

# Now & Then in Ripon ...

*Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*



**NOT ALL OF** the grave sites in Hillside Cemetery's potter's field are marked. Graves that have headstones are broke and degraded. Some fell down the hill. *submitted photo*

## Hillside Cemetery's potter's field is home of unmarked graves

People often think of cemeteries around Halloween.

One of the most unkept areas of Ripon's Hillside Cemetery is its "potter's field," which can be found in the southwest corner of the cemetery and down the western hill.

The easiest way to reach potter's field, however, is entering through Garden of the Cross Cemetery on Congress Street and going to its southeast corner. Potter's field borders Ripon College's Linley Lane and the fence that runs along it. People will spot potter's field on a hillside to their left.

A potter's field is known as a place for the burial of unknown, unclaimed or indigent people.

This might include paupers, criminals, poor immigrants and stillborn children of those immigrants, among others.

Plat maps of Hillside Cemetery, available on the city of Ripon website, show that Ripon's potter's field was designed to accommodate up to 204 burial sites.

An Anthropology 541 class paper written in 1982 by Ripon College student Kurt F. Schmidt notes, "The third section of the cemetery lies completely under trees, is overgrown with weeds and other plants, and is situated besides a drainage system which is subjected to flooding and erosion during heavy rains and the spring thaw. This is the Pauper's Field, used for the towns destitute. The last burial in the pauper's field was in 1923 and cost the city the price of one dollar. Although a few tombstones can be found in this area of the cemetery, most interments lacked a grave marker, and have no records kept of individual burial locations."

The deed to the present-day Hillside Cemetery was obtained in 1853, however records were not kept until 1863. The land the cemetery occupies sits near the northwest side next of the upper campus of Ripon College and the main gate is located on Congress Street. The cemetery



**THE GRAVESTONE OF** "Honest" John Williams (1843-1923) is overgrown and difficult to find in potter's field. *submitted photo*

was run at one time by the Hillside Cemetery Association, which struggled for years to have enough money to maintain the property. Today, the city of Ripon oversees the cemetery.

William "Billy" Prill (1896-1985) worked as grave digger and superintendent of the cemetery from 1922 until 1972.

In a *Ripon Commonwealth Press* article, Prill recalled "the parents — most of them German immigrants — were too poor to buy a grave plot. They paid \$1 dollar to have babies buried in this unmarked spot and that was the end of it."

A well-known burial in the potter's field area was John Williams (1843-1923). Williams was born a slave and came to Ripon late in his life.

His marker, which is difficult to find, reads "Honest John Williams, Negro died of old age 1923."

A local cemetery expert noted that sometimes a family did not have money to pay for a burial plot, so potter's field was used. Others might have enough money to mark the grave with a headstone and some were marked later when the family had enough money. Many other graves in potter's field were never marked.

The markers of some grave

sites that originally had headstones fell over, while some headstones became covered with dirt and vegetation and others washed away down the hill.

If someone dies today without the funds for burial or cremation, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services has a Wisconsin Funeral and Cemetery Aids Program (WFCAP). Its website reads: "WFCAP is an assistance program for service providers who offer funeral, cremation and cemetery services to eligible decedents, and whole services are not fully compensated by the decedent's estate, family or other resources."

Butzin-Marchant Funeral Home of Ripon, founded in 1896, informed that if needed today in the Ripon area, friends or family members normally step forward to help pay for cremation or burial of someone who dies without funds.

*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.*



**WILLIAM "BILLY" PRILL** (1896-1985) was Ripon's grave digger and superintendent of cemeteries from 1922 until 1972. Prill had many stories about unusual things in Ripon's cemeteries. These will be discussed in a program on Ripon's myths, legends, and hauntings Thursday, Oct. 26 at the Ripon Historical Society.

*submitted photo*

## Historical society will present program on myths, legends and hauntings

The Ripon Historical Society will present "Ripon, Wisconsin: Myths, Legends and Hauntings" Thursday Oct. 26 at 7 p.m. at 508 Watson St.

The presentation will be repeated on Halloween, Tuesday, Oct. 31, at 1 p.m. in the Ripon Senior Activity Center, 388 Murray Park Drive. Both programs are free and open to the public.

"Most communities like Ripon have their share of creepy or paranormal stories and activities," said Pat Grahn, a Ripon Historical Society volunteer who will present the program. "What makes Ripon unique is that Ripon College has been named the 'second-most haunted college in the Midwest' and we're home to the popular urban legend of Witch Road."

Those attending will learn more about how Ripon College might have become home to so many haunting stories, including the ghost Raphael.

"Raphael is so well known on campus that he made it into the official history book written about the college," Grahn said.

Black Walker, a powerful demon was supposedly summoned in 1985 in one of the dorm rooms of Mapes Hall.

"I guess it helps that Ripon College was built on the site of the original cemetery in Ripon and it now borders Hillside Cemetery and Garden of the Cross Cemetery," Grahn said. "The athletic areas, along with the music and art building, also sit near Woodside Cemetery."

Grahn will talk about William "Billy" Prill (1896-1985), who was the grave digger and superintendent for the city cemeteries from 1922 until 1972.

"Billy really has some interesting stories about the cemetery



**RIPON'S WITCH** Road is a popular urban legend that will be discussed at a presentation for Halloween Thursday, Oct. 26 at 7 p.m. at the Ripon Historical Society. *submitted photos*, including the time when a couple of Ripon College students dug up a body and displayed the skull in their dorm room."

Some unusual activities at the Ripon Historical Society will be covered, as well as little known burial sites in town.

Grahn also will discuss why so many people might hear, see, and feel things in their houses.

The legend of Ripon's Witch Road (Callan Road) will be debunked through historical research.

The evening will conclude with the thought that if Ripon, Wis. is not haunted enough for the general public, people can check out the city that the community is named after.

"Guided ghost tours of Ripon, England include Ripon Cathedral which was founded as a monastery in the 660s," Grahn said.

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