

FACES AROUND ZEPHYRHILLS

Passionate about Zephyrhills History

By BETTY KOSSICK
Correspondent

It's hard to believe that educator Madonna Wise isn't a born Floridian. Her passion for Zephyrhills can't be hidden. For her, the town's history is obviously a sort of love affair. So much so, she's written an 800-page book entitled "Tapestry: an anthology of the history of Zephyrhills High School."

During the past 14 months, in her search to uncover pertinent and interesting facts about ZHS, she's unearthed Zephyrhills itself. Wise explains, "This is looking at our history from a particular institution—that's the lens." Her research goes all the way back to when Zephyrhills was Abbott Station and there were three one-room schoolhouses.

What sets her in place to do this mountain of research?

"I'm an educator, currently the supervisor of Guidance Counselors for Polk County. But I'm retired from the Pasco Public Schools as a teacher, principal and district administrator. I worked in every school in Zephyrhills. My first job out of college, at age 21, was with Zephyrhills High School as a History teacher.

"My husband, Ernie, has been a media specialist and biology teacher for the Pasco County Schools at the high school level for 35 years. It's been our life. In fact, we never go anywhere like grocery shopping without seeing our students."

And what qualifies her as a writer?

"In terms of writing, I do a lot of technical writing and grant writing. I do that as a sideline all the time. I've been published with professional articles," said Wise.

She's also written a unique 400-page recipe book titled "Juanita in Blue". The book is actually a family history, and the recipes are her mother's, a farmwoman who once owned a restaurant in Indiana.

In order to get the information she needed, Wise sought out the places and people that might

have the information she needed such as *Zephyrhills News*. Gary Hatrick, former News Editor wished her well as she dug in. Thus, she explored the newspaper archives, including the predecessors of the current journal that were named *The Zephyrhills Colonist* and *The Pasco Free Press*. Carolyn Falls at the Pioneer Museum in Dade City was also helpful as she went through their files. Then there was the microfilm at both the Zephyrhills and Dade City libraries.

Margaret Seppanen at the Zephyrhills Depot Museum also assisted her in the search.

"And, Irene Dobson, the most gracious and wonderful person, who holds the black history of this community," Wise said.

She also lists Arin Neulcom, as well as a mother and daughter team of Celia and Dedi Anderson who aided in her search.

"Gaps in my book were filled in by Lynn Timmons."

Clarene Brunty, another person passionate about ZHS, upon hearing of Wise's endeavor came to her with the idea of including the Miss Zephyrhills Pageants, starting with 1926.

"Back then, the event was sort of like a rite of passage, a coming of age and as many as 40 girls participated," Wise explains. "Almost every week Clarene had something new for me and Diane Kennedy has also been helpful to me."

The list of those who provided valuable information for Wise is lengthy.

As she speaks of her massive undertaking, she smiles all the while—and you know without a doubt that she's deeply fervent about what she's discovered in her search. She confesses to being a prolific writer—thus the size of the book.

"But this genealogy is so nice for the people to have, to connect. It's full of names, maybe 5,000."

When Wise approached Byron Kennedy, the publisher at *Southern Heritage Press*, which is printing her book, he told her the reason her book is needed.

"No one else has told this story," Wise notes. "His words were very validating to me. It's a refer-

ence type book, but it's also a storybook. By preserving these memories, I know this history will be valuable to someone," she said.

"I've included some Honor Rolls for ZHS and some newspaper gossip columns. All kinds of little things like that. Sometimes, when I looked at the micro-film, I'd have a tear in my eye or start laughing."

She also notes that her favorite historian is Ken Burns, a documentary maker.

"I've tried to capture his approach with what is mostly an anthology."

Wise notes that her husband is very supportive of the long hours she put in preparing the book. She says that he enjoys the stories that he's learning about Zephyrhills past, too. She's almost finished with getting it ready for press and is planning for a 2008 publication.

"I feel like an explorer, Wise says. "That's why I always enjoyed history. I'm on an expedition. I was always stimulated in the classroom as a teacher of history. I'm intrigued by people and why they do what they do."

Even so, Wise says that she tends to reinvent herself every few years. "Versatility is a big part of my life. I've worn so many different hats."

Her nose isn't always in archives as she's also an equestrian who rides horses and a driver who has a horse and buggy.

"I have a quarter horse named Lark. I do a lot of trail riding with other women in this area."

Wise and her husband are also the parents of two grown children, Jervis a lawyer and Mamie, who is in her final year of law school at Columbia University in New York City.

"Rachel is our 13-year-old at St. Anthony's in San Antonio. She, of course, keeps me very busy! When you have a child in your 40s, you don't sweat the small stuff. I parent very differently than I did in my 20s."

One of the reasons that Wise says she "love[s]" this community with a passion is because she had mentors whom she classifies as "wonderful." Raymond B. Stewart, her first boss, who was the



Madonna Wise

BETTY KOSSICK

principal at ZHS and later became a state legislator, was a source of a variety of heart-warming stories.

"I want to be sure that folks like him are remembered. So many people's stories emerged and that's how I came up with the title 'Tapestry'. All these leaders and students made up the fabric. It's hard to stop writing because I've found the most marvelous stories in my research."