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Tours give glimpse of Rochester history

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ROCHESTER — Taking a stroll through downtown is something hundreds of people do on a daily basis during the spring and summer months. But what many might not know is the history packed into several of the locations they pass.

That's why Rod Wilson, president of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, has arranged to hold historical walking tours throughout the downtown area, stopping at several of the city's landmark locations and some he thinks many residents don't know about.

His hope is to spread the knowledge acquired by his group's members over the years through the two-hour monthly tours. The cost is \$5, or \$3 for students and seniors 55 and older, and all the proceeds go directly toward funding historical society events and presentations. Historical society members tour for free.

The tours begin at the northeast corner of Water and Fourth streets, near Rochester Mills Beer Co., located at 400 Water St. in downtown Rochester. So far there have been two walking tours this season: one in April and one in May. The next one is scheduled for 7 p.m. June 21. Tours are also taking place at 7 p.m. July 23 and Aug. 11, and at 1 p.m. Sept. 19 and Oct. 9.

"Just look for the man in a top hat; you can't miss him," said Liz Golding, public relations representative for the historical society. Wilson leads the tours in tuxedo tails and a top hat. He also carries a binder full of old pictures to show tourists what the locations looked like at the turn of the last century.

"Generally, the group is anywhere from three to 20 people, but sometimes there's 25-30," Golding said. Wilson holds the tours on different days of the week each month, so those with obligations on, say, Mondays may be able to make the Friday tour in July or the Wednesday tour in August. The September and October tours take place on a Sunday and Saturday, respectively. Registration is not required. Golding said to just show up.

"It's just a really nice tour, and it's extremely interesting," she added.

Wilson is hoping more folks — young and old — will take an interest in the tours this season. The first two, he said, were hampered because of the weather.

"Each year we put over 300 people through the walks — new residents, old residents, people looking to move to Rochester and trying to learn the history of the community," he explained. "They see the beautiful downtown and want to know more about it. ... And we just explain everything from our beginning in 1817 to what they're seeing today."

He talks for two hours, telling stories about when the buildings were built, about the previous owners. When he tours with class reunion groups, especially those celebrating an anniversary around 50 years, he said

they do much of the talking, reminiscing about what the locations were like in their heydays.

Most people, he speculated, don't know where the Michigan Central Railroad, built in Rochester in 1872, is located in the city. That's just one of the spots he takes tourists.

The Rochester Elevator is one of tourists' favorite stops, he said. It's on Water Street, which got its name "back at the turn of the century ... because when you came down Fifth Street (now University), you ended at the pond. Nowadays, you'll hit Water."

For more information about the walking tours, visit www.rochesteravonhistoricalsociety.org. Group tours are available.

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