

The Citizen and History by Robert Schuldenfrei, October 2020

Ever since a Spanish cave dweller, over 64,000 years ago, drew an image of a human hand on the wall, people have recorded the essence of their being. “This is me, and here I am.” This short essay is the result of an e-mail exchange between Kathryn Ostrofsky and me in September 2020. It started as a simple request. Ms. Ostrofsky is the archivist and librarian of the Dedham Historical Society and Museum. Note that until recently, the Dedham Historical Society (DHS) was its name. She found my e-mail address and asked me if an author could use some of my photographs in the museum’s collections. Of course, I granted copyright permission. The conversation continued over the next few days.

In the next message, Kathryn thanked me for the release and thanked me for documenting Dedham in my photos from the last quarter of the 20th century. I lived in town from 1978 until I retired in 2005 and moved to Palm Beach, FL. To make a living, I was a computer programmer and software company owner. However, my passion was, and still is, amateur historian and photographer. I have taken pictures ever since childhood and joined discussion groups interested in history. It was natural to join the Dedham Historical Society when my wife and I moved into town.

Shortly after joining, DHS administrator Ron Frazier asked me if I would be the organization’s photographer. To sweeten the deal, Ron offered the use of the darkroom. This was an offer I could not refuse. I did not want to build such a facility in my home as photo-graphic chemicals have a very sour smell. My career did not allow me to pursue photography during the day. My end of the bargain was to take pictures for the DHS and make prints of the glass plate negatives on file in the library.

Returning to the e-mail exchange, I posted a message explaining that I am currently writing a book for the 50th anniversary of my sailing club. The title of this volume is *Spinning the Yarn, History of the Hillsboro Inlet Sailing Club*. It is a work-in-progress, but it is on the club’s website. I invited Kathryn to look at the first chapter to understand why it is crucial to record and study history. What did she find there? She found a two-thousand-year-old quote from Marcus Tullius Cicero. “History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life and brings us tidings of antiquities.” However, Kathryn saw a deeper meaning in my first chapter. Here was her reaction, as she explained in her next e-mail message to me. “What an interesting story – thank you for sharing it! It is definitely a good model to share with our members – it’s so helpful to demonstrate that one doesn’t have to write an entire memoir in order to say something of historical interest, which may be an intimidating task, but that one can focus on a particular theme or anecdote.”

These few pages represent a plea, by example, how a mere citizen, not a historian, can contribute to history writ large. It is the fall of 2020, the year of the Coronavirus pandemic, as I take pen to paper (or really fingers to keyboard). At age 77, I am in the autumn of my life. My image library contains 8,500 color slides and 3,000 black and white negatives, plus too many electronic photos to count. The earliest of these dates back to 1950 when I was seven years old, and my mother gave me her old folding camera. One of the first shots I took was a small waterfall near my home. I gazed in awe how this primitive instrument “froze” the water. Right then and there, I learned the most important lesson of the visual arts; it’s all about seeing. Even as a kid, I knew what I wanted the final product to show, falling water, and had the snapshot in my mind days before I held the black and white picture in my hand. I am no ancient cave dweller nor the second coming of Ansel Adams, but this is me, a seven-year-old, and this is how I perceive the world around me.

From that day in 1950 until today, I continue to record my life centered on the fantastic world surrounding me. In the fall of 1980, a spectacular autumn day was caused by a high-pressure system that had moved over Dedham the previous night. You know what that means; clear air and deep blue skies. I grabbed my Nikon and



The Distant Goal

second, and pertinent to this story, it documents the town of Dedham. Here is this plot of land at the end of the 20th century. Just like Fisher Ames wrote about the weather and traffic on his farm, 250 years earlier, it is an instant in time and space recorded for citizens yet to be born generations from now.

Digging a touch deeper, consider my third level of abstraction. The title of this picture is *The Distant Goal*. On the surface, the title accurately describes the scene, a soccer goalpost as viewed from afar. Consider, if you will, the expanding explanation. In my profession, programmer, one must deal with tiny little steps as instructions for the machine. You must always maintain a focus on what the program must do, the distant goal. This image is a metaphor for my vocation, but we must not stop there. It equally well describes my career in its entirety. I started out writing programs for other people in the late 1960s. However, I always wanted to own my own company. When the opportunity came in 1981, I took the ball and ran with it. That goal was very distant in 1966, but it was in sight.

Now we should expand this story of spiral development one more turn. From job to career, we add one more rotation; to life. Like the fact that I am not a famous photographer, I am not the reincarnation of Steve Jobs or Bill Gates. My company allowed me a nice living and a grand retirement, so it should be considered a success. I certainly do. Return with me back to when I was seven and looking at that waterfall. I had no clue where life would take me, but I always had a vision of that distant goal. Goals kept changing, but there continuously was one as I kept moving from the foreground into the midfield to pursue and score the objective.

This second tale is more to the point of the Dedham Historical Society and Museum. You will remember Ron Frazier's bargain. I offered to take on photographic assignments for the society. One day I got a call from him asking me to do a magazine cover shot. The National District Attorneys Association had called to explain that they were publishing a new magazine. The inaugural issue would feature a story about the Norfolk County Court House in Dedham. Could they have an image for their new journal? Ron asked me to do it, and I said I would give it a try.

From the photographer's point of view, this image was a tad tricky. First, it is hard to back up far enough to capture the whole building. Next, telephone wires and other unwanted obstructions were crowding the scene. Finally, the cover of the magazine forced this picture to the proportions you see depicted here. In the end, I was pleased with the shot, as was Ron, and most importantly, so was the association.



Norfolk County Courthouse

headed out for a ten-mile photographic safari. I left my home at 32 Ridley Road and headed down Route 109, High Street. As I crossed the bridge over the Charles River, I took a few pictures of the river bank and two men fishing from a rowboat. Continuing my stroll, I turned onto Campus Drive leading to Noble and Greenough School. A small footnote, my daughter Rachel was born that April 1980, and years later, she would be a Nobles student. Of the many images I made that day; this one is a winner.

It works on many levels. First, it is a pretty picture and one of my favorites. On that basis alone, it has been reproduced many times in my writings and hung, framed, on my office wall. Sec-

What should you conclude from this small essay? We have the technology to record and retain the words, thoughts, and images of everyone. We have this gift at no cost or low cost. We should save these ideas for ourselves and ensure their retention even after we are gone. I “burn” my computer files, like this story, on CDs because the pits in polycarbonate plastic will last longer than any magnetic media. Remember, after you are gone, your cloud storage will vanish like morning fog in the heat of the noonday sun. If you can, write books and donate your artifacts to organizations with a vested interest in preserving the past. I cannot guarantee that your thoughts, words, and images will last as long as the writings of Cicero, but it is worth a try.