

Giving the gift of Kent history

By David Dix
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My most successful Christmas gift this year, in terms of return on investment, was, “Kent, Ohio: Then & Now,” Henry Halem’s wonderful volume of photos that show vistas of Kent as they look now versus how they looked way back when.

My siblings and I keep whatever we give one another for Christmas presents at less than \$20 apiece. At \$17, Henry’s book fit the bill, so I trotted over to the Kent Historical Society and purchased copies for my five siblings, including Geoff Thompson, who’s been part of the Dix family since 1959 after his parents had died.

My older brother, Bob, responded immediately from Florida, where he and his wife, Nancy, reside much of the year. He was most excited by the photos of the Kent Block that burned down in 1972 and left an ugly eyesore for several years when Kent, floundering after the May 4, 1970 shootings and the demolition caused by the construction of Haymaker Parkway, hit rock bottom.

Hometown Bank rescued the remains of the Kent Block by buying it. Hometown’s president, Howard Boyle, had the vision to turn it into a beautiful urban park.

My brother shared good memories of the old Standard Drug store on the corner in the Kent Block where they had a soda counter. Standard Drug served up a drink called a phosphate, a concoction that was tasty, but probably not that good for us. He recalled Standard Drug as a meeting point for classmates in 7th and 8th grades.

Church steeples on Gougler

Geoff Thompson, whose father, Will, chaired KSU’s Chemistry Department, and whose mother, Myra, was a contributing writer for the New York Times, emailed me from Mountain View, Calif. He

was curious about the cover photo of the three church steeples along what is now Gougler Avenue.

His parents were not regular churchgoers but would have been most comfortable at the Universalist-Unitarian Church if they did attend. Geoff recognized its steeple and the one belonging to the old Congregational Church that R.W. Martin and Sons has restored and uses as its headquarters Disclaimer

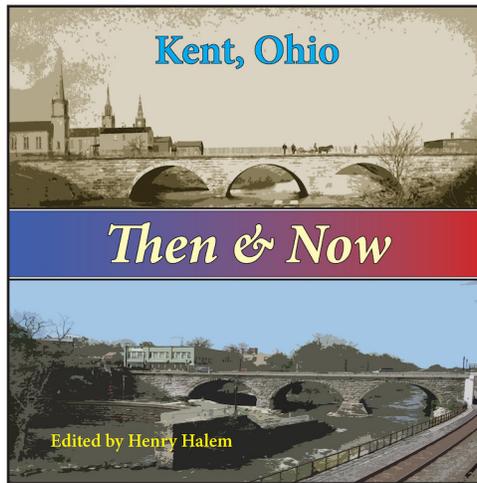
I told Geoff that the steeple in

the middle belonged to the Disciples of Christ church, my information coming from Editor Roger Di Paolo, whom Henry credits along with his wife, Sandy, and Bob Springer for their editorial support.

The photo credits are too many to completely list here, but Brad Bolton, who played an important role helping Henry create the “Then & Now” exhibition at the Kent Historical Society needs to be mentioned. That exhibition was the inspiration for Henry’s handsome book.

Photos stir memories

The photos in “Then & Now” are first-rate. The page devoted to the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad/Erie Depot that escaped demolition thanks to the Kent Historical Society reminds one of downtown Kent’s turnaround that began in the 1970s. Handsome-



ly restored, it has housed The Pufferbelly Ltd. for 35 years. The site is soon to morph into an upscale Italian restaurant, a venture backed by Mike Awad, Mike Beder, and Ron Burbick, a trio who have done so much to make Kent's rejuvenation possible.

The book's photos remind one of the potential for the building that now houses Huntington Bank. Its handsome brick facade was covered with a frame that holds green sheets of plastic, a modernization look in keeping with the 1960s when it occurred, but one no longer esteemed by preservationists who believe returning buildings to their original look is the way to go.

The late Dick Wiland, of W.W. Reed, and the late Paul Beck, president of what was once Kent National Bank and later Portage National Bank, were longtime pals. Dick had an irreverent streak and was one of the few who in Paul's dignified presence, could get away with calling the building that in 1973 became a branch of Huntington Bank, "the green monster."

Younger set likes book, too

There are so many memories in "Then & Now" for anyone who grew up in Kent or knows the city well. The South Water Street entrance to the former McCrory's 5 and 10-cent Store, which stood adjacent to what is now Don and Karen Barrett's City Bank Antiques, was where preteen youngsters would hang out to look at all the neat toys. McCrory's main entrance was on East Main Street.

I remember the handsome Charles B. Kent home that was surrounded by Young's Garage that eventually became the Firestone Compete Auto Care. Scenes from the Williams Bros. Mill, an iconic Kent landmark, spur good memories. Kline's Market, now Sue Nelson Designs, is in the book. The diner that occupied the corner of the block that Fairmont's Randy Ruttenberg and his team turned into the handsome office building now occupied by Ametek, Smithers Oasis and the Davey Tree Expert Co. is well represented.

Those who know Kent will discover their own

memories in "Then & Now." Our two sons, Chris and Tim, like so many of their age, tend to read off their smart phones and laptops so the history books I give them at Christmas time do not always rate.

Henry's book easily passed that younger generation test, however. Departing for their homes in North Carolina and California Wednesday, both boys, I noticed, had packed their copies of "Then & Now" in their belongings.