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Finch is preserving the past in Kelley

By Marlys Barker

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Duane Finch is passionate about the past, especially when it comes to his hometown, Kelley.

Since November of 1996, when he purchased the town's former Congregational Church building, Finch has been busy preserving Kelley's history inside that building, which he now calls Kelley Historical Hall.

Finch, after retiring from a career with Kmart, purchased the 1876 building with his wife, Barbara, and took up the cause of restoring the old structure. Then – with the help of family, friends and community members – they have filled it with valuable remembrances about the Kelley community they love.

Among the improvements to the building was the restoration of the original windows and a recently finished full kitchen area, which Finch said will allow for a variety of gatherings to be held in the basement area.

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Tracing history

For Finch, becoming a 'historian' started with his interest in family history. Inside his office, at the west end of the main floor of Kelley Historical Hall, is an entire shelving area of binders containing documentation of Finch family history. The office walls also hold historic photos and portraits of Finch ancestors, along with photos of his Finch family today.

"Our Finches migrated from Jefferson County, Wisc., to Story County, Iowa in 1860." Finch noted that his Finch ancestors first arrived in this country in 1630.

"Genealogy shows that families who stayed in farming, pretty much stayed put," he said. To honor the early Kelley farming community, of which his ancestors were a part, Finch has a section of the Hall, at the west end of the basement, that is dedicated to ag history.

You could sit and talk with Finch for hours about the items and the information that he's collected about Kelley and has put on display at the Hall.

Take for instance the Kelley school.

Finch starts out by walking over to a big wooden teacher's desk that he says he acquired two years ago from a family who got it from the old school when it closed. Most of the original old school building was later demolished. The newer part of that old school was salvaged and now is home to Kelley's City Hall.

Most of Kelley's students, Finch said, were "country kids." One Kelley superintendent, Joseph Neil Raudabaugh, whose obituary Finch keeps in his historical collection, is a man Finch believes is worthy to remember when it comes to Kelley school history.

"He (Raudabaugh) did a lot for the school, the students and the town. He had a tremendous amount of energy." Raudabaugh served as superintendent for only three years, 1936 through 1939. He started a school newspaper, which was called 'The Reflector' and he



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Duane Finch stands inside his office, where he keeps all of his own family history, both in binders and in photos and portraits on the wall. Photo by Marlys Barker



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also started a school yearbook, called 'The Kellonian.' Finch has obtained copies of these items.

Finch opens a book of bound editions of 'The Reflector' he received from his cousin. "My cousin had two bound books and look at that," he said, pointing to a copy of the sales receipt inside "it cost him 38 cents for both bound books."

The 'Kellonian' was printed from 1937 to 1941, and then Finch said they discontinued it during WWII. "Kelley School had one more (yearbook) in 1948." Copies of all of these publications can be seen at Historical Hall.

Along the east wall of the museum, Finch walks over and points to composite photos of all the Kelley High School graduates. He has all of the class composites from 1923 to 1948, the last year Kelley High School had a graduating class. There is no composite of the class of 1922, but Finch does have the names of those 1922 class members listed and hanging in front of all the other pictures. Finch referred especially to the class composite of 1927, which contains the picture of Mildred Brendeland, Kelley's current centenarian. Mildred has been and continues to be a very important consultant who can verify the accuracy of Kelley's history collection.

Kelley school sports memorabilia is also part of Finch's collection. He points out a few of the items on display. Irvin Miller, no longer living, donated to the Hall his 'K' varsity letter with eight bars on it. Finch said it is believed that Miller was the only student from his time period to have a varsity letter with eight bars on it – four from baseball, four from basketball. Finch framed the Miller varsity letter, along with photos of Miller in his high school baseball and basketball uniforms.

"Here's another fun one," he said, pointing to a girls' basketball team photo on a high shelf along the south wall. "This team was the Story County Basketball Champion in 1945," he said. "Everybody in Story County wanted to beat Slater, and that year, we did it. The final game was in Roland, and the Kelley girls beat Slater. It was Kelley's claim to fame!"

In 2005 three forwards from that championship team – Helen Carroll, Maxine Malliet and Norma Jean Walker (their maiden names) – came to a 60-year reunion at Kelley Historical Hall that Finch held in the team's honor. On that occasion Finch took a picture of the three and had them sign a basketball, which he now sets on the shelf behind the original team picture.

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Notebooks

It's important to mention at this point that Finch is not only passionate about preserving history, but he's meticulous about how historical documents are saved and how historic information is displayed. He gets that, he thinks, from a long career in retail, where 'how things are displayed' is vital to business success.

Oftentimes, during my visit, Finch would get up from his chair to retrieve a 'notebook' – a white, wide three-ring binder with the information inside protected by plastic sleeves.

Want to know more about Opal (Brown) Crouthamel? There is a "notebook" for that. And a story, too. As Finch grabs for Opal's binder, he tells about the longtime Kelley resident, who was born in Boone County in 1911. Opal had a love for writing poetry in the hours when she was not a busy housewife.

Finch explains, "Opal was a quick thinker and talked real fast. She went to church here in this building when it was the Kelley Congregational Church. Opal wrote many poems about her life and times but she'd often leave out little words because her mind worked faster than her hand could write. Opal's daughter was looking for someone to type her Mom's poems. We started out with 30," Finch said turning through the sleeves of the binder. "Now we have about 130 of Opal's poems. They tell the story of her life in the Kelley area."

Finch said Opal's granddaughters feel "that these poems are their grandmother's legacy. These are the kinds of items that if you didn't have a Historical Hall, a lot of history will be thrown in the trash," he said.

Want to know more about inventions that came from Kelley? There's a "notebook" for that, too.

Surprisingly, residents of the little town of Kelley had a number of registered patents given for various inventions by Kelley inventors over the years.

The idea of researching patents, Finch said, came from something he recently acquired from an antique dealer out of Massachusetts – a shingle baler, manufactured by Johnson Mfg. Co., Kelley, Iowa. This information is stamped on the side of the unique piece of equipment that is still sitting by the hall's front door, waiting to take a permanent place downstairs with the other ag-related items.

Finch said he bought the item on eBay and then started researching it. In the album of Kelley Patents he points to a 1921 article about Johnson and his shingle baler. "My niece found this 1921 article in a lumberman's magazine about Joseph L. Johnson and his shingle baler. The article not only shows a picture of J. L. Johnson, but it also gives us more details as to why he created the shingle baler. Johnson, according to the article, was losing money in every shingle order due to badly bundled shingles, so he created this device to re-bale the loose shingles. We also found a copy of Johnson's patent. It's amazing what one can find on the Internet,"

The patent shows that the shingle baler was created in 1919 and given a patent in 1920.

Because of this latest acquisition, Finch said, "we thought it would be interesting if we could find a few more Kelley inventors with patents. So again we went to the Internet. Turns out we've had a lot of creative and inventive people from Kelley!"

This patent binder includes Kelley patents that have currently been found via the Internet. Of special interest to Finch is an invention by a lady named Ragna Cleveland from Kelley. "She came up with a combination window and screen operating mechanism. This was back in 1926 ... in the summertime. It was a device that you cranked (by hand) to get the screens up. That's the first time I had ever heard or read her name," Finch said.

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Lots more

There's lots more to enjoy inside Kelley Historical Hall, like books of history on other Story County communities and schools. Finch has those books sitting together on a table on the main floor. He said the history of nearby communities often touch the residents of Kelley, too, because in the 'old' days, people couldn't travel too far. That created a lot of nearby relationships and often marriages took place between residents of neighboring communities. "We've got lots of information (in these books) that really tie area families together," he said.

Finch said he enjoys the annual gathering of county-wide history buffs who are all members of the Story County Historical Alliance. This year's Spring gathering will take place at the end of this month in Cambridge.

"Last year there were about 25 of us from nine Story County communities who gathered in Story City for lunch and sharing. It's fun to hear about the history collections in the various communities," Finch said.

A few other displays of interest at Kelley Historical Hall is a collection of pictures and paintings/drawings showing Kelley and its residents from as early as 1901 to the present day. The rare 1901 photo shows a horse-drawn hearse in a funeral procession as it was leaving Kelley. Finch said the photo was obtained from a lady who was visiting Kelley while doing research on her family. "I scanned it, enlarged it and framed it." It is part of the collection of numerous framed photos.

In fact, framed photos are seen all around the main and lower levels of the Hall. Finch said his brother, Ron Finch, deserves the most credit for all the framed photos that are hanging. "Ron came up with the idea that we could take all these photos to Hobby Lobby and have them framed for four bucks each. Most of these framed Kelley photos that hang in the main room at the building are size 8 x 10. We started with one row all the way around the main room. It wasn't long before we began a second row and even along the staircase," Finch said

Also hanging on the walls at Kelley Historical Hall are some incredible framed paintings. These are paintings by Wayde Soderstrum, a long time Story County farmer and noted regional artist. "When Wayde passed away, the family never sold his art; it's on display here. Wayde worked in oils, colored pencil, chalk, pen and ink. One of the favorite paintings hangs in front," said Finch as he pointed to the east wall of the building. "Wayde won a first prize at the Iowa State Fair with this painting. The painting shows a field during spring planting. Wayde's family intends to eventually add another similar painting of the same field, only during fall harvest."

There's a lot to take in at Kelley Historical Hall - from a display honoring the town's longtime local switchboard operator, Grace Carroll, to a display of World War II veterans. Finch has a little bit of something about so many folks who have contributed to this little town.

As to what will happen to Kelley Historical Hall and all the town's history when Finch is no longer able to do the work. Finch smiles and says, "I think we have that covered, too. Brother Ron and his wife Jean have young grandchildren who are in training for the job during their regular visits to Kelley Historical Hall. They're growing up in Kelley and are becoming familiar with Kelley history and these collections. They are beginning to sense that we hope they will continue our love for Kelley history and family roots."

This Saturday Finch looks forward to making a presentation for the Huxley Historical Society at their annual meeting on that community's longtime and very popular eating establishment, the Fjord Restaurant. The Tri-County Times will share Finch's remembrances from the Fjord in an upcoming article.

Finch said he's pleased to help the Huxley Historical Society with their history collection because he did, after all, graduate from Huxley High School. "A lot of these small towns are dying, so we have this desire to preserve what we can to honor the old-time families and their contribution to our Kelley community. Many Kelley area people still belong to these old name families of early Kelley."

To learn more about Kelley Historical Hall, to donate to the Hall or to schedule an appointment to visit the Hall, e-mail Finch at BDFinch@aol.com or visit the Hall's Web site: www.kelleyhistoricalhall.com.

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