

# The News-Herald

## Tales of another time

Chester Township's Dan Ruminski has made himself an expert on area history

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A century ago, Cleveland was considered one of the world's greatest cities.

Dozens of inventions began here, and some of the movers and shakers made millions. When Mark Twain saw the 156 mansions stretching four miles along Euclid Avenue from Public Square to where the Cleveland Clinic is today, he called it the greatest street in the world. Later it was dubbed Millionaire's Row.

A few years ago Dan Ruminski, who lives in Chester Township, learned that his home on Sherman Road near Hawken Upper School was on what once was the Walter White estate. He wanted to learn more.

That single flame of curiosity fired a blaze of interest in this area's history and has resulted in five talks, including one scheduled for May 15 that he says is the most interesting story of them all.

Ruminski hopes that learning about Cleveland's past will inspire a new generation of great leaders.

"Hawken maintains the White House on its 300 acres, and its students probably think the name refers to its color," Ruminski said. "But when I banged on the door at Hawken and asked about their archives, I found five bins of material there."

Early in the last century, he learned, Walter White's 1,000-acre country estate, called Circle W Farm, had its own polo field and hosted the Spanish polo team for a match.

"Once the Goodyear blimp landed on the lawn to take the White kids for a ride," he said.

White was one of four brothers, wealthy sons of Thomas Howard White, who had founded the White Sewing Machine Co. His brother, Windsor White, lived at Halfred Farms, another 1,000-plus-acre estate not many miles away in Hunting Valley.

Among their enterprises was White Motors, one of more than 100 automobile manufacturers in Cleveland.

Ruminski's early research into the White family took him to the Gates Mills library, which also has records of early families.

There he met with Sally Burke, president of the Gates Mills Historical Society, who was enthralled with the story he told about the White family.

"She asked me if I was willing to talk about it, so two years ago we set a date on a Sunday afternoon at the library for me to tell about the Whites," Ruminski recalled.

He expected maybe 30 people would show up, but got a crowd of 150.

"I did the same presentation a few weeks later only to find seven White relatives in my audience," he said.

The White relatives both asked and answered ques-



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**Dan Ruminski is a historian and storyteller.**

tions after his 45-minute talk — a scenario that has become common in the dozens of other presentations he's now given throughout Northeast Ohio.

"When I tell a story, old-timers often come up to me afterwards to share things that are never in the records or history books," he said.

It has resulted in random information and archives that help Ruminski make his talks even more engaging.

After telling those early stories about the White family, Ruminski learned that Gates Mills Mayor Connie White is the widow of one White descendant and that Thomas Vail, onetime publisher of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, is the grandson of Windsor White.

He's learned why Walter White was awarded France's highest medal for his services to the country during World War I and how Laura May Corrigan, scorned by her neighbors in Wickliffe, became fast friends with Queen Elizabeth's mother.

He shares both little-known tidbits and major discoveries about people who once lived here and shaped the area for all time.

In his stories of the decades between 1885 and 1929, he tells of a local woman who was as well known then as Donald Trump is now and why half the world's millionaires lived in Cleveland.

Now Ruminski, who is 67, has added "storyteller" to



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**Today it serves as administrative offices and student dining for Hawken Upper School, but early in the last century the Walter White mansion was the center of a 1,000-acre estate and home for the White Motors executive. It inspired Dan Ruminski, who lives on what once was part of the estate, to become a storyteller about people and places here between 1889 and 1929.**

vocations that include a stint teaching government, history and economics at Gilmour Academy, where he also served as basketball coach.

He also might be considered both an inventor and an industrialist, since his inventions gave birth to new divisions at his Willoughby-based Martinson-Nicolls Inc., which he has owned for 30 years.

"When I was at Gilmour I was fascinated with the Tudor House there," he recalled.

The school is on the one-time estate of Francis Drury, who built the grandest house in all of Cleveland at what is now SOM Center and Cedar roads in Gates Mills. Drury manufactured the first kerosene stove in an era when everybody was still cooking

with wood. He became very wealthy thanks to help from John D. Rockefeller, who sold kerosene prior to the discovery of oil in next-door Pennsylvania. Rockefeller was another early Clevelandlander who made a fortune early in the last century.

"Drury made and gave away millions, mostly to establish educational institutions," Ruminski said.

He also donated the land to establish the Drury Theater among those under the umbrella of the Cleveland Play House, now owned by Cleveland Clinic.

Ruminski credits his own background in education with the research skills needed for his stories, which are told for about 50 minutes without any notes while he sits in a wing chair.

### Hear Ruminski

■ Millionaire's Row Dinner and talk about Wickliffe's mysterious connection to the movie "The King's Speech."

5 to 7 p.m. May 15 at Gavi's Restaurant, 38257 Glenn Ave., Willoughby.

\$40 includes buffet dinner.

This is a fundraiser for Pathways Inc.

Reservations: 440-942-8008.

■ Ruminski's website at [www.clevelandhistorylessons.com](http://www.clevelandhistorylessons.com) carries his schedule of storytelling engagements and lots of background about the stories he tells.

■ The News-Herald's Jim Collins also has a connection to the Walter White estate, where he and his family lived for a time when his father took care of the White family's horses. Check out his column at <http://bit.ly/jxKmWk>.

"I spend about two months researching each story, but it's different each time I tell it," he said.

He realizes that his own personal history has played a large role because stories from Cleveland's history were part of the fabric of his life as he grew up in Wickliffe.

His father worked on a crew hired to tear down the former Charles Brush mansion, one of those on Millionaire's Row, Ruminski recalled. Brush had become famous with his invention of the arc light, which he demonstrated on Public Square, paving the way for Cleveland to become the first city to become lighted in 1882.

"During the crew's lunch break, a big black limo drove up and a guy asked the job supervisor if he could go in the Brush mansion," Ruminski said, retelling his father's story. "The guy goes in and then comes back out and asks if could borrow a screwdriver. They lent him one and in a few minutes he was back out again and drives away in his limo."

"It was Henry Ford," Ruminski said. "He and Charles Brush and Thomas Edison all were good friends."

No one knows what memento Ford removed from the Brush mansion, but it appeared that his chauffeur drove him all the way from Detroit to get it.

Ruminski hopes to take his Millionaire's Row stories, which remain his most popular, a step further by establishing a virtual Millionaire's Row at the few sites still remaining along Euclid Avenue. Because Cleveland Clinic now owns The Cleveland Play House property, including the Drury Theater, this strikes Ruminski as an ideal venue to realize that dream.

"Everybody loves a good story, and these old stories have everything," he said. "I can imagine a series of flat-screen TVs to explore the mansions and an interactive function that would allow the viewer to meet John D. Rockefeller and the others."