

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

Mystery 'baseball Bat' revealed as sheriff's billy club

By Pat Grahn

With the start of baseball season, the Ripon Historical Society wanted to research what seemed to be a large ceremonial baseball bat found in its collection. The artifact measures 41-inches long and is 11-inches around at the largest end. Printed on the side in gold lettering is, "Presented by USWV to Chas. Graham, January 26, 1911."

Charles Graham (1865-1927) was born in the township of Alto and moved to Ripon with his parents at age 7. He married Emma Schiepp Graham (1873-1943) in 1894, they had four children and lived at 116 E. Thorne Street.

During the Spanish-American War in 1898, Graham served as a corporal in Co. D 2nd Wisconsin Infantry and saw service in Puerto Rico. He then served as the Ripon chief of police and left Ripon for several years to become the undersheriff and then sheriff of Fond du Lac County.

The Feb. 3, 1911, *Ripon Commonwealth Press* revealed that what the historical society thought was a baseball bat had nothing to do with baseball. The *Commonwealth* reported that the "Arthur McCourt Camp No. 15, United Spanish War Veterans, together with 12 delegates from the Ripon camp, sprung a pleasant surprise on Sheriff Charles H. Graham in Fond du Lac."

The article continued: "The merry band invaded the county jail to the complete surprise of Mr. Graham. On behalf of the war veterans, Past Commander Henry Scherzinger presented Mr. Graham with a handsome 'big stick' about 3-feet long. The 'billy' was handsomely finished and polished and bore the sheriff's name in gold letters.

Two years ago, the veterans sprang a surprise on Sheriff Steve and presented him with a big stick. Mr. Graham, who was then undersheriff, was given a miniature 'stick' which was about the size of a lead pencil. The veterans expressed the hope that the cudgel would grow in two years' time or when Mr. Graham was elected sheriff."

A billy stick or cudgel is a club, baton or nightstick that was traditionally used by law enforcement as a self-defense weapon or a compliance tool in restraining others during riot control.

Traditionally, the billy stick was small and easy to

carry — being about half of an arm's length. The much larger billy stick given to Graham was intended as a presentation piece.

The "USWV" printed on the club refers to the United Spanish War Veterans, which was a voluntary fraternal association of Spanish-American War veterans which operated on both a state and na-



WITH THE START of the baseball season the Ripon Historical Society researched this large ceremonial bat given to Charles H. Graham (1865-1927) in 1911. A 1911 article in the *Ripon Commonwealth Press* shows the bat was not related to baseball but was a presentational billy stick given by fellow Spanish War Veterans to Graham, who was then the Fond du Lac County sheriff.

submitted photo

peace for Ripon. The Wisconsin Veterans Museum states that the men who formed the organization were "dedicated to preserving the memory of their sacrifices and to promoting patriotism."

Each participating state was considered a department, which was divided into local camps. The camps were numbered and named; no two camps within a state could share a name. Each department held an annual encampment, which might include formal dinners, camping out, memorial events and entertainment.

Charles Graham's obituary reads, "Prominent in local and county affairs, Mr. Graham was well known throughout the state and has a large circle of acquaintances. He served in a number of offices of trust in a capable manner. For several years he was a member of the common council representing the first ward of the city of Ripon."

Graham also served as mayor of Ripon and later in life acted as the justice of the

The obituary described Graham as "Kind, democratic, unassuming, he made staunch friends wherever he went."

Graham was a painter by trade and at one time became a partner in the Central Hardware Co. and later established the Graham Insurance Co.

It is unknown who donated the billy stick to the Ripon Historical Society. The society, founded in 1899, is the oldest continually operating historical society in the state of Wisconsin. The billy stick came to the society before modern museum cataloging practices.

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 or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



THIS CIRCA 1910 photograph shows Charles H. Graham (1865-1927) when he was the sheriff of Fond du Lac County. Graham was a business owner, as well as police chief, alderman, mayor and justice of the peace for the city of Ripon.

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