

Heritage gets a home

Museum harbors history of Paulding County

By Pat Randle
Staff writer

PAULDING, Ohio — Just a little more than 10 years ago, there wasn't a historical museum in Paulding County. In fact, little of the county's history was even collected.

A group of volunteers came together to start the museum. Now, they run it.

Children can sit at a loom and practice weaving as it was done 100 years ago, and gaze at a blanket that a county resident made from flax she wove or wool yarn she spun herself at the John Paulding Historical Society Museum.



Cathie Rowand/The Journal Gazette

Leo and Caroline Davis show the many pieces of Paulding County history on display at the John Paulding Historical Society Museum.

In another room, large bound books hold records of births and deaths and guides to where people are buried in the county's cemeteries.

A map pinpoints the locations of one-room schoolhouses, some with names like "Happy Corners" and "Sunnyside." Most buildings are long gone.

Artifacts and artworks and all kinds of old-time household goods are on display in the 10-year-old pole barn.

There's a clothes safe made in Latty from native Paulding County timber, the blanket hand-woven from linen a woman made from flax she grew and wool she sheared from her own sheep and spun into yarn, and a man's collar box from the turn of the century.

Each item has a story to tell.

The clothes safe was made locally because people could not afford to haul heavy pieces of furniture from out east. The blanket shows how women once had to make much of what went into their homes. The collar box shows how men used to wear detachable collars.

One old clothes trunk is the one the Philips family used to haul their worldly goods when they fled the South by way of the Underground Railroad. Standing nearby is one a family brought across the ocean and through the United States after emigrating from Europe.

Children who visit the museum use an old churn and bowl to experience how early settlers churned their own butter, and kids can also scrub clothes on a washboard and wring them out in an old-fashioned ringer.

Another building houses a sleigh, an old carriage, tractors from as far back as 1928, and farm equipment. Those remnants of rural history are on display most often during the summer, when the museum sets up exhibits at various festivals and the Black Swamp Tractor and Gas Engine Club holds its show at the museum.

Before the museum's creation, most of the old tractors and equipment sat in fields or in barns, said John Stuart of Cecil, a museum board member and volunteer.

He and a few other men have done a lot of restoration to get the machines so that they work and look pretty good, Stuart said.

"Sometimes, they take a lot of work."

The oldest tractor they have is a 1928 Farmall Regular, but they also have threshing machines and other old equip-

▶ See **Paulding** /Page 6D

House of history

What: John Paulding Historical Society Museum.

Where: Fairground Road, Paulding, Ohio.

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays, or by appointment by calling Leo and Caroline Davis at (419) 263-3086 or Royce and Ruby Smith at (419) 399-3892. The museum number is (419) 399-8218.

Admission: Free.

Paulding

▶ From Page 1D

ment.

Some of the pieces in the museum are on loan. Most were donated by people who want to leave behind a piece of history, said Caroline and Leo Davis, who work at the museum every Tuesday. She's a board member and he's ex-president of the historical society.

The first major bequest was made by former Paulding County resident George Philips, a black man whose family fled to Ohio via the Underground Railroad to escape slavery, Caroline Davis said.

A photograph of Philips' parents graces a wall of the museum, and articles from his home in Cincinnati, including a Tiffany lamp and furnishings from his study, are on display nearby.

A set of exquisite dresses made in the 1920s for a Miss Dessolee Chester, a teacher and hostess, found its way to the museum through the Antwerp Preservation Society.

"A dressmaker from Chicago made of lot of things for this lady in Cecil," Caroline Davis said.

The woman left them to the Antwerp group, which agreed to give them to the museum as long as the club can borrow any outfit it may need to put on a play, Caroline Davis said. Now, a couple of the costumes, flapper dresses in delicate velvet and lace, are on display.

"People know we will take care of what they give us," Caroline Davis said.

Many people bring in old furniture, household items, uniforms and farm tools in good condition.

But sometimes, volunteers have to sand, polish, clean and restore articles that fell into disrepair while stored for years in an attic, basement or barn.

Former Fort Wayne resident Royce Smith transforms grunge from the garage into display pieces.

"A lot of things we get in need repair," he said. "The furniture may have patches that need refinishing. When parts are broken or missing, we try to replace the parts as nearly as possible to the original."

When he retired in 1980, Smith returned to his native Paulding County, bought machine tools, and decided to hone his hobbyists' woodworking skills. He hired a contractor to build a new home, and Smith did the finishing work himself.

He did such a nice job that the contractor recommended him to the museum, and he's been helping out since, Smith said. "I didn't know anything about antiques or restoration. I said, 'This is a bunch of junk.' Now, my wife and I have been to every antique store within a 200-mile radius."

He and Ruby also travel to other historical museums and spend hours chatting with other restoration experts and museum operators to glean ideas about how to fix things up or show them off in exhibits, he said.

Running a museum involves figuring out how to display things, not just finding good stuff to show the public. Anita Burt of Melrose designs the displays, with help from others.

The life-size horse pulling an RFD mail carriage that delivered in the county came from Florida. Caroline Davis' brother found it while on vacation and bargained to get the price down, then drove home with the horse hanging on the back of his camper.

"He used it originally for his display of a small threshing machine with a horse-powered treadmill. But I persuaded him," she said.

A rack originally used to display carpet samples is used to display old photographs of graduating classes from all the Paulding County schools starting in the early 1800s.

"They're still bringing pictures in," Caroline Davis said.

Now, they're looking for something that looks like a big chunk of ice to use in a wooden ice chest, to better show how food was kept cold before refrigeration.

Caroline Davis said people decide to donate after hearing about the museum or visiting it. "They'll come in and look around and say, 'I've got this. I'll bring it in if you want it.' And they do."

Figuring out what is "history" can be a challenge, she said. It's obvious that Civil War artifacts or 100-year-old dolls are the kind of history that fits a museum. But what about Barbie dolls from the 1960s or uniforms from the Korean or Vietnam wars?

"There are some things that are new that are history," Caroline Davis said.

"We're supposed to be discriminating. If we have something, we're not supposed to take a duplicate," Leo Davis said. "If you don't, you become a warehouse." Display space is limited, and so is the space set aside for storage, he said.

The museum was built after the U.S. bicentennial awakened people's interest in the past, and they realized there were so many gaps in Paulding's history.

"The records of local history were being lost," Leo Davis said.

So were many firsthand stories of the county's earlier years, because the people who remembered them were dying, he said. "I realized we already had waited too long. History is slipping away from us."

The museum was dedicated in 1984.

"Someday our children will want to know what the world was like when our parents were young

conti on pg. 70



Cathie Rowand/The Journal Gazette

The John Paulding Historical Society Museum displays possessions of former Paulding County resident George Philips, a black man whose family fled to Ohio via the Underground Railroad. The items include his study, above, and a Tiffany lamp, below left.

conti from page 68

and we were younger yet. We should tell them what it was to be young before superhighways, supersonic flight, supermarkets, missiles, and the H-bomb," Leo Davis told the audience at the museum opening.

He thinks the museum is living up to that purpose. The second pole barn building went up in 1986, and an addition to the original building was built in 1991.

Ray Keck of Paulding spearheaded the effort to make it easier for families to trace their histories.

Keck was into genealogy for years and learned much at the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne. Ten years ago, he got involved in the genealogy and historical groups in Paulding County.

"There were not many indexes to old records in the county, such as births, deaths and marriages."

He made indexes for those, a veterans' book and, with the help of teams of people who went out to all 79 cemeteries in the county and walked through them row by row, a cemetery book.

"The marriages I brought up from 1839 to 1902 Then the birth records I took from 1867, when they started, to 1908. The death records I have completed up through 1993."

The cemetery books show the location of a person's gravestone, and even give directions so that someone can drive to the cemetery.

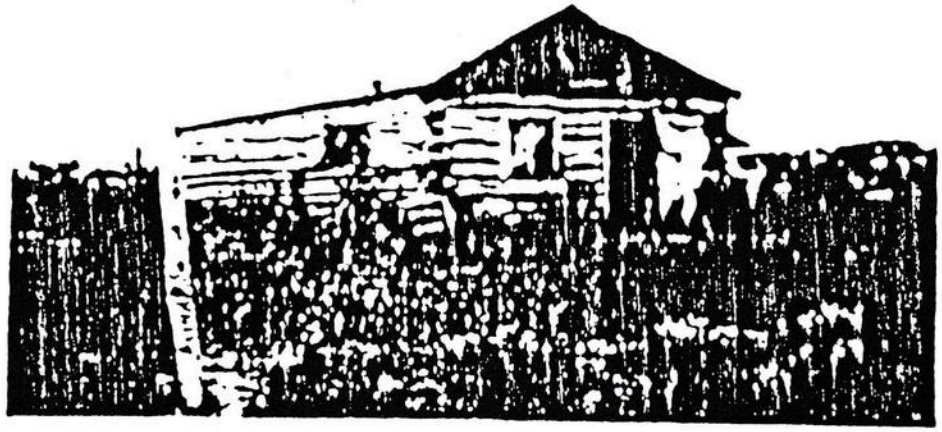
The veterans' books list, as extensively as possible, the records of Paulding County residents who served in the military.

"I copied all the Civil War records from the Fort Wayne library that were Paulding Countians. Then, I came home and went to the courthouse. The recorder's office had a large file of veterans' discharges that had been recorded. Every veteran is supposed to record their discharge in the county in which they lived." He and others combed thru old atlases, family histories, and newspapers.

Keck pored over handwritten records, hoping he was interpreting the faded scrawls correctly. He copied the information into a computer and used the computer to assemble the information in the books.

He's had help, but the projects are really Keck's babies.

"I've spent something like 14,000 hours copying at the library and putting it into the computer. They say after you retire, keep busy. I did. I enjoy it. So many people want copies of the information. . . . That's my reward."



Can you identify this? I think it was along 24 near Forder Bridge. Leon Jackson, 5242 Fairfax Ct. South Bend, Indiana 46614