

Ellis Little

Ellis Little knew that the Old Log Schoolhouse in Waterloo Park had a rough plank floor made from wood sawed at Abraham Erb's mill. He wrote about local men who made bricks from hand and dried them in the sun before setting them ablaze. There is a Russian Mennonite bishop named Jacob Janzen, in Little's papers, who held worship services in the building that is now Harmony Lunch in downtown Waterloo.



These are just three of the thousands of historical facts found in the Ellis Little Papers at the Waterloo Public Library. The library's local history room was named after the distinguished historian in 2003 to honour the man who devoted so much of his time to researching and writing about the city's history.

The Ellis Little Papers contain files on everything from the early history of Erb Street, to the city's first butcher, and fun at Silver Lake in Waterloo Park.

Little's gift was curiosity and, thankfully, his passion was sharing this knowledge. This devotion earned him the name Mr. History.

"His time spent at the library went too quickly, he would always say when he arrived home," his wife Margaret once wrote.

Little was born in Perth County and graduated from the Stratford Teacher's College before settling in Waterloo to teach history and geography at several local schools. He also served as principal at Alexandra and Elizabeth Ziegler public schools. After retiring in 1979, he devoted much of his time to researching local history collections, reading – sometimes three non-fiction books at a time – and writing.

While his diligent work produced hundreds of historical pieces, it was also his personality that made him memorable. "He was always gracious, pleasant, interested and happy to be working away in the local history collection for a couple of hours each week," recalled Janet Seally, the local history librarian. During a ceremony to officially name the local history room after Little, Seally added that Mr. Little was "one of our most popular visitors" among staff.

On another occasion Seally noted that Little was a "consummate researcher and pulled the various pieces of information together to form a whole picture."

The papers he wrote are often written in hand, others on a typewriter, and some notes are on recipe cards. He kept relevant newspaper clippings and copies of minutes of various councils and committees where heritage issues were discussed. In all, there are 101 separate files containing hundreds of documents. While many are in point form, Little

used his gift for storytelling to lend context to the historical facts. He wrote eloquent essays on everything from the need for a tourist train in Waterloo, to the life of Clair Creek conservationist Bud Clair.

Little interviewed Clair in 1991 and recorded fascinating stories about Clair's life in the first part of the last century. One story was particularly amusing – a tale about how a teenaged Clair earned money at the Silver Thread Sauerkraut Factory in Waterloo by stamping on cut cabbage in his bare feet.

In 1987, the beloved historian left the relative comfort of his local library and set off on a 28 kilometre hike from Cambridge to Galt. Little, who was 62-years-old at the time, wanted to walk in the footsteps of John Galt who, 160 years before had made the journey to found the settlement at Guelph. "I've read so much about it, I can visualize what it must have been like," Little said at the time.

Little won the Waterloo Award in 2000, an honour given to residents who have contributed to the community without thought of personal gain. Two years later he received an award from the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

In 2002 Ellis Little became ill. Before passing away in 2004, library staff held a ceremony in his hospital room to mark the naming of the local history room after him. During the small ceremony Janet Seally said, "We want to thank you for your contributions to the City of Waterloo, for your quiet, persistent efforts in keeping its history alive."

Photo courtesy of Margaret Little