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OPINION: Recording local history is a privilege — and fun!

Jim Grisso Jan 9, 2018 Updated Jan 10, 2018

My "marriage" to Gaylord and Otsego County is rapidly approaching a half-century.

I started reporting on, and in the process, recording local history when I sat down behind the editor and publisher's desk at this newspaper on April 10, 1968, which, appropriately and gratifyingly, just happened to be my 29th birthday ... one of the best birthday gifts I ever received.

"History Matters."

My transition from the Cleveland, Ohio area to Gaylord was the best career decision I made during my 58 years associated with the newspaper business.

I worked for an array of newspapers — from a small weekly in Dunkirk, Indiana, to mid-size dailies in Indiana and Ohio, to a large metropolitan daily, the Cleveland (Ohio) Plain Dealer, to the Petoskey News-Review, and finally "coming home" to the Herald Times in Gaylord, The Alpine Village, Michigan.

"History Matters."

I wrote history matters in quotes and capitalized the words because that is precisely the name of a new endeavor launched in our community by Phil Alexander and others.

Alexander, retired director of the Otsego County MSU (Michigan State University) Extension, has some definite goals in mind, which include making local history "come to life, making it relevant — and making it fun", as he put it.

Alexander has an impressive background as a community volunteer, working on both projects of a historical nature and with nonprofit agencies.

His credentials as a history aficionado include an appointment in 1987 by the Otsego County Board of Commissioners to serve as chairman of the state and local sesquicentennial committee in observance of Michigan's 150th anniversary of statehood.

"History Matters."

Phil recently asked for volunteers to serve on his "History Matters" steering committee. I was honored to be recruited by member Betsy Sanders.

When I walked into my first meeting recently, I was impressed. Talk about a great cross-section of our community!

The group includes Jim Akans, Maureen Derenzy, Sue Fuelling, John Jenkins, Roseann Kujawa, George Mertz, Brian Pearson, Betsy Sanders, Mark Tobin and Dona Wishart.

Partners include the Otsego County Historical Society, Otsego County Library, Otsego County Commission on Aging, University Center Gaylord and Gaylord Community Schools.

We know Mayor Jenkins represents the city of Gaylord. I like to think I can wear my old Gaylord Herald Times hat in this venture.

"History Matters". These folks realize it; they're ready to roll up their sleeves, go to work and bring history to the forefront in Otsego County.

After my first meeting, I knew, right then and there — I was was going to thoroughly enjoy this project.

Alexander equated the committee to a "Team of a History Detectives" which is, first and foremost, curious, with a genuine interest in our local history.

It works for me!

Coincidentally, in this year of my 50th anniversary in my favorite community, I plan to write a series of articles, tracing the news as well as my interpretation of news stories that made headlines in my newspaper.

Phil harkened back to the days of noted historians Herb Hutchins, Fred White and Bill Granlund, each of whom kept tabs on the historical pulse of the community.

One of the committee's goals is to carry on their legacy, according to Phil.

"History Matters."

I asked Phil what motivated him to tackle the project:

"One thing was the passing of the three men mentioned previously. I wanted to create a new team. You can be sure we plan to include the entire county.

"Another motivation is the fact our county will observe its 150th anniversary in 2025," he said.

(We published a special Otsego County centennial edition in the Herald Times in 1975. It was a blast! By the way, the Herald Times was founded in 1875, and it, too, will celebrate 150 years in 2025!)

"We want to share the information in traditional as well as new, creative ways," Alexander said.

"In the process, we want to include natives (of Otsego County) as well as transplants, all ages and interests and visitors."

According to Alexander, the concept is to create a team to inventory existing information, photos, documents, artifacts and make sure all this is easily accessible.

He stressed the importance of input from the public.

"We want to know what people are interested in finding out about our county's history," he said.

"How do they want to learn? Through books? You Tube? Guided walking tours? Seminars? Hands-on exhibits at our historical museum?"

"Who has interesting stories to tell? Did Albert Einstein really come to Otsego Lake before World War II? How has history changed our community?"

"Where are the ghost towns in our county?"

You get the idea.

"History Matters."

Phil emphasized history amounts to more than memorizing dates. "If it happened, it's history," he said.

"We want to help people realize the importance of learning about our community's past and make sure we continue to collect recent history for the benefit of the future."

Sounds like a plan to me.

Let's get to work!

"History Matters."

Jim Grisso was the publisher of the Gaylord Herald Times for 40 years. He retired in 2007. He remains as a writer and contributor. Jim can be contacted at grissogoblue@gmail.com or jimgrisso@icloud.com.



