

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

# Santa by postcard: Ripon's Christmas past

Ripon has celebrated Christmas since the area was settled in 1844. The community has changed over the years, and the Ripon Historical Society looks back more than 100 years ago to Christmas in the early 1900s.

Christmas was less commercial and more religious at that time. Santa Claus depiction was more frightening and sometimes appeared in a hood instead of the Santa hat of today. There was less emphasis on gift giving and children often received handmade toys.

Only one in five Americans was estimated to have a Christmas tree in 1900. Lights on Christmas trees often were real candles, but early strings of electric lights were starting to appear.

Postcards were the most popular way to send holiday greetings and to make plans with friends and family.

This postcard featuring Santa Claus talking on a candlestick telephone is dated 1914 and was mailed to Christine Krueger (1907-1996), 518 Newbury St.

Ripon's first Santa Claus was Arthur Steinbring (1879-1950), who was orphaned at age 8 and later noted, "I was left without anyone to make Christmas merry for me."

Steinbring promised himself as an adult he would make Christmas special for other people. He started playing Santa Claus in 1902 and spread Christmas cheer throughout Ripon for more than 45 years.

Krueger would have been 7 years old by the time this postcard was mailed, and most likely visited with Steinbring, who by that time had been Ripon's Santa for 12 years.

Steinbring operated a shoe store first at 301 Watson St. and then at 200 Watson St. He lived in the grout octagon house that was built in 1851 at 610 Liberty St.

The Ripon Historical Society has many of Steinbring's Santa items in its collection.

This includes a scrapbook of photographs, personal notes and letters regarding playing Santa, and parts of his costume, including a wig, sleighbells, hat and pattern for one of his three Santa suits.



This undated Christmas postcard was hand delivered to Christine Krueger (1907-1996), from "Freddie." Shown on the front of the card are two candlestick telephones. This type of phone was used from the late 1890s until the 1940s.

The phone was about 10 inches tall and sat on a stand with a mouthpiece at the top. It had an earpiece or receiver which was held up to the ear and there was a separate ringer box. Calls were connected through an operator, although later models had dials on the base.

Ripon's telephone system started in 1883 as a franchise that was part of the Wisconsin State Telephone Co. The telephone service was staffed by a

"telephone operator" who would connect individuals who used their phones to call businesses and houses that subscribed to the Ripon phone service.

Between 1899 and 1907, the Ripon phone company provided service to approximately 200 subscribers in town and in the rural areas surrounding Ripon. By 1928 Ripon had 1,283 listings in the telephone directory.

This undated circa 1917 Christmas postcard was never mailed. Written on the back is "A Sonora Phonograph is the most cherished of all Christmas gifts."

A floor model Sonora phonograph is shown just to right of the family on the card. A Sonora delivery truck is seen out the window. The Sonora company entered the photograph market around 1907 and went bankrupt in 1911. The company was reorganized and produced high-quality phonographs and later radios.

The Dec. 15, 1905, *Ripon Commonwealth* had an advertisement for the Edison Phonograph. The ad reads: "No Christmas present can give more lasting pleasure to the whole family than an Edison Phonograph." The ad went on to state that a repre-



sentative would be "In the Lyle store with four different styles of machines and a collection of 700 Edison records."

The first radio station in Wisconsin was started in 1917 and was the predecessor to the current Wisconsin Public Radio. Most people in Wisconsin did not get a radio until the later in 1920s and into the 1930s.

Theodore Krueger (1866-1917), 218 Newbury St., received this Christmas postcard in 1908. The card sent by "K" notes, "Christine wants to send you this so you can see what kind of a car she goes downtown to see Santa Claus."

Dr. Austin Mitchell (?-1921) owned the first automobile in Ripon. The Aug. 5, 1904 issue of the *Ripon Commonwealth* reported that Mitchell was driving his car too fast and "terribly frightened" some horses pulling a wagon which causing injuries to both the horses and the driver.

The *Commonwealth* went on to note: "One reckless automobile driver can throw a whole township into a state of nervous hysteria. He spoils all the pleasure for the owners of horses and does much to make the automobile unpopular."

Ripon boasted 74 automobiles within the city limits by 1912. Twenty-one varieties of cars were in the city at that time, which included 11 Buicks, 10 Maxwells, and nine Cadillacs.



Santa is shown driving an automobile on this photocard mailed in 1910 to Martin "Roy: Banville (1896-1955) by Keel Roberts (1894-1968). Roberts wrote on the back, "I hope Santa Claus will come in an auto this year."

Banville would have been 14 years old and Roberts 16 years old when the postcard was mailed. Both lived in Pickett.

Postcards were popular between the late 1800s and into the 1920s. The years between 1907 and 1915 was known as the "Golden Age of Postcards." Postcards were used like the modern-day phone text — they were a quick and easy way to keep in touch or deliver a short message.

The U.S. Post Office estimated that a billion postcards were mailed each year during the peak years of the postcard craze. In 1898, Congress changed the rate of the postage for postcards to 1 cent. Soon postcards became known as "penny postcards."

Mail was first picked up in Fond du Lac and carried in a pillowcase to Ceresco, a community founded in 1844 near Union Street and Ceresco Park. Ceresco had its own post office as did the new community of Ripon, which was located east of Ceresco on the top of the hill near Watson Street. Ceresco disbanded in 1850 and combined with Ripon, consolidating to one post office.

The post office moved from place to place until it was relocated to the first floor of the City Hall building built in 1885 at the triangle between West Fond du Lac and Scott streets off Watson Street. In 1924, the Ripon post office moved to its present location at 220 Blackburn St. This was the first federally owned post office building in Ripon. The post office building is in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and is therefore listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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



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