

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

Zobel Brothers store once was go-to place for groceries

As the holidays approach, people get out their family recipes in order to make up a grocery list.

Today, many people in Ripon grocery shop at Hy-Vee, 1188 W. Fond du Lac Street. In the late 1880s, many people would shop at The Zobel Brothers store.

The Zobel Brothers store was started in 1873 by two brothers — O. E. Herman Zobel (1847-1911) and Julius Zobel (1849-1925). The brothers came with their parents from Germany to Ripon in 1860 at ages 11 and 13.

They had two store locations both on Watson Street. Their second and last location was a building they built in 1878 at 121 Watson St., the current site of Edward Jones.

Lillian Zobel (1892-1985), Herman's daughter, gave a presentation to the Ripon Historical Society in 1960 about her father and uncle's store. A written copy of the presentation was printed in the 1965 Centennial Progress Edition of the *Ripon Commonwealth Press*.

Lillian Zobel noted that the store remained open year round from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and that a yardstick was a popular item given away by the store as a "means of advertising. The front side of the yardstick gave the name of the store and on the back side of the yardstick was the message "We Positively Carry the Choicest and Best Selected Stock of Dry Goods and Fine Groceries to be Found in Ripon. Prices Guaranteed to be as Low as the Lowest."

Besides grocery items, Zobel said that "the store also carried a wonderful line of crockery, lamps, linens, dress goods, thread, buttons and whale-bone stays."

The store was lighted by kerosene lamps, which had to be refilled, the glass globes cleaned and the wicks trimmed daily. A young boy was employed to do this work, along with other odd jobs in the store.

In the winter, the store was heated by a pot-bellied stove.

"The pot-bellied stove was a gathering place for patrons and friends," Zobel said. "Several town men assembled every evening, a club without dues, where tall tales were told before



THE ZOBEL BROTHERS Store was located at 121 Watson St. from 1878 until approximately 1900. The building currently houses Edward Jones. A piece of paper attached to the original photograph which is housed in the Ripon Historical Society archives states that Billy, the store's delivery horse, is shown on the left-hand side. *submitted photo*

a delighted audience, or practical jokes were plotted."

One practical joke that she wrote about related to a customer who repeatedly stole a pound of butter and hid it under his hat.

"One evening he had butter thus hidden, when the men of the 'stove-club' maneuvered him close to the stove and kept him in conversation," she recalled. "It was not long before the butter under the man's hat began to melt, and it ran down the man's cheeks and neck and into his shirt. The cure was effective, for he never stole butter again."

Another practical joke that Zobel wrote about was related to a cigar-box of free pipe tobacco that sat on the counter of the store.

"One man who never bought a thing in the store came in every evening and filled his pipe solid with tobacco," Zobel penned. "The 'stove-club' decided something should be done about the situation. So, a second box of tobacco was mixed with some gunpowder. When the marked man came in, the cigar-boxes on

the counter were switched. He filled his pipe with the loaded tobacco, stepped to the stove, struck his match and held it over the pipe-bowl. 'Pff,' the stuff blew up and he never again was seen in the store."

Zobel also noted that "A large barrel of oyster crackers in the store was a popular means of attracting patrons. Here men stood to each 10 cents worth of crackers after buying a nickel's worth of cheese."

At that time, individually wrapped items were unheard of.

"Grocery supplies arrived by the barrel and customers bought by the barrel," Zobel wrote. "In the first years, patrons came by oxcart and stocked up for six months ahead — sugar, salt, flour apples and even crackers by the barrel."

If smaller amounts were needed they were weighed or counted.

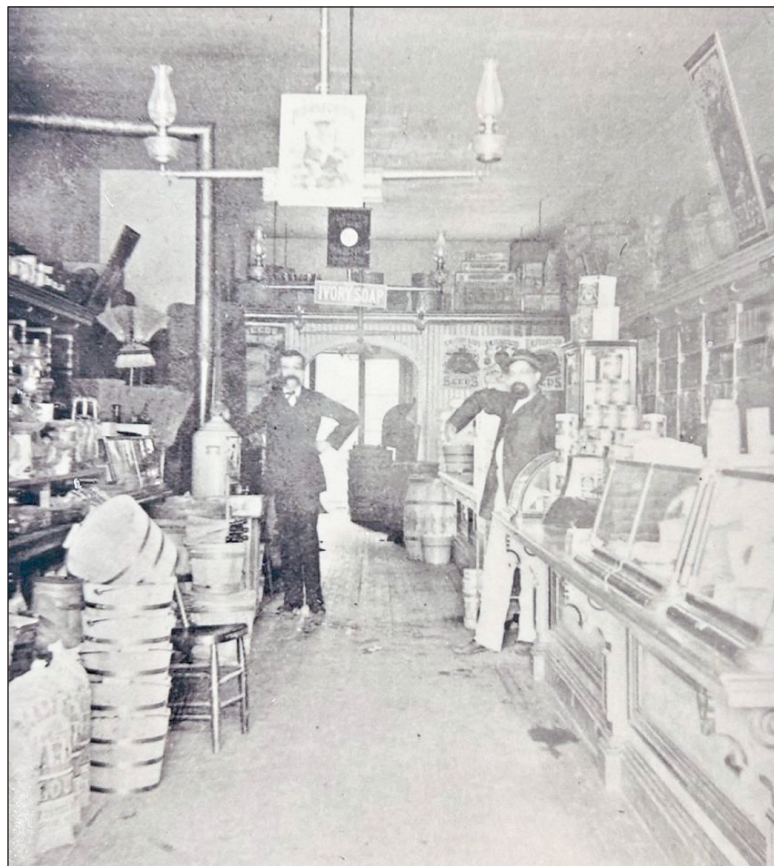
"There were no paper sacks for smaller packages, so the grocer made up square sheets of paper into cornucopias as effective containers," Zobel wrote.

Sometimes items were wrapped in brown paper, tied with string and had a wood and wire handle attached to the string for easy carrying. Paper bags did not come into common use until after 1912 and plastic bags were introduced in the 1970s.

Zobel also reported that "Coffee beans were ground in a huge grinder by hand. Tea was kept in large metal canisters of four kinds: Pan-fired Japan, Oolong, Orange-Pekoe and Ceylon. The tea we used at home was a mixture of three kinds."

Many women brought 1 pound pats of butter that they had made at home to exchange for groceries. People would trade items like or place purchases "on account" to be paid perhaps once a month.

"Those years were before the time of expert accountant, and bookkeeping," Zobel wrote.



THIS UNDATED PHOTOGRAPH with two unidentified men shows the interior of the Zobel Brothers store. *submitted photo*



PAPER BAGS DID not come into common use until after 1912. At the Zobel Brothers Store, brown paper was used to make cornucopias to hold items smaller purchased items such as coffee and crackers. Larger parcels were wrapped in brown paper tied with string and had a wood and wire handle attached to the string for easy carrying. The paper and string holders in this photograph are from the artifacts collection at the Ripon Historical Society. *submitted photo*

"Accounts were sometimes balanced and solved by the neighborly touch."

One Saturday night, her father and uncle added the weeks receipts and "over and over the money had been counted, but always 2 cents remained over. At 2 o'clock in the morning, the two men noticed a ray of light shining through the shutters of the bank's window across the street. On knocking at the bank door to inquire, they learned the bank was puzzled to find 2 cents lacking. The great sum changed hands on the spot and both firms locked up to keep the Sabbath."

Zobel recalled that "Groceries were delivered in a buckboard drawn by the horse 'Billy,'" who was an "unusually intelligent animal." She wrote that Billy "made trips alone from store to home. After a dinner of oats and hay, he again made his way to the store, backed the wagon around accurately and took his place in the covered

shed (behind the store) without mishap."

She also noted that "Eggs were often hauled over the rough and stony roads of that period, so father would call out 'Eggs, Billy.' If Billy had been jogging along at a brisk trot, he would calm down to a slow walk."

After almost 30 years in business, Zobel's father retired in 1900, leaving her uncle to run the store for a short time after that.

The Zobel Brothers store was one of the many business which once thrived in Ripon.

After 125 years it is now only a small, yet interesting part of the communities history.

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.



LIKE OTHER STORES of its time the Zobel Brothers store at 121 Watson Street received items in bulk, which could then be sold in smaller amounts to individuals. This photograph shows a tin coffee bean holder and an industrial size coffee grinder which are found in the artifacts collection at the Ripon Historical Society. The Zobel store would have utilized items like this. *submitted photo*