

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

A scoop of history: Ripon's ice cream industry remembered

By Pat Grahn

One popular way to beat the heat in the summer is by eating ice cream. In early Ripon, people used hand-cranked ice cream makers to produce this frozen summer treat. Made with milk or cream and sugar, flavors were made by adding fruits, candy or things like cocoa and vanilla.

When the state's dairy industry expanded commercial ice cream production started in Wisconsin in the late 1890s. With 10 of the largest ice cream manufacturers, Milwaukee had become the center of ice cream production by 1920. About the same time, commercial ice cream production started in Ripon.

In 1921, Carl Miller partnered with Carl Bobzin (1903-1965), Otto Kroll (1874-1934), and William Simmons Jr. (1863-1950) to form the Ripon Ice Cream & Beverage Co.

No information could be found on Miller, however this could be Herman Carl Mueller (1872-1941), whose family sometimes used the Americanized last name of Miller instead of Mueller.

Over time, William Simmons Jr. bought out the interests of his partners. William had been a farmer in the township of Ripon and moved to Ripon in 1921, when he helped to start the ice cream company.

William's son Charles Simmons (1893-1946) was the secretary/treasurer since the start of the company. His obituary stated that due to "ill health he retired" around 1943. Another one of William's sons, Walter



THIS PHOTOGRAPH FROM the Aug. 23, 1962 *Ripon Commonwealth Press* shows Ripon Ice Cream Co. ice cream and soda pop maker John Wepner, left, and owner Walter Simmons (1887-1973). The company was in business in Ripon for 46 years from 1921 until 1967. *submitted photo*

Simmons (1887-1973), also worked for the company.

The *Commonwealth* featured the Ripon Ice Cream and Beverage Co. on Aug. 23, 1962, in their series of articles which showcased Ripon businesses. The article stated, "The Simmons family moved to a farm in Ripon township when Walter was a boy. He was graduated from Ripon High School and attended Ripon College." The article went on to note, "Later, Walter joined the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture as a potato inspector. He served in that capacity for about 10 years."

Walter started at Ripon Ice Cream & Beverage Co. in 1936 and eventually became the owner.

In the 1962 *Commonwealth* article, it was stated that the Ri-

pon Ice Cream & Beverage Co. made 20 flavors of ice cream and about six different soda-pop flavors. However, the caption under the accompanying photo stated, "The company makes 73 different kinds of ice cream in a year's time and also manufactures nine different flavors of pop."

They supplied the Ripon area, as well as stores in Beaver Dam, Neshkoro, Omro and Wautoma areas.

After 46 years in business, the company closed and sold its building to Blakely Auto Parts in 1967. Early telephone books for Ripon list the Ripon Ice Cream Co. as being on "Watson Street," but did not give an address. A 1962 article in the *Ripon Commonwealth* noted that the company was "located just northwest of the Van Metre Garage."



THIS 28-BY-21-inch tin sign from the Ripon Ice Cream Co. is on display in the "Gimme a Sign" exhibit at the Ripon Historical Society, 508 Watson St. Ripon Ice Cream Co. produced ice cream and soda from 1921 until 1967. The sign was donated to the historical society by Ron Keplin. *submitted photo*

This garage was located next to the current Pastimes Pub & Grill, 120 Scott St.

When the Ripon Ice Cream & Beverage Co. building was sold to Blakely Auto Parts in 1967, the auto parts store had an address of 109 E. Jackson Street. This building is located east behind the 100 block of Watson Street in the city parking lot between East Jackson and Scott streets.

The Ripon Historical Society currently has a sign from the Ripon Ice Cream Co. on display in an exhibit entitled "Gimme a Sign," which pairs historic signs with modern artwork.

Ripon artist Dick Folsie responded to the Ripon Ice Cream sign by producing an oil on aluminum painting suggestive of a companion sign which advertises seasonal prairie flavors from fruits, plants and trees.

The limited-palette painting

of the Ceresco Prairie with call-out text of plant flavor locations is reflective of the more than 90 paintings Folsie has produced about the prairie in the past three years and is a whimsical addition to his oeuvre. Folsie's sign is available to purchase and those interested may call the Ripon Historical Society at 920-748-5354 or email ripon-histsoc@gmail.com.

The "Gimme a Sign" exhibit is open Friday and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. or by appointment at the historical societies Pickard House Museum at 508 Watson Street.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.

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