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Historian to discuss Interlochen's past

BY DAVID L. BARBER Special to the Record-Eagle Mar 8, 2018



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BENZONIA — Dave Pennington chuckled as he pondered the question: Is Interlochen one of Michigan's best-kept secrets, or is it famously known all around the world?

“That’s a good one,” said the 78-year-old retired school administrator whose family has

lived in the Interlochen area since 1890.

“Maybe we'd like to keep the parks a bit quiet, but yes, (the music camp) is known all around the world.”

Pennington, a long time historian of northwest Michigan, will present a brief history of the Interlochen area at 4 p.m. on March 8 at the Benzie Area Historical Museum in Benzonia.

He will speak on the history of the Interlochen's remaining historic buildings, “though there are very few pieces (buildings) left,” and will also talk about the origin of the Interlochen State Park, which is located between Duck and Green Lakes.

Part of his presentation will be devoted to the development of the four Pennington camps from 1917-50, which included one section for boys, another for girls, and a traveling camp that traveled as much as 9,000 miles in one summer, taking campers across the United States, down into Mexico, and up into Canada.

“In 1890, about the same time Interlochen was founded, my great uncle opened a drug store (in the area),” said Pennington.

“Then, my grandfather and grandmother wanted to start a camp for girls, and that's when things took off.”

With a population of just under 600 annual residents, Interlochen is located 14 miles southwest of Traverse City in Green Lake Township between Duck Lake and Green Lake, which were originally called Wahbekaness and Wahbekanetta lakes respectively by the Odawa natives.

Then, at the end of the 19th century, European settlers — the Pennington family being among them — began to operate the first fishing and logging operations in that area.

“A few years later, my great uncle Willis (Pennington) met with Dr. Joseph Maddy and got him to bring his (music) camp to Interlochen.”

After a nationwide search to find a site at which his National High School Orchestra could hone its skills, Maddy selected Interlochen in 1927, and, one year later, his camp opened.

By 1930, Maddy and his orchestra of 182 young musicians were giving concerts at the Metropolitan Opera House in Philadelphia, Carnegie Hall in New York, and Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., the same year John Philip Sousa made his first visit to Interlochen.

In time that camp would become known as the Interlochen Center for the Arts, and host students and teachers from around the world.

“Dave is a classic historian,” said Misty Sheehan, executive director of the Benzie Area Historical Museum. “He has always been interested in the history of the area and his family opened and ran some of the early camps in the Interlochen area.”

Pennington said as word spread about the summer camps for young people his grandparents opened, the more residents from the south traveled north for the summer.

“Those camps seemed to be popular back then,” said Pennington. “The camps lasted about eight weeks and were divided into three (age) levels.”

Pennington, a former board member of the Traverse City History Center, said after the logging era began to fade away in that area in the early 20th century, the State of Michigan purchased property in the area and turned it into Interlochen State Park, which became one of the first such parks to be opened.

“I think Interlochen is known because it has very nice parks, on two lakes,” said Pennington.

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