

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

Fields to playgrounds: Remembering the Sherwood Farm at Riggs County Park

By Pat Grahn

Riggs County Park, located at N8137 Douglas Street at the corners of South Douglas Street and East Fond du Lac Street/Highway 23, is Fond du Lac County's largest park and encompasses 300 acres of land.

It includes 180 acres of wetlands, 70 acres of native prairie and about 50 acres of active recreation. The park is known for an all-inclusive playground, splash pad, disc golf course and hiking trails.

The land for Riggs Park was purchased in 1998 and over the past 28 years many people have forgotten its history. In fall 2025, one of the last pieces connecting the land to its history was lost when an outbuilding that was once a part of the Sherwood farm was razed.

In 1845, Somers (sometimes written as "Sommers") Sherwood (1825-1895) moved from New York to work on a farm in the township of Metomen. He began buying and selling parcels of land in the town of Metomen, then for two years he bought land in Waushara and Waupaca counties before returning to Ripon to farm.

In 1863, Somers Sherwood went to Connecticut and married Theodosia Kellogg Sherwood (1838-1907). They purchased a home at 526 Newbury St. and had two children, Ellen "Nellie" Sherwood Trevor (1863-1912) and Ralph Sherwood (1866-1932).

When Abram Thomas (1818-1865) died, Somers purchased his farm, which eventually became Riggs County Park on the southeast side of Ripon. The family dates the purchase of the farm as 1866.

The 1874 Fond du Lac County atlas shows that Somers had 160 acres of land and, in 1875, he purchased a milk business

and started delivering milk in the city.

In approximately 1890, the milk business was sold and Somers opened the pasture to neighbors for their cows.

It was at this time that Somers' son, Ralph, left Ripon to work as a brakeman for the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad. When Somers died in 1895, Ralph returned to the farm and concentrated on cash cropping — including sugar beets, cabbage and cucumbers for pickles.

In 1912, Ralph married Fannie Latimer Sherwood (1878-1966). They had four children, Somers (1912-2000), Wesley (1914-2004), Rachel (1917-2008) and Sidney (1918-1984.)

"He had a few cows for the family, but he got into community and government jobs." Wesley wrote about his father Ralph in a family history. Ralph was the town clerk for 11 years.

A sketch of the original Sherwood house was featured in the 1874 Fond du Lac County atlas. However, this house burned in 1891. A new house was built on the old foundation. Unlike the original house, the new one did not have porches and only had three sets of flagstone steps.

Wesley wrote in his 1966 family history booklet that "The house was built for two families so each one could live privately from the other. Sommers had a saying, 'We built for hers, we know not who they be.'"

The house cost about \$9,000 to build (approximately \$320,000 today). In the summer of 1913, Somers' son Ralph had a front porch built on the house and moved the front door from the east end of the porch to the west end.

The house which faces south still exists today. A 1966 aerial photo of the Sherwood farm shows the Sherwood house, five



A 1966 AERIAL photo of the Sherwood farm, now Riggs County Park, shows the Sherwood house and numerous outbuildings. Recently, the only outbuilding remaining on the farm was razed. It is shown in this photo on the right-hand side. *submitted photo*

outbuildings and four corn cribs.

Ralph died in 1932. His wife, Fannie, along with their children, then ran the farm and started making butter, buttermilk and cottage cheese, as well as selling dressed chickens.

Fannie purchased an additional 150 acres of land next to the original farm in 1941. This included 50 acres of marsh on Silver Creek, cattle, chickens, machinery and additional farm buildings. Over the years, land was bought and sold — and by 1976, the Sherwood farm incorporated 375 acres of land.

A *Ripon Commonwealth Press* article from Sept. 23, 1976, related that a grandson also named "Sommers" and "Wesley" take care of all the field work. Rachel looked after the house duties and worked with the sheep, geese and ducks found on the farm.

"Sidney used to be the dairy herdsman in charge of the barn," the article stated. "He took a job at Speed Queen in 1967 when the decision was made to sell the herd. However, he still takes active participation in farm duties."

At that time, the Sherwoods planted wheat, barley, oats, corn and hay, as well as raising 15 sheep, 200 ducks and 27 geese. The article went on to say that Sidney's son, Ralph, would be the next Sherwood to continue farming the land.

The Sherwood farm has benefited Ripon in some interesting ways. A *Commonwealth* article related that at one time as many as 90 cows, which were owned by people who lived within



THIS UNDATED PHOTO shows the original Sherwood family who farmed the land now known as "Riggs County Park." Pictured are, from left, Ralph (1866-1932), Theodosia (1838-1907), Nellie (1863-1912) and Somers (1825-1895). Ralph was the second generation of Sherwoods to take over the farm, which remained in the family from 1866 until 1998. *submitted photo*

the city of Ripon limits, were pastured at the Sherwood Farm. The children of the families would collect their cow at the end of the day and walk them home.

In 1911, five acres of land was rented for a pea canning company that eventually expanded to more acreage. The canning company changed hands several times and eventually became Green Giant. Starting in 1912, three wells were dug in the pasture, which provided water to the city until 1932.

During World War II, some of the Sherwood farmland along Douglas Street was rented to the U.S. government for a P.O.W. camp. The 600 German prisoners from this camp assisted with the harvest.

After 132 years of being owned by the Sherwood family, the farm was sold to Fond du

Lac County for the development of Riggs County Park in 1998.

Ripon resident Doris Riggs Miller (1910-1998) offered to donate \$500,000 (approximately \$1 million today) for the development of a park under the stipulation that it be named Riggs County Park.

This amount was combined with \$300,000 in county funding and a \$212,000 Department of Natural Resources Stewardship Grant to purchase and develop the park.

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, visit www.riponhistory.org, [facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety](https://www.facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety) or [instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/](https://www.instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/).



THIS BUILDING OFF Douglas Street in Riggs County Park recently was razed. It was the last farm building connecting the land to its history as the Sherwood farm, which remained in the Sherwood family from 1866 until 1998. *Al Klapperich photo*