

Floridian Bill Dreggors Enjoys the Pursuit of History, Sometimes Catching Up With It

By Bill Baab

Happiness for some people is the pursuit of history. Just ask 80s-something William J. (Bill) Dreggors, or do it yourself and check out the fruits of his passion in DeLand and Volusia County, Florida.

“Guess I got my historical interest from my father, who was born and raised in this county,” explained Dreggors, seated comfortably in a chair at the DeLand Memorial Hospital Museum. “Someone would be building a house and we’d ride out on a Sunday afternoon to check it out.” Dreggors also portrays the original Father Christmas (Santa Claus) during the Christmas holidays and city founder Henry DeLand and other pioneers at other times.

On Dec. 27, 1887, the first street lights in DeLand were turned on. John B. Stetson (for whom Stetson University in DeLand was named) was a personal friend of Thomas Edison, who gave Stetson the fourth generator Edison’s company ever built. Stetson used it to illuminate the downtown area with three street lights as well as his personal DeLand home, giving the City of DeLand the first electrical system in the state of Florida.

On shelves in front of a window behind Dreggors in the museum are glistening, colorful rows of glass insulators, all part of a collection he started during the 1960s. Collecting and digging for antique bottles, especially in the salt water marshes used as dumping grounds by St. Augustine, Fla., residents, claimed his early attention until finding a two-piece, sun-colored amethyst Hemingray insulator in that same area.

He joined the Florida Power Company after being discharged from the U.S. Navy in 1946 to begin a 42-year career that ended June 28, 1988. He also began concentrating on collecting all things insulators. Unable to attend the inaugural National Association of Insulator Collectors show, he did attend the second held in Oklahoma, “and I nearly died of the heat!” He also attended many of the national events that followed wherever they were held.

While hunting mule deer in Montana, he found a batch



Bearded Bill Dreggors sits in front of a colorful window display of antique insulators. (Bea Baab photo)

of electric meters (the power company there was upgrading equipment). He was able to pack four to a box and shipped them all back to DeLand. All are mounted on a wall in a room inside the museum, which houses eight galleries and exhibits.. Those include the Bert Fish Room, an operating room replica, an apothecary exhibit, the veterans gallery and ice and electric exhibit. An adjacent Burgess Building houses the Hawtense Conrad Elephant Fantasyland, the West Volusia Black Heritage Gallery and Conrad’s Toyland.. All are worth a visit.



Meters mounted on the wall found by Bill Dreggors while hunting mule deer in Montana. (Bea Baab photo)

In 1994, the museum building (on the National Register of Historic Places) and the site on which it sits was dedicated by the DeLand City Commission and named for William J. “Bill” Dreggors in honor of his historical contributions to the city of DeLand and Volusia County and his knowledge of Florida’s history.

Glass drawer pulls, Dreggors said, were among the first insulators. In his vast collection is a round-top insulator used as a castor on the station master’s chair at the DeLeon Springs railroad depot. “After the insulators wore down from the chair being pushed back and forth on the floor, the man who did the telegraph work at the station would swap them with linemen for other round-topped ones. The station master was a friend of mine and when the station closed during the 1960s, he gave me one of the insulators from that chair,” Dreggors said.

A transformer squirrel guard – something all of us could use to protect our transformers from suicidal squirrels – also is in the collection.

One rarity is a black glass threadless insulator manufactured by the H.C. Fry Glass Co., of Rochester, Pa. Another is a tree insulator that could be screwed into a tree trunk or branch. The largest insulator in the collection was a heavyweight made by Pyrex in 1933.



Author Bill Baab in front of one of several massive display cases showing off Dreggors' collection. (Bea Baab photo)

The collection has been willed to Dreggors' granddaughter who, he said, will keep it in the museum. At the time of our visit during Thanksgiving week last year, Effie Powers was the knowledgeable docent at the museum, located at 230 North Stone Street. Visiting hours are 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday and there is no admission fee. However, donations are accepted and appreciated. A side visit to the Henry A. DeLand House at 137 West Michigan Ave., home to



Here's yet another display case filled to overflowing with insulators and related electric equipment. (Bea Baab photo)

the West Volusia Historical Society, also is recommended. It is open from noon to 4 p.m., on Wednesday through Saturday.

While at the museum, visitors ought to purchase a copy of *Hot Sand and Sandspurs*, the autobiography of Bill Dreggors, an entertaining little book transcribed by Elysha Dunagan from notes and dictation from Bill. She describes it as "... the hijinks of a fourth generation cracker," Florida Cracker, that is.




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