See Ottawa County's first lighthouse keeper come to life at series of events

BY SHERI TRUSTY

OTTAWA COUNTY - It makes sense that historian Brian "Fox" Ellis of Peoria, Illinois, would grow up to portray a Lake Erie lighthouse keeper in historical talks. His mother was born near a tributary that runs into Lake Erie and was an avid collector of lighthouse décor. Ellis grew up in Toledo, where his father worked as a shipbuilder for the Cleveland Cliffs company.

"I'm a lifelong lover of Lake Erie and have a really personal connection to the lake," Ellis said. "My dad worked on a lot of the Great Lakes freighters that used the light. If you see a freighter with a big letter 'C' on a star welded onto a smokestack, my dad helped make that boat."

Ellis will present "A Night in the Life of a Lighthouse Keeper," based on the life of Marblehead's first lighthouse keeper, Benajah Wolcott, three times this summer as part of Ottawa County's celebration of America's 250th anniversary. Ellis will give the talk at the Port Clinton Lighthouse on Saturday, June 6, at 2 p.m.; at the South Bass Lighthouse on Put-in-Bay on Sunday, June 7, at 2 p.m.; and at Orchestra Hall in Lakeside on Monday, June 8, at 7:30 p.m.

"The idea is to give a big arc of the settlement of Ottawa County, a big arc of local history," Ellis said.

Ellis will talk about the geology of Marblehead and South Bass Island and how that geology impacted the construction of the lighthouses, and he will touch on the War of 1812 and the Battle of Lake Erie.

"A lot of it will be told through the lens of Benajah Wolcott. He has a great connection to the Revolutionary War because he enlisted at the age of 14," Ellis said.

Ellis will also discuss Wolcott's connection to American traitor Benedict Arnold and how that connection reached Ottawa County.

Ellis is a storyteller, historian, and author who has toured the world for over 40 years.

"I have been a full-time storyteller since I was 14," he said. "I've performed in 26 countries and all 50 states. I started with more traditional talks, and about 30 years ago, I started doing first-person reenactments. I do about 30 people, and many of them have direct connections to the Lake Erie region."

Ellis said he brings his family connections into his talks when he can to help his audience connect to the stories.

"It's a real immersion of history, but it's also personal," he said. "The best compliment I get is when someone tells me their family story that's connected to my talk."

Ellis will also portray President Herbert Hoover on Monday, June 15, and he will portray President John Adams on Monday, June 29, as part of the American President Series at Lakeside.

For more information on upcoming America-250 events or to download the 2026 Program Guide, visit the Ottawa County Historical Society Facebook page at www.ottawacountyhistory.org.

Brian "Fox" Ellis, shown here as President Herbert Hoover, will portray Ottawa County's first lighthouse keeper, Benajah Wolcott, at a series of America-250 events this summer. (Submitted photo)

Barnes Nursery features landscape, compost, and retail divisions and 76 years of experience

BY SHERI TRUSTY

HURON - It is unlikely that Harold Barnes could have envisioned the expansive business that Barnes Nursery would become when he started the business as Barnes Roses with his brothers in 1950. But today, 76 years later, Barnes Nursery is thriving with three divisions – landscape, compost, and retail – and garden centers in Huron and Catawba.

"My grandfather started it in 1950, and last year, we celebrated 75 years," said third generation owner, Julie Barnes Foster.

Foster operates the business with her brother, Jarret Barnes, and her parents, Bob and Sharon Barnes, are still involved in management.

The landscape division offers a wide scope of services, including design, yard cleanups, maintenance, drainage solutions, mulch and rock installation, pest control, leaf removal, and more. Barnes also offers demolition, excavation, and crane services.

Since 1993, Barnes has operated the Barnes Composting Facility on Camp Road, where staff recycles organic waste and develops amended soils, mulches, and wood chips. Unlike backyard compost piles that are occasionally tended and left to mostly develop alone, commercial composting is subject to strict EPA guidelines and requires the administration of scientific principles.

"There's a lot of chemistry to it," Foster said. "It cooks from the middle out, so there is a lot of turning piles and maintaining temperatures."

Barnes contracts with the city of Huron for curbside brush service and offers drop-off days for other local towns. The Barnes compost division benefits the environment by keeping brush from landfills, where it can produce harmful methane emissions, and by recycling brush into eco-friendly byproducts.

The Barnes retail garden centers offer a variety of products, including annuals, perennials, shrubs, trees, and lawn décor for all seasons.

"We're really known for our trees – from small potted trees to large balled-and-burlapped 15 to 20-foot shade trees," Foster said. "This time of year, we sell a lot of hanging baskets, and perennials and container gardening are popular."

In autumn, mums and other fall décor will fill the garden centers, and live Christmas trees will be available in winter. Most customers purchase cut trees, but some prefer Christmas trees that are balled and wrapped in burlap so they can be replanted after Christmas.

The Barnes Nursery family is continuing a legacy of service that began in 1950. Shown are, from left, Jarret Barnes, Sharon Barnes, Bob Barnes, and Julie Barnes Foster. (Submitted photo)

"Some people have a tradition of doing that," Foster said.

Foster is grateful she can continue her grandfather's legacy and can invest 76 years of family experience into meeting her customers' needs.

The Barnes Garden Centers are located at 3511 Cleveland Rd. W in Huron and at 1283 NE Catawba Rd. in Port Clinton. For more information, call 419-871-4086 or visit www.barnesnursery.com.

LASAGNA, *from Cover*

Oak Harbor home, so she has made deliveries in Oak Harbor, Fremont, Port Clinton, Marblehead, and Elmore.

"You can set your own schedule. That's what I love," she said.

Helton has learned tips along the way, like asking about dietary needs and preferences and whether they would like the lasagna baked or just assembled. Volunteers can use their own recipes or choose one from the Lasagna Love website. Helton often includes a salad, salad dressing, bread, and cookies, but those extras are not expected.

She has made and delivered about 25 lasagnas in the 18 months she has been volunteering, and she is hoping to encourage more people to volunteer because she sees a need in the community.

"I've only been matched twice with the same family, so that demonstrates a need," she said. "If there were more chefs in the area, maybe we could match more people."

For more information about being a volunteer or a recipient, visit www.lasagnalove.org. Locals with questions about volunteering can call Helton at 317-752-5554.

COUNSELING, *from Cover*

Bower said that counseling is the largest piece of an individual's recovery program, and attending counseling is a requirement for clients living in Light House's sober living homes. Bower said there are good counseling services available in the community, but this will give locals one more option as they navigate recovery and mental health. People living in Light House's recovery homes will not be required to choose Light House for their counseling needs.

"Counseling will be one more arm of Light House Sober Living. Housing and counseling will work independently, but they will work together," Bower said. "We're going to do things a little differently than other places by offering more services inhouse."

A secondary benefit to offering counseling services is it opens the door to eventual financial independence for Light House. Currently, the organization is funded by housing fees, the everchanging assistance of grants and donations, and financial support from the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board of Seneca, Ottawa, Sandusky and Wyandot Counties.

"We'll be able to provide services and guarantee funds. This is a financially sustainable model for Light House," Bower said.

Bower said he hopes the facility, which is located at 100 Jefferson St. in Port Clinton, will open in July. In the meantime, staff are working to take over operations of the concession stand at City Beach. The stand will sell ice cream, snacks, and beverages as a fundraiser for Light House.

Light House Sober Living Counseling Services will open a new era of recovery and mental health care in the community through a wrap-around approach to recovery assistance and with a big step toward financial self-sufficiency.

"It's our goal that people associate Light House with hope," Bower said. "If they can get in the door, we'll take it from there and help them get the help they need, whether it's here or somewhere else. We want to make sure they're set up for success. That's always been our approach."

For more information, visit the Light House Sober Living Facebook page or call 419-967-9550.

FENTON, *from Cover*

"We almost didn't process it," said his mother, April Fenton. "We thought there was a mistake."

When Mason was scheduled for surgery, doctors told him they were hoping that removing the tumor would relieve pressure on the optical nerve and his vision would improve, but there were no promises.

Mason underwent surgery to remove the tumor on Dec. 1.

Recovery was difficult. Mason, who has Becker Muscular Dystrophy, struggled to come out of the anesthetic, which is common with Becker patients, and he suffered from temporary mutism.

"He couldn't talk for a week. We had no idea how long that would last," April said.

Mason's vision declined after the surgery, and today, he is completely blind in his right eye and has about 10% vision in his left eye.

"My left eye is light sensitive, and I can see bright colors and silhouettes," Mason said.

Mason was back to school by the beginning of the year, and he switched from the Skilled Trades Academy to the Hospitality & Tourism Academy so he could continue his studies. When he graduated from the Workforce Hub on May 14, he was honored with the Phoenix award which is presented each year to a student who overcame tremendous obstacles and still reached success.

"They give it in recognition of rising above hard circumstances," April said.

The Workforce Hub staff and the Port Clinton High School staff helped Mason navigate his new life, and they are still helping. Workforce Hub hospitality teacher, Erin Steinbrick, gifted Mason braille Legos and began teaching him to read braille.

"She offered to help me this summer, too," Mason said.

When Mason began his school year, he was considering a career as a sanitation worker or an electrician, but blindness made those options impossible. So, he switched gears. Mason is currently studying to become a Certified Peer Recovery Supporter, and when he is finished, he will be employed at the Oak House, where April is executive director, and work with male youths in recovery, showing them that overcoming obstacles is possible.

Mason's life changed dramatically, but he didn't change with it. For him, obstacles are to be expected, and you don't have to let them change who you are or how you enjoy each day.

"You live, and you die," he said. "Becoming blind never really phased me."

SAUGER, *from Cover*

population thrives, the fish should reach legal harvest size for the 2028 fishing season.

The early stages of the project included a genetic study by Travis Hartman, a Lake Erie Fisheries Program Administrator for the Division of Wildlife, and other partners who researched the strongest genetic source for the project and discovered fish with healthy genetics in the Ohio River. A brood stock was collected from the Ohio River before the spawn and taken to an isolation facility at the London State Fish Hatchery where eggs and sperm were mixed for fertilization.

"We injected hormones into the females to ripen the eggs," said Division of Wildlife Hatchery Program Administrator, Joe Conroy.

The fertilized eggs were transported to the Hebron State Fish Hatchery, where they developed under the care of an inland fisheries research team and hatchery biologists. The fingerlings were then brought to the Sandusky and Maumee rivers on May 28.

Division of Wildlife staff are developing and improving their sauger hatching methods.

"It was a fairly intense six-week process. It's very dependent on conditions," Hartman said. "The goal is, after we refine the hatching process, to stock 500,000 sauger annually."

The process will be repeated for ten years with the goal that the sauger river population will then be self-sustaining. Unlike some fish that are stocked annually, it is hoped that the sauger population will thrive on its own.

"This is really a restoration project," Hartman said. "It is an effort to reestablish a native, self-sustaining population."

The once-populous sauger were heavily harvested locally in the early 1900s, and their survival was further impacted by the Ballville Dam in Fremont, which blocked spawning, and by poor water quality. Sauger were extirpated by the 1960s.

"There was a brief attempt at restoration in the 1970s, but the dam was still up and the water quality was still poor," Hartman said.

The Ballville Dam was demolished in 2018 to help restore the Sandusky River to its original, natural state, and water quality is now greatly improved. The conditions are so favorable to sauger survival that the Sandusky River was chosen as a stocking site.

"We contracted with the University of Toledo to do a habitat assessment, and they learned that the most appropriate habitat for the sauger is in the Sandusky and Maumee rivers," Hartman said.

The sauger population will expand across the Sandusky River, the Maumee River, the Sandusky Bay, and the Maumee Bay and will make its way to Lake Erie in season. One of the most exciting parts of the project for river anglers is that sauger are not seasonal fish.

"We expect sauger to stay in the river all year," Hartman said.