

NEWS

Canton vs. Massillon: A rivalry long before football

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PERRY TWP. – The score in the Massillon vs. Canton rivalry is actually a 1 to 1 stalemate.

This competition has nothing to do with high school football. The gridiron rivalry between the two cities, just eight miles apart, may have begun in 1894, but the locales had already done battle for more than a half-century prior.

"The lowly mosquito is the origin," Richard Haldi announced to a crowd of about 75 people in a conference room at Stark Parks' Stark County District Library's Exploration Gateway one evening last week.

Stark Heritage: Who was Cornelius Aultman?

Stark Heritage: A history of Interstate 77 in Stark County

The Perry Township location was appropriate — it's sort of the Switzerland located between the two cities.

Haldi, a local history buff and author, has been doing his history talks for years to church and civic groups. He has a slate of 44 different subjects — from Canton's "Little Chicago" mafia past to the story of the rise and fall of Meyers Lake amusement park.

Retired from Diebold Inc. two decades ago, Haldi is 84 years old. He admits he probably won't be able to do the local lecture circuit for too much longer.

"I don't stand as well as I used to," he said afterward.

We don't want a stinkin' canal

But Haldi's delivery on this evening for his "A Tale of Two Cities" was full of his usual energy. No fancy PowerPoints. Just a microphone, a mammoth pile of transparencies and an overhead projector.

He guided the audience through the 19th century events that led to the creation of Massillon and Canton, the near demise of the latter, and how they are intertwined.

"Canton inadvertently created Massillon by refusing the canal," Haldi told them. "But Massillon (then) saved Canton by bringing the railroad to Stark County."

Founded in 1805 by Bezaleel Wells, Canton came first.

When plans to build part of the Ohio and Erie Canal developed in the early 1820s, Canton wanted no part of it. The last thing early leaders wanted was a giant ditch of water in town. Water attracted mosquitoes, which led to malaria, a deadly disease.

The big ditch wound up near the Tuscarawas River and Massillon was born in 1826.

With the equivalent of a modern-day highway running through Massillon, the city grew. Haldi referred to a piece written by historian Henry Howe in 1846: "Massillon quickly became a canal town that for over two decades literally sank Canton. Great personal animosities arose among Canton's early townsmen, between the enemies and friends of a big ditch in Ohio."

A railroad saves the day for both cities

Canton was the county seat, but Massillon was mighty.

In fact, it got to the point that some of the county's biggest names, such as Whipple and Danner, were among those who signed petitions to move the seat to Massillon.

It never came to fruition.

However, not only had Canton leaders rejected the canal, they also turned down late 1830s plans to build a railroad through town. The Pennsylvania and Ohio rail line wound up routed to the east, which led to the creation of Alliance.

Haldi said Canton finally did land a railroad, thanks to a huge assist from Massillon folks.

"The Russell brothers were responsible for bringing the rail through Canton," he explained.

There were seven of them in all, led by C.M. Russell. And they were making agricultural equipment that needed to be transported. Haldi said it was their influence and money that convinced rail officials to alter a planned east-west route that was to be located to the north, through Ravenna and Akron, bypassing most of Stark.

Instead, the Pennsylvania and Ohio rail was dropped south, through both Canton and Massillon in the early 1850s.

The Russells prospered. So did Canton's agriculture equipment makers, Cornelius Aultman and Ephraim Ball. Aultman struck gold with his famous Buckeye reaper.

"And Canton, Ohio, became the reaper capital of the world," Haldi said.

That, he said, is the real story of a city rivalry.

"It's the foundation of everything that followed," Haldi said.

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