

pioneers lived and farmed in the Parry Sound District.

So, armed with a wealth of information about the area's pioneering history, and real stories and anecdotes from the local folk who lived them, he began writing regular newspaper columns in 1981, initially for the *Georgian Bay Beacon* and later, the *Parry Sound North Star*.

"You never run out of ideas," he says, flipping through a thick file of notes and ideas jotted down for future columns and books. "This file is cooking ideas that are sitting there for columns. For a lot of them, their time will never come, but sometimes something happens that will bring them into focus, or I've assembled pages for a future column and may never use them.

"I've struck a vein no one else is touching," he says, explaining that he perceives his columns and books of accounts, as "filling in the cracks and crevices with mortar – the small things" in the area's logging and pioneer foundation.

"Not so many people are really doing that. I would never attempt to write the history of Parry Sound, partly because I'm too lazy to do the heavy research. I'm an anecdotal writer. I write the one-liners of history."

His columns, now numbering well over 500, began as weekly submissions, and later became bi-weekly. They were published in five books. The first, *Now and Then*, a collection of 75 columns was published in 1983, and John shudders when he thinks of how he'd never really heard of proofreading back then.

"They only improved from then on," John shrugs. "I quickly caught on after the first book, that I needed someone to proofread and check the grammar in my books."

Since then, his wife Joan has proofread his books, and in recent years, daughter Beth, who is a professional proof reader, editor and indexer of books, is the final arbitrator "polishing up" his book manuscripts. His newest release is called *Lots more ... Parry Sound Stories*, and like several of his most recent books, features one of his own oil paintings on the book jacket.

"I like it when a new book comes out," says the author of 11 books. "You get a little adrenaline out of it, like an actor does on stage after a good performance. It is fulfilling to produce something people are actually willing to pay money for. My books eventually do sell out. Most are self published, but three were published by publishers."

Not bad for a fella educated in the one-room Sunnyslope School between McKellar and Dunchurch, where he returned to obtain his Grade 10 to qualify for admission into Air Crew in the Air Force.

Later in life, John upgraded his skills by imitating writing and photography styles he liked. His readers appreciated his ability to bring history to life through stories about people they may have known, or are related to. Humanity adds that third dimension to his columns, offering colourful snapshots often missed in textbook accounts.

"It makes you picture a person standing there who's made a stupid mistake or something – a load of logs upset on him or something like that – those snapshots bring it to life," he says. "You can write flat history or you can write history that is in three dimensions, by putting people into the foreground and using little anecdotes."

These anecdotal accounts, mixed occasionally with his own commentary, bring life to the dusty old history textbook accounts of logging and early homesteading in the district.

Often he accomplishes this through the simple things he spotlights in his columns, like the bridge he and his readers often pass but never really think about, despite it being an appealing piece of architecture linked to threads in the oldtimers' yarns and significant local history.



John was photographed with a piece of his own history; a photo he took in 1963 of his father Roy Macfie (foreground) and brother Frank Macfie. The pair were hauling logs to brother Don Macfie's sawmill. They are shown unloading a sleighload of logs using canthooks.

"I try to bring the stuff that has impact up front where it affects people" he says, clarifying that this all has to be framed in a 1,000-word column. "So you have to make it punchy."

Like the Seguin Sam character who came to life at his easel 40 years ago, John thoroughly enjoys bringing local history to life in his bi-weekly columns for the *Parry Sound North Star*. It seems to be a self-perpetuating game, with one column or interview prompting notions for another tale that has to be told.

"People who can dance, they dance, people who can sing, they sing," he says. "I find I can write. It's my way of getting on stage. That's partly it."

But it's much more than that fondness for being on stage which, of course, both John and 'Sam' relish.

Having acquired a disdain for meetings while working in government services, he's not one to join a local service club. So, his books and columns – along with the historical photos he's collected – have become his community service.

"It's important that the little things be preserved. I believe I'm doing a public service in putting what was oral history or myth into print, putting it into available form, making it available to those who happen to want it. And the thousands of people who have bought my books make it appear that people want it."

He agrees that his drive to write his columns and books has a lot to do with leaving a legacy.

"Because books tend to last, it's my claim to fame – fame or infamy?" he jokes.

Seated at his computer, comfortable in this basement work zone surrounded by his books and files, and his own colourful caricature of Seguin Sam on the wall, John describes himself as an office-bound tour guide.

"Doing it this way, sitting in a chair, is easier than talking to a busload of tourists touring Parry Sound's history," he comments. "And it's easier for the consumer because they can do it at their leisure instead of sitting in a seat, as we tour back into history in easily digested morsels."

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