

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

A tradition of youth in leadership continues in Ripon

By Pat Grahn

Preston Benton, a 2025 Ripon High School graduate and member of the Ripon College class of 2029, is running for the Ripon School Board on April 7.

In a statement to the *Commonwealth*, Benton noted: "I acknowledge that I am young, but I believe I bring a bright and valuable perspective."

This is not the first time that a Ripon High School graduate and Ripon College student made an impact in Ripon by running for public office.

In 1972, Mark Conrad, a Democrat, became the mayor of Ripon just five days after his 22nd birthday, making history as the second-youngest mayor in the country. His election garnered national attention in a community known as "The birthplace of the Republican Party."

Conrad was born in 1950, the son of Betsy Conrad (1924-2010) and Reinold Conrad (1922-2015).

He was raised on his parents' farm at 7556 Highway 44/49, which was purchased by his grandfather in 1910 and remained in the family for more than 100 years. He graduated from Ripon High School in 1968.

Ripon was a community of 7,053 residents at the time of Conrad's election.

A *Milwaukee Sentinel* article from 1972 stated, "Conrad, a lifelong resident of Ripon, took five of seven precincts in the city in the April election. His winning total of 1,101 votes placed him above Max Heffernan, 65, acting mayor and city council president, and Nicholas Goluba, a local businessman."

His victory margin among 2,435 votes cast was 105.

The article noted that Conrad made

it a point to walk up and down Watson Street daily to "rap with the people."

"One they see me and talk with me they know I'm just not a freaky college kid," Conrad said.

The November/December 1973 issue of the *Chrysler-Plymouth Spectator* wrote an article about Conrad, who related "The newspaper publisher, Douglas Lyke, told me I didn't have a prayer of beating my opponent."

But by the time the article was written, Conrad had gained the respect of the community.

The city clerk, Harold W. Duac (1912-1985), who had worked with six mayors, told the *Spectator* that Conrad "has better educational training for the job than any mayor I've known. He's willing to learn and he is grateful for the time you give him."

Conrad, who was in office for two years, lived on the Ripon College campus. At the time he was elected, Conrad did not own a car and was known to hitchhike to his parents' farm on the south side of Ripon.

He received \$1,500 a year as mayor, which is approximately \$11,700 today.

In May 1973, Conrad graduated from Ripon College with honors in German and political science. A five-person crew from *ABC News* filmed the ceremony to produce a short feature special for the *Reasoner Report* about Ripon and its young mayor.

The Ripon Area School District honored Conrad in 2014 by giving him its Distinguished Alumni Award.

The district newsletter from October 2014 noted, "A controversial term of office was presaged by his opposition to the Vietnam War and declining a West Point appointment. An anti-war Memorial Day address shocked some local citizens, resulting in his censure by the Ripon City Council. But the city progressed and a *Fond du Lac Reporter*



CONRAD
FOR
MAYOR

MARK CONRAD'S 1972 campaign flier featured a quote from the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in which he said, "My candidacy is not an exercise in student power ... but an expression of civic pride." Conrad won the election by 105 votes from the 2,435 votes cast just five days after his 22nd birthday.

submitted photo



IN 1972, MARK Conrad, a Ripon High School graduate and Ripon College student, became the second youngest mayor ever elected in the United States. He served the community as mayor for two years before going on to graduate from the University of Wisconsin School of Law. submitted photo article 'graded' his civic service an 'A-.'

The newsletter went on to inform, "Having earned a University of Wisconsin Law School degree, he served on the legal staffs of two Wisconsin governors. The next decade was devoted to working for mortgage and commercial banking firms. Mark began years of community service leading the Barron County Habitat for Humanity organization, subsequently moving

on to preside as board president of a University of Wisconsin foundation."

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.

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