

Life in a small town

When I was a kid in school here," Charlie Morrison says, "I never heard a word about local history, had no idea how the town got its name. Today's kids don't have that problem."

Instead, today's kids in Ashville, a village of some 3,400 people 17 miles south of Columbus just off of Rt. 23, have "Ohio's Small Town Museum," a veritable treasure-trove of local memorabilia. "Stuff keeps pouring in," Morrison says. "Every day brings old photos, mementos, souvenirs. We've got more stuff than we can ever show."

Back in the 1970s, Morrison and Bob Hines, now of Columbus but then an Ashville resident and Ohio State University student, began beating the bushes for a local museum; funds for remodeling an aged building were sought from the Ohio Arts Council and other public entities. Jack Lemon, another crusty veteran of the museum wars, says the answer was no. "The building wasn't up to par, according to them," he says. "All the work and money that created this place was local," and that nonassistance provided the impetus for a sign prominently displayed in the museum: "The only thing the government gave us was a hassle."

From 1937 to 1982, a unique traffic signal—with a sweeping second hand that informed drivers how long they'd have to wait for the red light to turn green—hung at Ashville's main intersection of Main and Long streets. The light was taken down for repair after someone shot a hole in it, Lemon explains, and, "Our illustrious mayor made the mistake of asking the state for permission to reinstall it. Surprise. They said, 'No, no yellow warning signal.' It was an illegal light, they said. The thing had been up for 50 years and we'd never

had an accident, but it wasn't safe, they said. Ah, well."

He notes that Teddy Boor, the device's hometown inventor, "really expected his signal to take over the country. It didn't, of course—made too much sense is my guess—but the thing found a home in our museum."

That is true of lots of things: aged calendars, advertisements, license plates, tools, clothing, arrowheads, medical equipment, theater programs, *McGuffey* readers, old Coke bottles, musical instruments, uniforms, banners, trophies, a crank telephone, souvenir cups and plaques, Ashville High School graduation pictures from its first in 1898 to its last in 1962. Yellowed posters spotlight past Pickaway County fairs and a 1909 "Field Day/Fish Fry," featuring "Prof. M.E. Gains, the world's greatest Aeronaut," along with "Baby Jim," all 793 pounds of him.

Other exhibits focus on the Ashville Hotel (1882-1934), area industries then and now, Ashville in the Great Depression, famous sons and

Among election campaign displays is a large button pin that says only "Charlie for Mayor." "Yeah, that was me," says Morrison, who served 38 years as Ashville mayor and village councilman in addition to his unpaid role of museum curator. (No, he's not the mayor who asked the state about the traffic signal.) Other spotlighted personalities include Chic-Chic, "the

world's smartest rooster," and Buster, "the dog who voted Republican." Should you visit, Morrison will be happy to provide their biographies in detail.

The museum opened in 1979 in a building constructed in 1915 to house the Dreamland Theater. It went through various subsequent incarnations until the mid 1960s. The building, eventually bequeathed to the town, had deteriorated through many years of disuse before volunteer labor and donated funds brought about its rebirth as a museum. The facility has hosted visitors from all 50 states and every continent, except Antarctica. It has been written about, and praised, in several national publications and was featured in "An American Moment" TV vignette narrated by James Earl Jones.

The town itself, which was a depressed area many years ago, is undergoing a renaissance as a



The traffic signal with the sweeping second hand that hung in Ashville from 1937 to 1982.

MICHAEL A. FOLEY/RYCUS ASSOC. (2)



A display for village native Sarah Fisher, who competed in the 2001 Indianapolis 500.

daughters—Champ Henson, Ohio State football star who led the nation in scoring in 1972, puppetry pioneer Vivian Michael and race car driver Sarah Fisher, who competed in last year's Indianapolis 500.

Columbus bedroom community. A new branch library recently opened across the street from the museum, Morrison says, and other renovation projects have converted a former canning factory and one-time interurban power station into, respectively, an antique mall and a new restaurant.

So tell us, Charlie, how did Ashville get its name?

"Well," he says, "actually, nobody really knows. There are two theories. The one we like better, gentleman name of Mahlon Ashbrook ran a gristmill here in the 1870s, a very prominent guy, and when the town was incorporated in 1882, why, it was named after him."

What's the other theory?

"Well, there were a lot of ash trees in those days—ash trees, Ashville, get it? But we like the one about old Mahlon better. It has the human touch."

▼ Joe Lersky