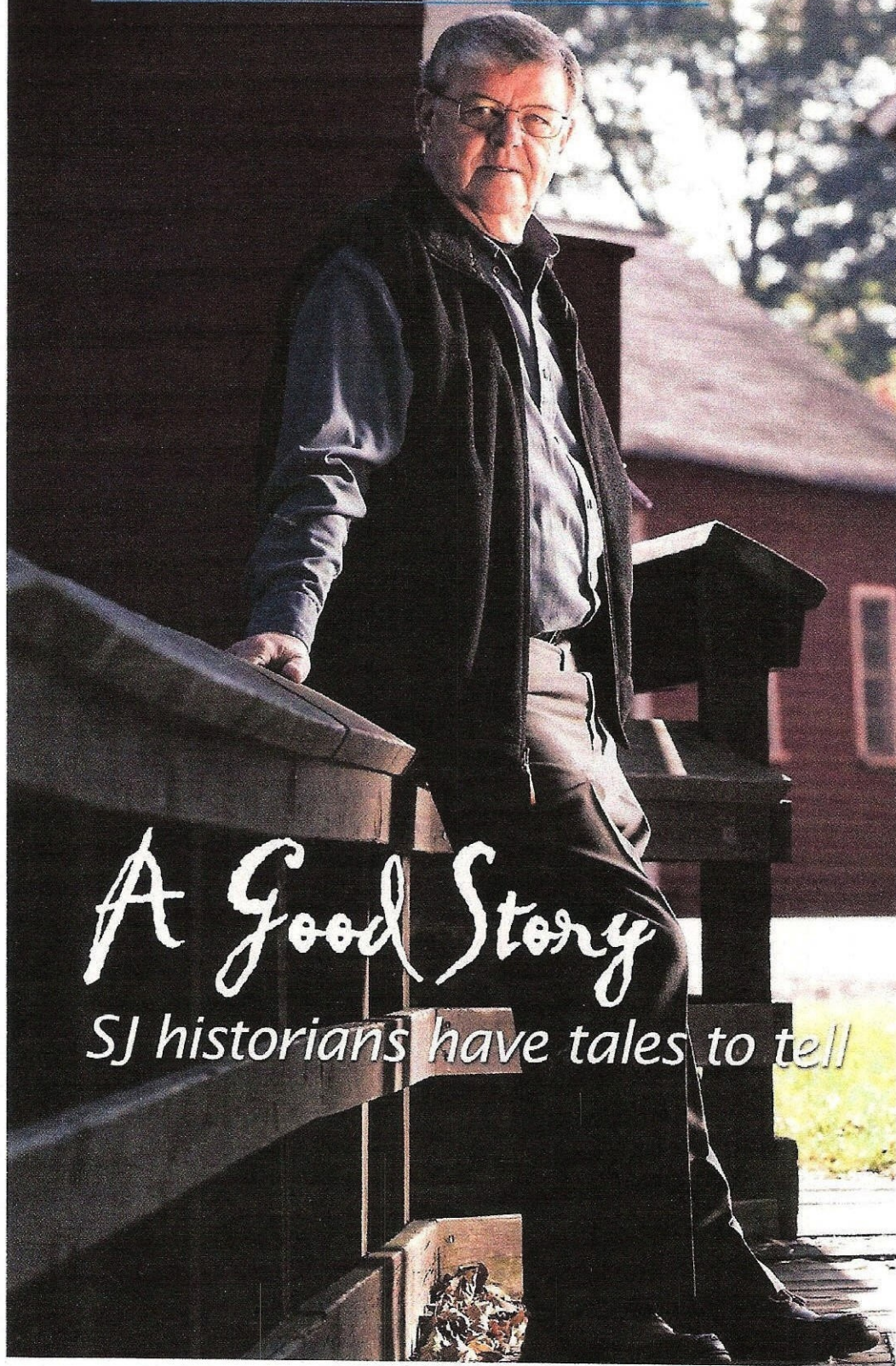


BY MARY LOU SHEFFIELD



A Good Story

SJ historians have tales to tell

Southern New Jersey's past is alive and kicking, thanks to county historians who volunteer their time to research and re-tell the lively stories of days gone by.

"I guess you could say I'm drawn to the showbiz of history," says Joe Laufer, 73, sitting in his workspace among shelves of old pamphlets, books and photos of SJ. It's been three decades since state lawmakers

mandated that each county appoint a historian in preparation for the nation's bicentennial. Though the position still carries a high demand for time with no money in return, history buffs relish the role.

When the Burlington County Freeholders appointed Laufer to the position in 2003, "it was a dream come true" for the new county historian.

"I have four words on my business card," says Laufer, "'Remembrance' so that we don't forget our roots, 'preservation' so we keep those roots alive for the next generation, 'memorialization' to pay tribute to the individuals who had an impact on the area, and 'celebration,' which is our greatest opportunity to bring historical facts to the forefront."

Laufer's love of history started at an age when most young boys are drawn to sports and cars. In high school, he learned about the Civil War during a visit to Gettysburg with his father. "I was in awe of the fact that I was actually standing in a place hallowed by the blood of brave soldiers," says Laufer. It is a passion that endured, so much that he considered it a "stroke of luck" when his oldest son enrolled in Gettysburg College, ensuring future return visits to that site he held dear.

Perhaps this compulsion – as he calls it – for experiencing history through its sites is why his favorite part of being county historian is organizing tours for the public. For those who like to go it alone, Laufer creates self-driving tours. But it's the role of active tour guide that he truly flourishes. "I love to bring people to historic places to share my excitement through stories."

Some of his tours are on foot, including walking tours in Pemberton and Smithville. Other times, Laufer will provide a bus for trips from Mount Holly's Mill Dam Park to the Old Court House.

Laufer also coordinates an annual "New Views" tour based on the project of the same name, in which historic sites are interpreted by local artists. The pieces are displayed at the Smithville Mansion Annex Gallery, and the sites are toured by a Laufer-led bus trip.

Laufer often speaks of the Quaker influence in Burlington County, noting that the group's imprint can be found throughout the area. "In the late 1600s, four ships, filled mostly with Quakers, founded this community on the Delaware River. William Penn was involved here even before his interest in Pennsylvania. So much of our history is attributed to the Quakers," he explains. "For example, why were there so many freed African Americans in New Jersey prior to the Civil War? It's because the Quakers were

key players along the Underground Railroad. As a result, we have some of the country's earliest black churches here in Burlington County.

"Most of our one-room schoolhouses are attributed to Quakers as they set up an early educational system. And we still have 21 preserved Quaker Meeting Houses in Burlington County, eight of which are fully active, all dating back to the 1700s."

Once you hear him deliver stories of the past with his eager pace and animated inflections, it comes as no surprise that Laufer once worked as a professor of communications and public speaking. For each lecture today, he researches a specific

"I love to bring people to historic places to share my excitement through stories."

area and then travels to those little pockets of the past with his camera in hand. "I try to help my listeners feel vicariously what

I feel when I visit these places," he says. The finished product is an aural and visual journey of people and places that once graced the very lands we now live on.

Still, Laufer's personal history may surprise you. First, he's a transplant. Born in Pennsylvania, he spent more than half of his life living out of state. And rather than majoring in history, Laufer began his schooling in seminaries to become a Franciscan, before receiving a master's degree in education from Washington D.C.'s Catholic University. Events led him to SJ roughly 30 years ago, when he dropped his residential anchor and remained.

Nowadays, Joe Laufer's life is defined by the preservation of history. In addition to county historian, Laufer is a founding member of the Historic Rancocas Valley Tourism Association, chairman of the advisory committee of Burlington County's Office of Cultural and Heritage Affairs, president of the H.B. Smith Industrial Village Conservancy, and board member of the Jack Allen Memorial Early Country Living Museum in Southampton. Previously, he served as president of the Southampton Historical Society and as a board member of the Burlington County Historical Society.

In his fifth year as county historian, Laufer has only one complaint: the lack of time to plunge deeper into the stories and places that once were Burlington County. "When you have so much excitement and passion for something," he says, "you can

never have enough time for it."

Penny Laufer, however, would point to a lack of space instead, saying that her husband's addiction to history has taken over the house. In reality, Laufer keeps his work limited to his corner of the living room, with a desk and a bookshelf filled with material, as well as a closet-full of resource material, plus the extension onto the dining-room table when a deadline is pending. Then, there's also the additional office on the second floor if there's too much bustle on the first...okay, maybe Penny has a point.

"Nevertheless," says Joe Laufer, "she has been very tolerant of my passion and has always been my cheerleader and supporter," a role she has served since the two married in 1969. "The year of Woodstock, the first man on the moon and the year the Mets won the World Series," notes the man who can't help but mix flavor with history.

To experience the past with one of Joe Laufer's tours or speaking engagements, check out his calendar at burlcohistorian.com.

Tamara Scott and Stephanie Bilovsky contributed to this article.

Historical Notes FROM SJ'S COUNTY HISTORIANS

Atlantic County

"Atlantic County is where The Battle of Chestnut Neck took place. Here, privateers routinely raided the British ships along the coast. The British eventually had enough and decided to attack. They steered their ships into the Egg Harbor River, but didn't realize the river was shallow, so they all got stuck! The privateers, familiar with the river, had shallow boats so they got away. They even had time to pack up valuables, including materials they had pilfered from the British ships. The British were so frustrated they burned the whole city, but the villagers had fled so they only lost their homes. The British, however, ended up spending days getting stuck ships out of the shallow waters."

Jane Sheridan, County Historian

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