Memory Keepers
Local Historians and Historical Societies Safeguard Our Past
By Jan Bridgeford-Smith
"Time erases real lives, leaving only vague imprints."

-JAIME MORTON

My two counts and I followed my mother into the attic with purpose, undeterred by the waves of heated air that rushed around us. The room is on the second floor, at the back of my mother's house, a nineteenth-century frame dwelling built by my great-grandfather. Located under the eaves of a steeply pitched roof, the unfinished planks and open-rafter space has one tiny window that serves no useful purpose beyond masquerading as a portal for fresh air—a role it can't fulfill thanks to layers of exterior paint that keep the wooden sill and sash firmly stuck to each other and the house.

Armed with trash bags we were ready to save, sell, or toss “stuff”—the beast that stalks so many American households. But when we started to pick through the boxes, read the papers, examine the photos, scrutinize the trinkets—what emerged was not easily categorized as treasure or junk—it was more complicated. Each item held up for inspection, prompted a conversation fueled by any treasured memories, and lengthy debate over dates and places.

I suppose we are all historians of a kind, saving memories and remembrances anecdotes—sometimes to share, often just to savour alone, in quiet moments when the past seems more compelling, or more alluring, than the present. But there are Central New Yorkers who make it their business to share the stories and stuff of history. They are the region’s official “memory keepers.”

"History unravels quietly, like an old sweater."

-JERRY PRACTICE

I walked into the Fryer Memorial Museum in Mumawville to meet with local historian David Sadler. I had come to the hamlet—where vacant storefronts and frayed commercial buildings stand like faded mausoleums from a bygone era—looking for a violin with some remarkable history.

Inside the museum, it was déjà vu—the narrow, weather-beaten building, diminutive by any standard, was a slightly expanded version of my mother’s attic, though spread between two floors separated by an intimidating flight of stairs, steep and constructed. Shelves cramming with notebooks, high-school yearbooks, and agricultural reference books lined the walls. Though there was a mix of horizontal surfaces—all shapes and sizes—filled with old hand tools, farm implements, mull sausage, dried photos, old-fashioned pots and pans, and assorted dishes, yellowed newsletters, and antiquated, oversized encyclopedias filled with two centuries’ worth of New York’s notables. It felt like being inside an unruly time capsule.

Though the violin wasn’t there, what I did discover was a dedicated public historian doing his best to manage a slowly deteriorating storehouse of paper and artifacts for no pay and less glory. Sadler told me he is the resident historian for the village of Canastota as well as the town of Lincoln, Lenox, and Stockbridge, where the museum is located. He juggles his municipal responsibilities and works full time at the job that pays his bills, but Sadler’s enthusiastic stories about people, places, and events long gone make it clear his role as a “memory keeper” is his passion. As we talked and searched through dusty cabinets, crowded shelves, and various containers, I wondered where this memorabilia would go when Sadler is gone. Would someone else step forward to be the official custodian of the stories and stuff? When a community’s artifacts crumble away and the teller of tales is a dim memory, what is lost? I left the Fryer, not closer to solving my violin puzzle than when I arrived, but I wanted to understand more about why keeping a tiny sliver of history accessible in a community matters.

"History is who we are and why we are the way we are."

-DAVE MCCROBIE

"Understanding the history of a place," according to Robert Weible, "can change how residents view their community, view themselves, and think about history. Americans are always looking toward the future. We're a country settled by immigrants who wanted to better their situation and look for a brighter tomorrow. They risked everything to leave their past behind."

As the New York State historian and chief curator of the New York State Museum, Weible has thought a lot about the nature, role, and importance of history in forming the identity of people and places. He is an advocate for history being accessible and inclusive, noting that individuals relate to the past when they see "themselves" in the story, and for using multiple mediums. He also cites a very practical benefit to preserving and promoting the state's history: money.

In our interview, Weible was encouraged about Governor Cuomo's initiative, Path Through History, as a means to attract more tourism dollars into the state. He pointed out several Central New York communities, such as Skaneateles, that have successfully capitalized on their history while also attracting new business investments. It's a delicate balancing act.

"Sometimes, history needs a push."

But Weible acknowledged that efforts to marshal enthusiasm and resources for cultivating a locale's history are driven by resident interest and political will, not by an "edit from Albany." This pattern of decentralized responsibility was codified in New York with the passage of the 1919 "Historian's Law," as it came to be known. The landmark legislation required that every city, town, and village appoint an historian, a nod to the importance of retaining
and re-telling the past as a means of understanding the present. But without state funds to support the requirement, the regulations weren't fully implemented, monitored, or enforced. Since there was little political downside to this approach, lawmakers decided to expand the scope in 1921 and include each borough in New York City. In 1933, counties were added.

State legislators never altered the formula of regulation without revenue, so the appointment of historians remains incomplete. In some municipalities, elected officials have managed to find a few dollars to support an historian position, but many places have been fortunate enough to have a resident willing to take on the duties out of sheer love for the subject matter.

"Another thing is people lose perspective. My advice is: learn history."  

WINNIE LARKE

Whether paid or volunteer, the responsibilities of appointed historians are not rigorously prescribed or even well known. Few ponder how the "collective attic" of our past is organized and maintained. For many, historian is synonymous with arranging museum exhibits or giving a tour of a restored mansion. But that's just one aspect of this humble field. Most municipal historians dwell outside those venues.

As Madison County historian Matthew Urtz noted, "At its core, history is storytelling, and people like me spend a lot of time uncovering the story through records, letters, deeds, legal documents, and other primary sources."

Denise Roe, Madison County's deputy county clerk, is a strong supporter of the historian's position, not only in service to research but also for the public education activities that come with the job. "Being grounded, knowledgeable about our history," she told me, "reminds people of their civic obligations. It's important for our community, we have a social contract to fulfill... to be engaged in the democratic process."

Martin Sweeney, historian for the town of Homer, echoed the sentiments of municipal historian as narrator, educator, and advocate for civic connection. A retired history teacher, he's a seasoned storyteller, up to the task of making the past come alive even if the audience is a classroom of bored adolescents. With his easy smile and infectious enthusiasm for "all things Homer," every anecdote he shares is entertaining. "I tell the story of this place, that's my job," he said when we met. "I believe the more people know about the town's past, the more interested they are in investing in its future."

With heritage tourism on the rise, Sweeney thinks his books and articles highlighting the area's past have contributed to Homer becoming more appreciated as a cul-

continued on page 58

Seated in David Quintan, a Homer resident, artist, and a teacher at Marathon Central School, portraying Francis B. Carpenter, standing is Homer Town Historian Martin Sweeney, dressed as a Carpenter's Friend, William O'b. Stockard. According to Sweeney, "The occasion was a celebration of the restoration of the portrait of another Carpenter, Eliza Carpenter, by Westlake Conservation of Syracuse. The painting was rendered by the artist Sanford Tewey, who was Frances Carpenter's early instructor in portraiture in Syracuse."
tural destination. But he doesn't just write, he also has a healthy schedule of public presentations and lectures; and he makes it a point to work with local organizations on creative events that have a history twist like the "Walking Ghost Tour" for Homer's annual Winterfest.

Fielding genealogy requests is another aspect of the municipal historian's job, and Sweeney sees the burgeoning interest in family mapping as a positive sign. "History is nothing to many people until it's personal," he said. "As people mature they can recall history-making events that they lived through at the time. History takes on a whole different meaning once a person realizes he or she was a "witness" to it."

"History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon."
-NAPOLEON

What no village, town, or county historian does is acquire, maintain, and exhibit artifacts. The keepers of "things," I learned, are local historical societies, museums, and other heritage organizations such as house museums like the Seward House in Auburn. Outside of the grade-school showbox diorama, many New Yorkers' first exposure to a formal history exhibition comes through contact with a local society.

In America, historical societies began forming in earnest during the last decade of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century. Although often concerned with the history of a specific place, associations also formed that were specific to ethnic and religious groups, social and political movements, transportation, technology, industry, historic buildings, genealogy, and antiques.

The earliest societies were founded by the educated elite in a community, usually professional, white men with money and connections. These were the people able to devote energy and funds to pursuing their interests. One consequence is that the history these societies often chose to safeguard, highlight, and publicly promote was equally exclusive. The societies gained a reputation, usually deserved, as a stuffy pastime for stuffy people. It's been a tough rap to overcome but the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) and the Tully Area Historical Society are two organizations that focus on engaging all segments of the community, and telling the broader story of their respective locales.

The Onondaga Historical Association's offices, research center, and museum are located in a fifty-thousand-square-foot building in downtown Syracuse, but the group's outreach efforts extend well beyond those walls. OHA has high community visibility, thanks to an aggressive campaign best described as "history everywhere." For instance, the organization airs history tidbits on local television, and tweets factoids on the Internet.

OHA's object collection includes such treasures as corn husk mocassins, a Smith typewriter, an extensive inventory of Syracuse china, nineteenth-century toys, Civil War uniforms, and artifacts related to the Underground Railroad and famous Jerry Rescue. Paintings, posters, and locally made products from novelty candles to stoneware corks to musical instruments also have a home in the association's museum. OHA also boasts a significant archival collection of letters, documents, and records.

"Love of the past implies faith in the future."
-STEVEN E. AMBROSE

Dennis Connors, curator of history, oversees the organization's preservation, compilation, research, acquisition, and exhibition efforts. Besides being steeped in the "stories and stuff" that form the basis of OHA's
work, Connors has a wide-ranging perspective on how history can shape a community’s pride, but the success of the endeavor depends on the locale. He stated that it’s harder to engender support in a community that has lost its commercial core through sprawl or dwindling population, yet these are the very places that could use a historical society to rally civic pride and strengthen a sense of community. But in America, he noted, there is a cherished idea that if a bunch of citizens are interested in saving an historical structure or starting a museum—they should find the money to do it; there’s often no support to use taxpayer dollars for cultural endeavors.

“It’s an expensive proposition,” he said, “to preserve buildings or artifacts or documents, a big commitment that many civic groups aren’t able to take on, or maintain in small communities.” From that perspective, the Tully Area Historical Society (TAHS) has defied the odds.

Eleanor Preston explodes the doddering, forgetful senior citizen stereotype. She radiates good-natured energy, and can tell you where the bodies are buried, literally, in the cemetery; why Tully Valley is famous for potatoes; and the reason cold and icy winters were once lucrative. She spins the tales without cracking a book or looking at a note. A raconteur, shrewd fund-raiser, and self-taught computer enthusiast, Preston is the eighty-something powerhouse president of the TAHS. Her office and the organization’s exhibit space—along with the Country Peddler consignment shop and the Twice Read Bookshop, whose proceeds go to support the historical society—are housed in two adjacent former churches on South Street in the village of Tully. Preston can be found at her computer, surrounded by stacks of books, papers, and magazines at least four days a week.

When I asked what her experience has been in maintaining the curiosity and interest of younger people—those younger than sixty perhaps—she told me she’s encouraged. “Sometimes, a young family will buy an old house and the realtor has told them a little bit about the place being historic so they want to know more. Or a new mother will stop at the consignment shop looking for baby clothes and want to learn more about the society. We also collaborate with the local school district so that gets us in with kids who turn around and get their parents interested.” (For years Tully Town Historian Lynn Fisher complemented Preston’s efforts. From her own tiny office directly behind the consignment shop, Fisher planned school programs and conducted research projects for anyone with a historical question.)

Preston admits her organization has been lucky in part because she donates her time, and has a knack for making restoration projects financially viable. But she also cites a positive relationship with local officials, and widespread community support for the society’s signature events like Christmas at the Station (a holiday shopping bazaar held in the renovated Tully train station). She credits residents and businesses for their generous contributions.

Putting a careful spin on the query, I finally asked her what she thinks will happen to the society when she’s no longer able to run the place. Her answer was swift and candid. “Well, at my age I’ve thought about that a lot, and you can see I’m using a walker these days. Other people will come along, just like I did ... and just in case, I’ve already started training my replacement.” Nancy Chawgo will assume the role of Tully town historian as well as president of the TAHS.

Frederick von Schlegel wrote, “The historian is a prophet facing backwards.” Having been totally beguiled by her reminiscences that turned back the clock to an earlier time, I hadn’t noticed the walker until Preston mentioned it. The longer we visited, the younger she seemed ...