

RAY RUSSELL – MAM OF THE PAST

By Mike Hickey

Ray Russell is a man of the past.

And his love of the past, handed down to three of his children, has insured that many facets of history will be available to those who come in the future.

Many area residents know Ray as a retired Rochester police sergeant who, with wife Winifred, raised five fine offspring. Fewer know Russell as an authority on and collector of history and memorabilia concerning Rochester, British military battles, antique weaponry and Michigan units that served in America's Civil War.

Ray has a collection of between three and four hundred postcards depicting Rochester's past. The oldest of these, taken around 1899, depicts construction of a railroad trestle for the Detroit United Railroad – also known as 'The Interurban' – on the site of what is now South Hill bridge.

Cordie Russell, Ray's father, was maintenance supervisor at the DUR car barns, located on a North Main St. site now occupied by the Atallah Heart Center. The Russell's lived in a house on the corner of East Third and Baldwin Sts. In an area then known as Baldwinville.

Ray was born there Dec. 17, 1913, grew up and graduated from Rochester High School in 1932. The Depression cut short a college education but Ray was able to find work with General Motors' engineering department, where he remained until 1949. His work was an inspector of naval torpedoes in Pontiac carried an 'Essential' classification and kept him from military service during World War II.

The former Winifred Rose became Mrs. Raymond Russell in 1940. The couple have two daughters, Peggy of Orlando, Fla., and Kathleen in San Francisco, along with three sons.

Sam Howlett was chief when Ray joined the police department in 1949. He served with distinction for 25 years, earning promotions to sergeant in 1960 and retiring in 1974. He remembers: "We knew who our characters were, and where to find them. Even more important, we knew their dads and moms. We didn't always follow the letter of the law; sometimes just a quiet visit or a word passed in the right way – and in the right place – did the job."

"Radio made a big difference, too. We used to be alerted to trouble by a blue light at the corner of Fourth and Main Streets," Ray recalls. "We would either

call in or go back to the station to find out where and what the trouble was.” He chuckled as he recalled that when radio was first proposed for the department one councilman objected strenuously, claiming ‘it wouldn’t be used once a week.’ That observation was quickly proven wrong.

Ray’s fame as an historian is not just local. He is regarded as a top authority throughout the Midwest in the fields in which he specializes. The January show of the Michigan Antique Arms Collectors, Inc. was dedicated to Ray and wife Winnie.

Quoting from the President’s Letter of the MAAC: “Ray is a charter member of MAAC and has been active since its founding in 1947. He has been a member of the board of directors since being elected president in 1950 and has held all the offices of the club as well.”

“He is well recognized in the field of antique arms collecting, an expert on firearms and hunting books, is an historian of Michigan Civil War history, British military history and local history. Many of his weapons have been used by MAAC in its displays at the National Rifle Association annual conventions. His special collectings interests now are Scottish edged weapons, identified Michigan Civil War weapons and guns made in Pontiac, Michigan.”

Ray and Winifred, also a recently retired MAAC director, managed the organization’s shows for many years. They continue as active members.

For many years, Ray sold books and historical artifacts from different Rochester locations. He currently has a collection of over 2,000 volumes, plus a large tape library and an enviable assortment of Scottish bladed weapons and antique firearms of Pontiac origin at his home.

The three children mentioned earlier are the Russell sons. Each an historical authority in his own right, inherited their love of the past from Ray and Winifred. Mike, a Lansing area resident, deals in naval history; Brian, in Royal Oak, specializes in the military field, and Terry, an Air Force master sergeant based in Spokane, Washington, is known as a western and fur trade history authority.

Truly, Ray Russell is a man of the past. His legacy is that, through his efforts, the past will be far more accessible – and much richer – for those who come in the future.