

Local BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

Froelich Foundation

Froelich Foundation celebrates Clayton County life in bygone time

BY JOHN JENSEN
THE OUTLOOK

FROELICH — One of the hidden gems of Clayton County lies in our own front yard – where both Clayton County residents and visitors can celebrate the birthplace of the gasoline-powered tractor and life like it was around the turn of the 19th century when it was invented.

The Froelich Village Museum site, run since 1986 by the not-for-profit Froelich Foundation, features the 1891 Iron Clad General Store, 1920 Freight Warehouse, 1866 Froelich #5 One-Room School, a blacksmith shop, railroad depot, semi transportation building and the 1903 Barn Event Center.

“We have a hands-on-tour so young children are welcome to come, learn and enjoy,” Museum Curator Denise Schutte said. “Our favorite tours are multi-generation tours. Grandparents, their children and grandchildren have an opportunity to share stories of what they remember as they were growing up. Some stories they’ve never shared with one another. So this is a great place to reminisce and share! We have displays showcasing how life was lived so many years ago.”

“We enjoy giving tours to school field trip students,” she said. “There is a wealth of educational information and historical significance available right here in our community. For kids to get to see how people lived in the early 1900s is a wonderful resource for the younger generations.”

Froelich, which was never incorporated as a community, was named for the Froelich family. It was there that John Froelich invented the first successful gasoline tractor that was able to propel itself both forwards and backwards in 1892. Froelich went on to found the Waterloo Gasoline Traction Engine Company with a group of investors the following year, and that company was the forerunner of the Waterloo Gasoline Engine Company, which built the first tractor marketed by Deere & Company (John Deere) when it purchased the Waterloo company in 1918.

A monument to John Froelich is located on the hillside just off the museum grounds. More than 2,000 people attended its dedication in 1939.



“The store owners, Lon and Mattie Burlingame, wanted to make sure John’s invention would never be forgotten,” Schutte said.

The property was later turned over to Clayton County, which talked of tearing the village down in the middle 1980s before a local group stepped in to save it.

“The Froelich Foundation for the Preservation of Farm Tractor History, Inc. was formed Sept 9, 1986,” Schutte said. “The first five founding members were: Roger Swanson, Keith and Marlyce Kling, and Gene and JoAnn Kramer. These folks and many other people of this community worked hard to clean, repair, and restore the General Store. So many people donated old time items and relics of that time. They also donated much time and talent to create the look of the General Store, Post Office, and all the other buildings over the years.”

The Froelich Foundation receives no local, state or federal funding and is run exclusively on money made through tour income, the sale of memberships and donations. It has an 11-member board of directors that meets monthly to handle business matters, maintenance of the property, and planning for the group’s annual Fall-der-All fundraiser, which is held the last full weekend of September.

Schutte said the family-friendly event showcases many old-time demonstrations, a full lineup of antique and other tractors, steam engine, and hit and miss engines. There is a tractor ride on Saturday, followed by a meal, homemade pie and ice cream. Breakfast in the Barn kicks off Sunday events and is followed by the kids’ Pedal Pull and the annual Big Raffle Drawing at 3 p.m. Sunday. There are also kids’ activities and tours of the entire museum site throughout the weekend.

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