

“To the residents of this small southern town, the past is more than history, it is ancestry. It is a compilation of family stories, told and retold, from one generation to the next. It’s old brown photographs framed in silver on the piano. It’s grandmother’s dishes and the family home and ancient trees planted ages ago that still shade the porch and scrape the knees of children who climb them. It’s stables that have never been without horses and hay and Jack Russell Terriers. It’s gardens that have their roots in the 1800s and their fresh-cut blossoms on this evening’s dinner table. It’s an unbroken thread of memories and families and love. And the distinction between past and present often becomes blurred, the past sometimes superimposed over the present in a decidedly unique way.”

– Marti Healy, *The Rhythm of Selby*

Welcome to Vintage Americana: exploring and restoring rural American culture. I'm your hostess, Holly, and this is episode 64 - The Way We Were - discovering local history. So settle back for a discussion on why local history is important, why you should learn the history of YOUR place, and how to go about it.

Before we dig into today's topic, I'd love it if you could drop by Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen and leave me a rating and review. It will help more people find the podcast. Or, if you'd rather, screenshot it, share it on social media - and tag me! Thanks so much!

Are you back? Good. Let's, then, get down to talking about local history.

The end of the school year and the warming weather sometimes takes me back to my grade school days. Somewhere around 4th or 5th grade, part of the curriculum included a Michigan History element. And, as part of that, we each were gifted with a map of Michigan (appropriately decorated with a sticker pronouncing it to be provided by the Governor himself!). I should point out that this was in the days long before GPS, TomTom, or Google Maps. My own map was a treasure - I could spread it out and look at ALLLLL the tiny little dots. We were, after all, never permitted to run off with the "good map" that lived in the glovebox of the family car - largely for fear that we would fall to return it to its place and it would be unavailable when needed.

But the map was a window into the world of all the places that we'd talked about all year. And seeing them in relationship to each other. Dad, always up for a little adventure, was never very hard to talk into a road trip. And so it was that we spent

many a happy Summer weekend exploring the history of Logging at Hartwick Pines State Park. Or visting the Bonnymill Inn - a sawmill converted into a B&B - in Chesaning. Dad never met a historical marker he wouldn't stop at.

However, things were even MORE interesting when we visited Charlevoix - my parents' hometown. Because we weren't dependent on just historical markers. We could stroll downtown, and Dad would point out the old boatworks where he worked in high school - sanding down the varnish and reapplying it to the wood runabouts so popular on small sport lakes in the 50's and 60's. Driving through the countryside, Mom would point out where the cheese factory used to be, where her father sold the milk from his Guernsey cattle. A trip out to Depot Beach involved the story of the multiple train depots in town - one for the locals, and one to serve wealthy Chicagoans who came up to escape the city heat in the summer and stay at the Belvedere Club. Even tales from Grandpa, who told of driving out to the Loeb farm with HIS father in their Model T truck. The Loeb farm was a demonstration farm, owned by one of the executives from Sears and Roebuck. Everything on it was supposed to meet a certain standard. The chickens, of instance, were weighed weekly. If they did not reach the prescribed size, the employees were prone to huck them over the wall - the better to avoid reprimands. Grandpa and Great-grandpa would shove them into gunny sacks and drive home a dozen chickens richer.

All of these tales we were told - of Green Sky Hill, and Whisky Creek. Of Jingleville and the Belvedere Hotel - made up the fabric of the town and its surrounds. It helps to bind places and people together. When I drive by the golf course on the North side of town, I remember that it was once Great Uncle Ralph and Aunt Frankie's Farm. These are more than just random facts, but instead are the story of the place and the people who have lived there. The threads of that story are continually woven by the people who live there now. And to forget that history is to cut the fabric from the loom and attempt to redress it in order to start again. The loss will always be felt, as if the blanket of the place in which we live isn't quite long enough to go from toes to shoulders.

There is a very strong modern tendency to paint rural America with a single brush. As if it is nothing but an unending sea of huge farms, tiny towns with graying, storefronts, closed factories that have moved out of town, and grungy WalMarts with crumbling parking lots. Maybe interspersed with the occasional "World's Largest Ball of Twine!" or a state park or two. A history that is always framed to emphasize the negative - from issues of "colonization" or "exclusion" to a failure to join the modern stream

But none of that reveals the true picture. The tapestry of tiny towns with deep roots. Stories about families that have farmed the same land for 5 generations. Ghost towns that grew up during a boom, faded away - and perhaps were rediscovered and resettled later. Or perhaps not.

Each small place has its own story. And, if you are committed to finding YOUR place in this world, and loving that place - you need to know that story. Much in the way you need to know the story of the person you choose to marry. Look at all the warning tales in folklore about what comes of marrying someone who forces you to vow never to ask about their past, or look in that chest they brought with them, or unlock that room in the basement. Stories tell us who (or where) we are building a relationship with. Only when you know the story of your place so far can you tell what your part in the tale is.

How, then, do you get started learning about your place?

Let's start out in the obvious places. Do you have a local museum? That is an excellent jumping-off point. Now, local museums usually have exhibits meant to appeal to a broad swath of the public. Our has a birch bark Native American home reconstruction, recreated rooms of homes of some of the early town luminaries, and an exhibit on the history of the Coast Guard station and lighthouse. All of which are both expected - and a little generic. But working your way further in, there is a really fascinating exhibit about the soda fountain factory that once called this town its home. There are also some other choice tidbits here and there. Take your phone - take photos of the information presented, so that you have names, places and dates for further research. AND - don't forget to hit the gift shop. No, you don't need the stuffed beaver that represents the trapping industry that used this site as a trading post. You're looking for books on local history - if they are locally written and locally or self-published - even better. These are the books that tell the tales too small and ordinary to be thought worthy of history books devoted to a broader swath of the area.

Your next stop should probably be the local library. MOST have a local history section, or even an entire room. If you're REALLY lucky, they even have a local history librarian. If so, find out when that person works and make plans to show up for a chat. I've found that these people LOVE "Fresh meat." And will load you down with reading material while talking your ear off on the subject.

Check out those materials that you're permitted to remove from the library. And assess

the collection of noncirculating items. Some old and fragile books, leaflets and other "ephemera" are just a little too delicate to leave the confines of the reading room. If there is a lot there that interests you, you might have to make a few trips.

My other trick is to bring along my wand scanner. What is this, you ask? Just what it says. It's a scanner that, instead of being large enough to have a flat glass plate - or have a slot you feed single sheets into - is a long device that you pass over the document you wish to scan. Which is a very gentle way to scan fragile pieces. You won't damage them with the wand. But always ask permission - some pieces are fragile enough that there may be concern about the light from the scanner.

Before you leave - don't forget to ask your friendly local history library two things (which they may well have already waxed enthusiastic about - but if not, do ask):

First - is there a local historical society?

Second - is there a walking tour of historical sites in town?

We'll talk about the second one first. Historical walking tours are common in a lot of towns that have managed to hang onto their downtown and inner residential region. Usually, it's a small brochure with a map. Sites are marked, and little descriptions and historical tidbits are included. This will help you to not only learn the history but also to associate it with actual locations. For instance, one of the houses on the local walking tour here belonged to the town doctor. It sits on a hill, and has a three story square tower. There, the doctor's wife would place a lantern at night if he was needed - so that if he were visiting another patient or otherwise away from home, he could be summoned back.

Knowing the history of that house makes it mean just a little bit more. When we noticed that the plasterwork on the outside was being restored, both my husband and I were heartened that there was someone else in town who cared enough to be the custodian of this little piece of history.

Local historical societies. These places can be gems to go visit. Most often, you'll find that the historical society in small towns or rural townships either have a building (usually a rescued local schoolhouse, church, grange hall, or other public building. Allegan's is in the old jail) or have space in another civic building. The library, or a

community center. Sometimes even the township hall. Hours can be quite limited, as they're staffed by volunteers. Some keep quite extensive archives. Others are still working on building their resources. Most also serve as a social hub for the folks in town who have an interest in its history.

So a visit will accomplish a number of potential goals. First, you might find yet more reading material, locally published books, or get the details on presentations being hosted by the society. Second, they MIGHT even have specific information on the plot of land or house that you've purchased. It could even be that you'll find copies of blueprints or photographs of the house in its early days.

And, you'll meet those interested folks. If you're not in a hurry, and act like you're in the mood to linger, they might start telling stories. Stories about the town. Little histories passed down from their grandparents or their own remembrances. The fuss when the local church decided to build a new building. The fire that claimed the General Store and why there is a more modern building in the midst of the Victorian era storefronts on main street. Buckboard wagon courtship, or bicycle trips down the dirt lane into town for a grape Nehi.

Not every dot on that state road map has its own historical society. Expand your search a little bit. Visit any you might find in nearby towns or townships. After all, no small community exists in a vacuum. Even a visit to a larger town nearby could be fruitful.

Does your town have a local festival? Especially one that celebrates something about the town's past? Some produce that used to be a significant source of local income, or an event that is remembered every year? Go to that. Grand Haven, for instance, every year is treated to The Feast of the Strawberry Moon. Costumed interpreters recreate aspects of life from the town's history as an early trading post. Colonial cooking demonstrations, weaving, rug hooking, a carpenter, and even a candy cannon provide a taste of the time. Founders Days, Pioneer Fests, and other similar events are worth checking out for more on your place's background.

Visit local antique stores, sales, and flea markets. You might find old business signs, bottles from the local dairy, post cards, newspapers, or other pieces of life gone by. And each piece of information you pick up gives you another avenue of research. Go back to the library and look up that now-defunct dairy. Drive down the street on the postcard to see how things have changed. And, if it's an option, talk to the vendor. This is what

sometimes makes weekend sales and flea markets more useful to browse. The person running the booth might well know something about that item that catches your eye.

Talk to them about other folks locally who run small business either via estate sales or as "picker." Have you ever spent an afternoon happily binge-watching American Pickers? The local versions of Rob and Mike are likely to have an intimate knowledge of what used to be.

You might even think about buying something salvaged from a local building that had to come down. Incorporate the floor from the bowling alley that was demolished to make room for a dollar store by turning a section into butcher block for countertops or a table. Buy some brick from the armory that is being razed for a new county building. Take it home for a fireplace surround, or slice them into pavers. Put the coachlight from the old pizza joint that was popular in the 60's on a pole as a yard light. Incorporating things from what USED to be in your place into new things being built in your place is another way to preserve the history - and learn to love it that much more.

Stroll (or take a Sunday Drive) through your place. Do you notice an older home that has a profusion of flowering plants - shrubs, roses, or other perennials? Knock on the door and ask for a garden tour. You'd be surprised how many people are genuinely delighted that you noticed their pride and joy. In fact, it's quite likely that you'll be offered cuttings or divisions from some of the plants you admired - although you might have to drop back by in the correct season. What does this have to do with town history?

First, chances are that you may well have noticed a garden and yard that has been cared for with plant specimens that are decades old. Maybe that hydrangea was planted by the woman who ran the ladies Red Cross sock knitting circle during World War II. Perhaps that magnolia tree was first planted when the house was built - a kit house that came by rail on a train line that no longer serves the town.

My grandmother had a rather spectacular flower bed. Roses, glads, poppies, irises. It was a riot of color all summer long. Such a landmark it became, that the alleyway beside it became "Rose Lane," when the city decided to pave it into a street. There are probably a few people in town who have flowers descended from those that gave Rose Lane its name. Grandma tended to be generous with her floral bounty.

Is there an ancient apple tree - or even an ancient apple orchard - in town? Or maybe a

few outside a farmhouse that belonged to the town doctor or mayor? Ask around and see if you can get permission to snip a bit of scion wood in the winter, and graft yourself a clone and successor of that historic tree.

All right, you say, that's all well and good. But I'm listening to this podcast right now on my couch, and it's too late in the evening to go gamboling about just now. Is there anything I can do from here?

Sure there is. In addition to looking up those resources mentioned above, you could certainly do some searches for information on local history. Keep in mind, most "independent researchers" - which is code for "lay people with an interest" - don't always have the most tech-savvy skill sets. You'll find a lot of websites that are quite outdated in their design and sometimes difficult to navigate. Persevere! Because there can be some excellent information contained in them.

It's also often possible to find old plat maps online. Plat maps for a given year will tell you who owned which parcels in town. They also often will be marked with the locations of churches, schoolhouses, and other important sites. Finding multiple plat maps from different years can help track changes over time, as well. Railways might appear, and border an actual city. And disappear again, if the "city" becomes formally dissolved.

Online library collections are worth searching, as well. Start locally. Even some small libraries will have digitized collections of old maps and local newspapers.

Colleges and Universities also maintain collections. Sometimes there are whole photo collections that have been made available online. Or even old records. For instance, Michigan State University has possession (and often has digitized) the records from local Granges that became defunct.

Search youtube for presentations or even point-of-view explorations of historic sites. Sometimes those live talks at libraries or historic societies that you missed were also filmed and made available online. It's a resource worth mining.

Look for local history online groups on social media. These folks share lots of photos and can often answer questions. Some of them really love a good historical conundrum, too, so hit them up if you've hit a wall in your research.

And don't forget, after you've done all this research, to give a little back, too. Loving your place means not just learning about it, but caring for it. Support all those people stewarding its history.

Was there a local history book that the library didn't have? Buy them a copy.

The Historical Society was lots of help? Join. Or at least donate. Volunteer.

You found some great tidbits in the digitized newspaper collection, but wished there were more? Ask if they need help getting more of their collection prepared for online availability.

Had fun at the local fest? Volunteer next year. Take tickets for two hours, and that will probably garner you free admission, plus the warm fuzzies from helping out.

Have you assembled a ridiculously thorough collection of local cookbooks? Talk to the library about possibly donating them to the local history collection as a special item.

Does your town do not just self-guided walking tours, but maybe some actual tours, especially at special times of the year? Volunteer to lead one of those.

Did you end up with some very special landscape plants from places around town? See if there is a garden club, and join it. Or, if there isn't, organize a plant exchange. Emphasize how special it is for people to share those specimens that might have special local meaning.

Does your place have a cherry pie contest or chili cook off every summer? Enter it. Maybe YOUR name will end up recorded in the local paper for posterity. Now you're not just preserving history, you're making it.

Does your town or township have an archive - but need help organizing it? If you're one of those "born to file" types, offer your services.

Do you enjoy the speakers the historical society brings in, but wish more people could come? Ask if you can bring a tripod and a camera or smartphone to record it, and upload it on Youtube to share with others who are interested.

Do you KNOW some of the local history of specific places? Grab a friend and your phone and go shoot a video local history tour.

Is there an endangered historic site in your town or place? Join the fight to save it (there likely already is one going!). Here, the Coast Guard decommissioned the lighthouse and installed an entirely digital signal. The lighthouse was sold - nearly to PETA to become a "fish empathy center." Instead, the city was able to buy it, restore the catwalk, and keep a treasured landmark. While I miss the beacon, and the fog horn on misty nights, I'm glad the lighthouse itself is still here.

I hope I've inspired you to dig a little deeper into the place you call home or want to call home. To WANT to learn more about it, why it's there, its struggles and triumphs. And then to go a little further and help preserve it.

If you do, drop me an e-mail via the web at brambleberry meadow.com, and tell me about it. Or post a photo on Insta and tag me. I'd love to see what's up with the history of YOUR place.

Just now, it's rhubarb season in this neck of the woods. Time for me to go find some and enjoy the flavor of Spring.

Are you coming?