

"A Look Back at Carroll's Yesteryears"

Carroll County Times article for 17 March 2002

By Jay A. Graybeal

This column will be my last one and I thought it would be interesting to look back to the beginning of the series and trace the how the column evolved. During the spring of 1990, Delegate Joe Getty, then the Executive Director of the Historical Society of Carroll County, arranged with the leadership of this newspaper to write a weekly local history column. The column would explore facets of County history and would usually be accompanied by a historical photograph from the Society's collection.

The inspiration for a local history column came from many sources, not the least of which was the work of The Times editor J. Leland Jordan, who wrote weekly column entitled "Time Flies" in the 1940s. Following his untimely death in 1955, Jordan's important collection of local newspapers, manuscripts, photographs and books was acquired by the Historical Society. The Jordan Collection became a cornerstone of the Society's library collection.

Joe wrote a special article about Westminster's Memorial Day observances for the May 28, 1990 issue. The article chronicled a great community story, that of having the nation's oldest continuous Memorial Day observance. His first Carroll's Yesteryears article, entitled "Manchester School Dedication," appeared on June 10, the day the new Manchester Elementary School dedicated. This inaugural article explored the histories of several earlier schools in Manchester, including the former high school built in 1932 that Joe and I attended as grade school students in the 1960s. The article provided the reader with an overview of the development of public education in Carroll County and Manchester and placed the dedication of the new school in a historical context.

Joe also wrote a brief sidebar introduction to the new column that he and I would write; he wrote in part: "The weekly column will provide the public with greater access to the Historical Society's excellent resources. The essence of local history is recording and interpreting the everyday life of the previous generations that have resided in Carroll County. Understanding our local history often provides a perspective from which we can evaluate today's current events and our plans for the future."

My first column appeared in the June 24 issue and was an overview of the Society's founding in 1939 and the development of its museum and library collections. The Society had celebrated its semi-centennial in 1989 and I had recently finished an exhibition about the kinds of objects in the Society's collections. As the Society's Curator, I wanted to share stories about objects and what they can tell us about the people who used them in the past.

From 1990 to 1994, Joe and I took turns writing about a wide range of local history topics, including how holidays were observed, great and small events, natural and man made disasters, human triumphs and failures, humorous stories and a host of other topics. The public response was highly enthusiastic and readers often provided new story ideas or additional information about something we had written. When Joe left to pursue a new career in 1994, I was appointed the Director of the Society. Thankfully, Joe was able to share the writing responsibilities for part of that first year, however, I eventually assumed the daunting task of writing the column solo. Time constraints forced me to write less original material and present period writings accompanied by a brief overview that placed the topic in a historical context. This format had the added benefit of allowing readers to read period accounts written by earlier writers.

Looking back over the last ten years, I have many fond memories of writing Carroll's Yesteryears. I learned a great deal about Carroll's past from reading old newspapers, letters, diaries and other sources in the Society's extensive collections. I also heard from many readers who were touched by a particular column. Some were nice enough to take the time to contact me. Last year, a Florida reader, who was briefly mentioned in an article about Dutch Picnic, was kind enough to send me a great childhood photo of himself and write: "Because of your article, I contacted Mary -----, who I have not seen in 35 to 40 years. I found her on the Internet. I called her and she sounded so grateful to hear about the article that I am sending her a copy of it along with a copy of the picture, taken back in 1951, of her crowning me at the picnic. I just wanted to say thank you for your interest and research into Carroll county history. It sure touched our memories..."

There were also some humorous moments along the way. A layout error led to the insertion of my photo in place of Ann Landers for one of her June 1999 columns. I had a lot of fun fielding calls for readers who feigned a wide variety of personal problems none of which a historian could help with. I keep a framed copy of the article in my office.

For those of you who would like to look back at some of the earlier articles, the majority of them, nearly 450, are available on the Historical Society's website (www.carr.org/hsccl). You can also search the site for a key word such as a surname or place and locate articles of interest.

In closing, I want to thank all readers especially those of you who were thoughtful enough to call, write or even stop me on the sidewalk to let me know how reading Carroll's Yesteryears enriched your life and led to a greater understanding of our heritage. I also want to thank the Times staff for making it possible for me to present some stories of our shared past.