

25 years: Dan Patch Historical Society turns a quarter of a century old

- By Britt Johnsen | bjohnsen@swpub.com Mar 18, 2017

As of this month, the Dan Patch Historical Society is now 25.

A quarter of a century old. Old enough to rent a car, if it were a person.

While it has much life behind it, it also has much ahead.

“I think that we accomplished our mission and we’re continuing to accomplish our mission,” said Savage Mayor Janet Williams, a founding member of the Dan Patch Historical Society.

Accomplishments

The Dan Patch Historical Society’s mission is to educate the public about famous racehorse Dan Patch and his owner, Marion W. Savage.

Williams said that in 1992, a group of citizens decided to create the Dan Patch Historical Society.



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“A group of us decided that it was time to formalize the organization,” she said.

The population had been increasing and people were constantly wanting to know the history of Savage’s name. Many people think the city’s name has a violent or otherwise unsavory context, when in fact it’s named after Marion W. Savage, a renowned businessman and owner of the famous standardbred pacer, Dan Patch. Some were so concerned that they went to the school board to ask to change the name of Savage Elementary, Williams said. It worked and that school is now called Marion W. Savage Elementary School.

Williams said she and others felt that if people knew the history of Savage and its namesake, they would be more comfortable.

“We needed to get the message out,” she said.

In the 25 years since the organization was born, they’ve achieved much. They started a newsletter and launched a website. They have an entire section at the Savage Library, called the Heritage Room, which is part of an agreement with the city that they get to have the space if they maintain it and keep files updated. While it contains Dan Patch and M.W. Savage information, the space also includes lots of other historical information on Savage.

They’ve also created story boards that have been sold to businesses around Savage, Williams said. These storyboards have been presented to each of the schools in the city, as well, she said.

“And we see people reading them,” she said.

They also got the Dan Patch Avenue sign at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds, which was dedicated in 2006.

Williams also mentioned the relocation of the depot, a historical Savage building built in 1880 that used to be a railroad



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depot and now contains Flavor Pho, a restaurant featuring Vietnamese dishes. The railroad depot closed in 1970, and in 1973, Murphy's Landing purchased it and moved it to their site in Shakopee. The building was later purchased through a partnership with the city of Savage and Dan Patch Historical Society, and moved back to Savage in 2006. Williams said the relocation of the building from Shakopee to Savage had "incredible community support."

The DPHS also plays an integral role, fittingly, in Dan Patch Days, the annual community celebration in Savage. In the weeks leading up to the event, the historical society puts on a horseshoe hunt, revealing a new clue each week on its website and in the Savage Pacer. It creates buttons to commemorate Dan Patch Days, and residents need to purchase a button first to participate in the horseshoe hunt.

The group also has a booth at the event each year, and it holds a raffle with the first-place winner taking home an intarsia commemorating that year's event and the second-place winner taking home a Dan Patch blanket. Anyone who purchases a button is automatically entered in the raffle.

The group also takes part in the annual Dan Patch Days parade with a float featuring board members, a replica of Dan Patch and a M.W. Savage impersonator.

For many years, Jens Bohn was considered the face of the Dan Patch Historical Society. He served as president from 1994 to 2016 and was the main contact for the group, and every year he sold the Dan Patch Days button out of his barbershop, Razor's Edge, in downtown Savage. He also sold memberships and books about Savage, and the barbershop displayed his collection of Dan Patch and M.W. Savage artifacts.

The Dan Patch Historical Society currently has 78 active members, with 35 in Minnesota and the rest spread out among 18 states nationwide.

"It gives us a good opportunity to look back and see what the society has done," Jim Ross, board member of the Dan Patch Historical Society, said of their anniversary. "We've really been instrumental in some big projects."

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What's next

So now that they have so much behind them, what's ahead?

Williams said she would like to see the materials at the library become digitized, particularly paper files and old newspaper copies.

She also looks forward to the project that could put statues of Dan Patch in Savage and the Minnesota State Fairgrounds.



“For a group of volunteers without any paid staff, we have accomplished some neat things,” she said.