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Walking tours offer a stroll through Rochester history

By Mary Beth Almond
C & G Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — Every year, Rochester-Avon Historical Society President Rod Wilson places a top hat upon his head and parades around the streets of downtown Rochester with a crowd of followers in tow.

The commotion always sparks some curiosity in passers by, but by now, he's used to all the attention.

In the spring and fall, Wilson leads historical walking tours in tuxedo tails and a top hat, sharing the history of downtown Rochester with all who'll listen over a portable public address system strapped to his shoulder.

The first walking tour of the season kicks off at 7 p.m. April 28.

"My goal is to educate people about historic downtown Rochester. As we go along, I talk about some of the history of the buildings, some of the stories of some of the tenants, and answer lots of questions," Wilson said. "There are lots of interesting facts. For example, we talk about the beginning of Rochester and how it started as the first settlement in Oakland County, which a lot of people don't know."

Tour guides also have a binder full of old pictures on hand for tourists to take a look at as they move from location to location.

"Most of the pictures are from the 1900s, so people can see what various locations looked like and how they compare to today," Wilson said.

The tours are well attended, according to Wilson, who said they average about 300 people a year.

"If you don't understand where we came from, it's pretty hard to figure out where we're going," he said.

The walking tours, which last approximately two hours each, continue each month — with additional ones planned for 7 p.m. May 17, June 20, July 22 and Aug. 17, and at 1 p.m. Sept. 18 and Oct. 8.

"Each one of them is on a different day of the week, so if you're busy every Thursday — when our first tour is — you can make one of the other ones. We do them in rain or shine. The only time we don't do them is in thunderstorms," Wilson said.

Registration is not required. Those interested in taking a tour are asked to just show up. All tours begin at the northeast corner of Water and Fourth streets, near Rochester Mills Beer Co., located at 400 Water St. in downtown Rochester.

The cost is \$5, or \$3 for students and seniors 55 and older, and all of the proceeds go directly toward

funding historical society events and presentations.

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

You can reach C & G Staff Writer Mary Beth Almond at malmond@candgnews.com or at (586)498-1060.

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