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Historic walking tours offer a stroll through renovated downtown

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ROCHESTER — The construction on Main Street last year didn't stop Rochester-Avon Historical Society President Rod Wilson from placing a top hat upon his head and parading around the streets of downtown Rochester with a crowd of followers in tow.

This year, however, organizers are thrilled to lead the historic walking tour crowds around a fully renovated downtown, sharing the history of downtown Rochester with all who'll listen.

"We have a gorgeous walkable downtown, and it will certainly be nice not to have to walk around construction barriers. Last year, the tour had to change routes every time we ran it because things were changing downtown all the time. Now, we'll enjoy the nice new walkways," said Historical Society member Deborah Larsen, who assists with the tours.

The Main Street Makeover uncovered some previously undiscovered historic artifacts, which Wilson plans to incorporate into the tours this year.

"We'll talk about some of the smaller artifacts, the buttons and different things; there were some animal skeletons found, and there were two Indian remains that were found. We'll just be talking about all those kind of things, as well as the construction of the trolley bed, as I refer to it — how they had the railroad ties in the cement right down Main Street. I'll talk a little bit about that, along with all the other stories," he said.

The first walking tour of the season kicks off at 7 p.m. May 14. The goal of the tours, according to Wilson, is to educate people about historic downtown Rochester.

"Most people don't know the history of the town, and a lot of people want to know, particularly newer people who have moved in," he said. "One of the stories I tell is Lysander Woodward. He was the president of Detroit and Bay City Railroad that was the first railroad to come through Rochester in 1872. If you go back and look how important that man was to our community — if you didn't have a train coming through your community, you soon became a ghost town, so he's very, very important to the community and why we exist today. That's just one of the stories. It's all an education of who we are, what we were and where we're headed."

Tours begin at the Rochester Mills Beer Co., move on to the Michigan Central Railroad Bridge, over to the Rochester Elevator, and then head up to Main Street. From Main Street, the group heads to Walnut Street to discuss the history of some of the local churches and then continues to the World War II memorial next to the Rochester Police Department.

As Wilson discusses the historic sites and some of the stories of historic downtown Rochester, tour guides show off copies of old pictures of many of the sites and buildings, most of which are from the early 1900s.

“We have an interesting mix of people who attend the walks. Some are new and want to learn about it for the first time, but we usually have a sprinkling of people who have lived here for decades, and they have interesting stories to contribute to the narrative as we walk along down the street, so even if you’ve been on the walk before, you never know what you’re going to hear because each time it’s a different mix of people,” Larsen said.

“I’ve had people who have lived here all their lives come and they say, ‘Wow, I thought I knew everything, and you pointed out some new stuff to me.’ To me, it’s refreshing to hear that. We’re not only teaching the new people in town — we’re also teaching the people who have lived here,” Wilson added.

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

“We average 20-30 people per tour, once it starts, depending on the weather. If the weather is not the best, we might only get 15, but we can get over 40, so we are prepared for that, too,” he said.

The walking tours, which last approximately two hours each, continue each month — with additional ones planned for 7 p.m. June 19, July 18 and Aug. 9, and at 1 p.m. Sept. 21 and Oct. 6.

“It is a great way to see Rochester’s history up close and personal — we’re standing in front of these buildings, looking at vintage photographs of them, hearing stories. It’s also good exercise, a good way to meet your neighbors and a nice way to enjoy a beautiful day,” Larsen 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.

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