

INTRODUCTION: WHO WILL PRESERVE OUR HERITAGE?

This article marked the October 1998 debut of my local history newspaper column in the Uniontown (Pennsylvania) Herald-Standard. At the time, I had no idea that this single article would evolve into a weekly newspaper column. In this article, I emphasized what was to become a recurring theme in my columns – the need for each of us to take personal action to preserve the history of our family and our community.

One afternoon about a week ago, I arrived home from work at Brownsville Area High School, where I teach several different history courses, including Local History. I placed my briefcase in its usual resting place, then checked the daily mail which my wife had placed on the kitchen counter. One envelope, addressed only to me, bore a return address which contained a name I did not immediately recognize.

The envelope contained a thank you note from Mrs. Margaret Townsend Robison. In the note, Mrs. Robison described her emotions as she viewed for the first time a videotape which I had given to her last spring. The content of the videotape was a two-hour conversation that I had recorded five years ago with her father, Eugene N. Townsend, in his home near Royal.

Mr. Townsend, who died this past May at the age of ninety, had agreed to sit down with me in his living room and reminisce about his career as a teacher and principal in Redstone Township schools, his lifelong love affair with “Indian” brand motorcycles, and his memories of eighty-five years of living in the Brownsville area. It was a wonderful, wide-ranging conversation.

Mr. Townsend, who was born in 1908, told stories of events which took place more than half a century ago, tales so richly detailed that I could almost hear his long-departed friends’ voices, see the expressions

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on their youthful faces, and relive their hilarious antics as though I were there in the 1920s myself. I had no doubt that, as he and I sat there that day in his home and he spoke with me from his easy chair, he was merely relaying to me what he was hearing and seeing in his mind's eye as he remembered his boyhood friends, the students he taught in a one-room school, and the buddies with whom he shared motorcycle rides. Permit me to relate to you just one excerpt from our conversation.

I asked Mr. Townsend, "Where did you begin your teaching career?" He told me that he began teaching in a school called Garwood.

"Where's that?"

I had never heard of it.

"Do you know where Superior is?" he inquired. "Do you know where the hospital is?"

I told him I did.

"Simpson is down there, but Garwood was another mine on this side of Dunlap Creek. A one-room building there, and I had eight grades and sixty-two students . . ."

"You were the only teacher?" I was incredulous.

"Oh, yeah," he answered matter-of-factly. "They paid me eighty dollars a month, and for five dollars extra, I swept up, cleaned the windows once a month, and fired the furnace. Twice in the winter time, the snow got so deep I couldn't get out and I slept on the desk, kept warm. The people who lived in the community brought me something to eat because after I had my lunch box, I didn't have anything more."

He told me he drove to the school from Grindstone in a Model T Ford.

"Was the road then better than it is now?" I asked, referring to the road, now in poor condition, which currently passes Hunter's Ridge and continues on to Dunlap Creek.

"Oh, no, no," he said. "It was worse, I think. I remember when the weather was bad, where the hospital is now, there was an athletic field. I would park my Ford and go across the hills to the building. The night I stayed all night, I came back," he began laughing as he remembered, "and there was just about a foot of that old Model T's cloth top sticking out of the snow!"

I asked him why he thought that he, a beginning teacher, was assigned to Garwood. He hesitated a moment, then in a quiet voice, he said, "They had a problem at Garwood."

"A discipline problem?" I said.

"A discipline problem. Teacher had her finger broken. They told me it would be rough, and I said, 'Well, I don't think that'll bother me.' So they sent me there, and a young gentleman and I had a confrontation

on the second day, after school. He and his very close friend were going to ‘clean the schoolhouse out with me.’ He ended up on the floor.”

His voice grew even quieter, but the firmness was unmistakable.

“We had no more problems all year.”

There was no braggadocio as he recounted this tale. Indeed, Mr. Townsend’s tone of voice reflected his attitude that the incident was regrettable but necessary in order to establish who was in charge.

“Amazing as it will be,” he went on, “the boy came to me the next day and asked me not to tell his mother.

“His mother came the last day of school. She wanted to meet me; I had never met her. She was a mannish type, very straight spoken, and I think a very good woman. She wanted to know if there was anything I could do to have him come back and spend another year in my building. That was very complimentary to me. We had straightened him out.”

The stories were colorful, one after another. He told me how his love for motorcycle racing led him to learn how to repair his own motorcycle, then those of his friends. He eventually opened a motorcycle shop and became a dealer for Indian brand motorcycles and parts, a sideline to his primary career in education.

As we talked, the time seemed to fly by. The two-hour videotape was soon exhausted. The video camera, standing forgotten on its tripod, shut itself off automatically, but the fascinating conversation continued into the late afternoon. I was gazing through a window to the past through Mr. Townsend’s eyes. I did not wish to draw the curtain.

What a treasure our older folks are. Talking with them about their lives is such an enriching experience. I never had the pleasure of meeting my own paternal grandfather, who was killed in a coal mining accident two years before I was born. I will never know what his voice sounded like. I never heard his laugh. I have no insight into his personality or his sense of humor. How priceless it would be if I could listen to him talk, watch him move and laugh on videotape, as Mr. Townsend’s descendants will be able to do when they watch our recorded conversation in future years.

Is there an older individual in your life who is special to you or your family? A grandparent, or perhaps an elderly neighbor or longtime friend? Video cameras are commonplace now. Borrow one if you don’t have one. Make arrangements to sit down with that person soon.

You’ll be amazed at how both of you will warm to the conversation, and you’ll find one topic naturally flows into the next. The most surprising revelations often come in response to the most innocent questions. You will gain new insight into the life of someone whom you may have thought you knew very well.

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Even as you are reading this column, time continues to pass. Don't wait. As soon as you put down your newspaper, get in touch with that person, set the wheels in motion, and arrange to have that conversation. I promise you the experience will be special for both of you.

You will never regret it.