Julie McDonald: Treasure and preserve living history while you can

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Lewis County lost a piece of history this month when John Alexander Jr. died on Sept. 7 after living nearly a century, much of it locally.

I've always enjoyed running into John through the years and spent time with him more than a decade ago while researching the Chehalis Industrial Park for the book "Chehalis: A 'Can-Do' Community: A History of Industrial Development in Lewis County," which was published in 2014. I interviewed John, Buck Hubbert, Gale Shaw, Joanne Schwartz and so many other people who shaped industrial and business development in Chehalis decades ago and even more recently through the Chehalis Community Renaissance Team, today known as Experience Chehalis.

John Alexander Jr., standing at right, with Bud Kuehner, Ernie Kuehner and others at Security State Bank in Chehalis in 1975.

Even a decade earlier, while researching World War II and its effects locally, I learned a bit about John's childhood when he shared recollections of the war years for the book "Life on the Home Front: Stories of those who worked, waited, and worried during WWII," published in 2005.

John Jr. was a descendant of Scottish immigrant John Alexander who settled in Lewis County in 1858 and Margaret (Urquhart) Alexander, whose parents emigrated from Scotland and landed in Lewis County in 1853. He was born in Portland on Dec. 11, 1934, to John William and Hester C. "Bill" Alexander. He attended Cascade Grade School from the ages of 7 to 11 while war raged on the European continent and in the South Pacific.

"We knew there was a war on," he wrote in his recollections for the book. "The newspapers and radio were filled with it, and newsreels at the movies graphically reported on recent successes or setbacks as various battles were waged."

He said Life magazine "brought the war into our living rooms with pictures of soldiers dead on beaches in the South Pacific." Movies featured John Wayne as a Fighting Seabee or a Flying Tiger while other films depicted jungle warfare, PT boats, amphibious landings and military operations.

"I remember one grim jungle scene where our soldier, surrounded by the enemy, finds time for a last cigarette before he is shot," he wrote. "So the media of that day kept the struggle on our plate constantly. And there was no confusion as to who the bad guys were. There were no Jane Fondas. There was Tokyo Rose, but everybody knew she was on the other side."
Pro-American journalists such as Ernie Pyle and cartoonist Bill Mauldin brought the news to the home front.

"Patriotism prevailed at the highest point on the scale, and the country from my impression was more focused and together than at any time since," he said. "We were in this thing together, and it was a good feeling."

He noted people at home supported the military and the war effort 100 percent. The southeast hallway entrance to Cascade School displayed a jeep diagram.

"Even the kids were buying war bonds, and we were doing that by filling stamp books," he said. "As I recall it was our classroom's mission to buy the right front wheel for that jeep."

John's father walked to work at Security State Bank, and his mother grew vegetables in a large Victory Garden while buying eggs and milk from local farms to churn cream into butter. They saved gas ration coupons for one trip a year to the beach. They took scrap metal, lard, and other items to collection points, and he recalled snickering over a sign that read: "Ladies, bring your fat cans in."
"Everyone was into the spirit of supporting the war effort," John wrote.

He remembered workers at the Boeing branch plant in Chehalis, now the Lewis County PUD building, often "on their lunch breaks used Pacific Avenue for impromptu baseball practice."
"We were not immune to the tragic consequences of war, as the tentacles of the conflict reached into our community," he said. Jeri Hughes, his tap dancing teacher, married a young man who was lost over the English Channel. When Lorne Keesee returned home on furlough, telling stories of life as a B-24 bubble gunner, John wrote, "the thought that he would soon be going back to war was causing some eyes to mist over."

John saw military service in the U.S. Navy, where he trained as a frogman in underwater demolitions. He lived in Indiana, Rhode Island and Virginia before returning to Chehalis in 1962.
"Lewis County looked like an awful good place," he told me, but returning home after his Navy service was a culture shock. "I'd been in the Caribbean and blowing things up and spearing fish and scuba diving and jumping out of airplanes and having a great time. And all of a sudden, I'm over here in a room with a bunch of high school girls earning $200 a month filing checks."

1968 he married Sally Finley, who gave birth to five boys in six years.

He spent his career as a banker at Security State Bank and served as chairman of the board from 1974 to 2001. For a Pacific Coast Banking School program, he published a history of banking in Lewis County in April 1972. He gave me a copy when I interviewed him. It recounts the history of

pioneer banking in the 19th century and throughout the 20th century and lists banks in Lewis County.

He later called me with information about the Hatfields and McCoys, descendants of the infamous 19th century feuding families on the Kentucky-West Virginia border, who had settled in East Lewis County years ago. I didn't write about it, but I recalled reading one account from 1906 where the feud — fueled by alcohol — led to a murder in Pe Ell. A fellow named Joe Hatfield suggested that George Trent, a drunken Virginian whose family sided with the McCoys in the feud, should go home. Instead, Trent shot and killed a pioneer Pe Ell resident, Harve Craton. A mob wanted to lynch Trent, but guards at the jail prevented it.

John helped shape local industrial development after joining the Chehalis Industrial Commission in 1974 and serving for more than four decades. He worked closely with Shaw, Hubbert, and others to diversify the local economy by extending railroad and freeway access and obtaining financing for potential investors. He also helped found the Lewis County Economic Development Council, today known as the Economic Alliance of Lewis County.

It's sad to see the passing of yet another member of the Chehalis Industrial Commission and a longtime banker who helped many people through his job at Security State Bank.
According to his obituary, he also enjoyed working on his family tree farm, riding motorcycles, flying and doing stunts in small private airplanes. He is survived by his sister, Mary Alexander; sons Andrew, Charles, Mike, Jim, and John; 11 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild. He outlived both Sally and his second wife, Ruby.

Speaking of living history, I popped into the Cowlitz Prairie Grange near Toledo on Saturday to offer 99th birthday wishes to Margaret Denzil "Denny" (Kirkendoll) Cole, who like Alexander is the offspring of early Lewis County pioneers.

Cole, who lives in Ethel, is a descendant of the Layton family of Toledo's Layton Prairie and a lifelong county resident with a rich grasp of pioneer history. Like Margaret, her daughter, Sheryl McKinley of Chehalis, is involved in the Daughters of the Pioneers of Washington. Sheryl invited me to speak to the group in March, and I loved meeting so many likeminded lovers of history.

Cole is a founding member of both Lewis County and Toledo historical societies. She describes her sturdy pioneer background as providing her with good genes.

When I asked the secret to longevity, she responded, "Keep hanging on."

I'm hoping I'll be invited to celebrate her centennial birthday next year. She's an inspiration to many as the crowded room at the Grange attested. It was nice to see Margaret's family and friends honoring her special day.
We have many wonderful seniors who possess a wealth of living history.
Spend a little time listening to their stories. It's bound to enrich your life.
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