

Written by Henry Steiner
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To call Peter Oley an Irvington "institution" would be terribly inadequate. The word simply does not convey the energy and enthusiasm that radiates from the man.



Peter has officially retired from teaching and coaching, but the word "retired" is also misleading; in his own way he is still coaching and still teaching. Today, Peter is officially the village historian of Irvington. I spoke with him recently — historian to historian.

You don't need to ask Peter a lot of questions to get answers. Peter is a walking compendium of Irvington history and lore; speaking with him is like standing in a gale of information. Not all the information is about the distant past, he has an uncanny ability to report, chapter-and-verse, the progress, careers, triumphs, whereabouts of his beloved students and athletes. One of the most ingratiating aspects of Peter Oley is his readiness to credit the efforts and achievements of others — the successes of a motivated group of Irvingtonians in vitalizing the village historical society and the unprecedented successes of the Irvington track teams that Peter has coached. We met in front of the newly restored Irvington History Center, near the top of Main Street.

As we talked Peter freely mixed information about local history and news of his athletes. He has countless success stories and updates on the athletes. Together they have amassed an impressive record — 133 consecutive wins in dual meets since 1995, an outstanding achievement. Five Irvington students are now at West Point, a surprising representation given the size of the school district. Peter proudly mentioned that Irvington has become the state champion in producing scholar/athletes with the highest grade-point average. There is a large turnout for track, 150 girls and boys from grade school through high school. Peter coached all three of his children in track — to many parents this may be the most impressive statistic of all!

Peter was born in 1933 and moved to the Tarrytown area at the age of eight. His mother taught at North Tarrytown High School where Peter excelled as a runner. Now, once a year, Irvington hosts the Doc Rasbeck Relays, dedicated to Peter's charismatic North Tarrytown High School coach. Coach Oley was active in the Boy Scouts as a youth, and after high school he served in the Navy; in 1968 and 1969, he was the director of Westchester County Camps. His coaching career started in 1957, during which he served as the Section One Cross Country Chairman from 1960-1989. All tolled, he coached fifty seasons before retiring from coaching this year.

I asked Peter how his teams had become so successful. He stressed the value of tradition, the continuity of leadership, and the importance of valuing both the team and the individual. What is the secret ingredient? "It's not a secret," he said. "Passion. It's about allowing yourself to give your all."

It seems unlikely that Peter will ever really leave teaching and coaching behind him — one of his athletes interrupted a summer training run to see him during our interview. Peter is now the village historian, and village history has been another passion for many years. His new office is

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on the second floor of 131 Main Street. In 2002 the Village of Irvington bought the old McVickar house, and after three years of donations and volunteerism, the new Irvington History Center emerged.

The McVickar House is a mid-nineteenth-century dwelling and the second oldest in the business district of the village — the oldest is the Dearman farmhouse, which stands directly across the street. The McVickar House was built in 1853; it has been lovingly transformed into a home for the historical society. The basement features a children's center, the first floor — a roomy exhibit gallery, the second floor offers space for collections, research, and offices, and the top floor is a dedicated workspace. The finished building is very fine and inviting; the restoration was completed in November of 2005. A large portion of the historical society's collection is housed separately at the society's archive on Bridge Street.

The society, headed by its president, Betsy Wilson, has already featured an exhibit on the art of needlework, handcraft, and weaving, mounted by curator, Barbara Sciulli. Currently, the first-floor gallery features a rich exhibit highlighting the career of coach Peter Oley. The visitor will see an impressive array of mementos and photographs. Soon to come will be an exhibit on the old Main Street pharmacy that dated from the 1870s.

The society enjoys support from the descendants of many early Irvington celebrities. Members of the Cyrus Field family have donated artifacts such as a length of the first trans-Atlantic cable and the blanket that kept an ancestor warm on fifty cruises, as he linked the New World with the old.

As we ascended the stairs together, Peter rattled off the family history of one old village family. We discussed the old Odell Tavern, which is privately owned and recently underwent some restoration by artisans from Lyndhurst. He also credited the research and writings of other historians within the society, "We have thirty historians," he said.

The History Center was buzzing when I met with Peter in July. The society issues a regular newsletter, *The Roost*, and the current issue includes an article by Peter Oley on Civil War figure, General Samuel Thomas, who lived in Irvington. The First Annual House Tour of historic homes in June met with outstanding success. (Note: The center has hours between 1:00 and 4:00, Thursdays and Saturdays. It can be contacted by phone at 914-591-1020.)

With his new, village historian's office at the McVickar House, Peter is as close to the center of Irvington life as ever. Some of his earliest students have already retired from business, and he will in due course have plenty of fresh history to write about.

Henry Steiner is the village historian of Sleepy Hollow and a writer on people and history.