

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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