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FEATURED

Film about local legend of Keys history to premier

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Tavernier resident Jerry Wilkinson is the subject of a short documentary titled 'Adventures in History,' which premieres Friday at the College of the Florida Keys' Key Largo campus.

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KEY LARGO — A documentary short will premier Friday, Dec. 3, at the College of the Florida Keys' Key Largo campus. The subject: a man who has watched the Keys evolve over the decades and worked tirelessly to preserve their history.

The film, dubbed "Adventures in History," is about Tavernier resident Jerry



Wilkinson, who has been president of the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys since about 1990. It documents his relentless efforts to locate thousands of photos, documents and records about the Keys' past.

The film screening will also feature a book signing of Wilkinson's most recent work, "Historic Lighthouses of the Florida Keys," which he co-wrote with Laura Albritton, the producer of the film.

Wilkinson, 93, came to Key West in 1947 and joined the Air Force. After 23 years he retired and moved to Key Largo. He bought a house around 1988 and met a longtime resident named Katharine "K" Wilkinson (no relation).

"She was an early Conch lady," Wilkinson said. "I learned so much about the Keys, I was interested anyway. I had been playing around amateurly with Keys history."

"K" Wilkinson was then the president of the Upper Keys Historical Preservation Society, and Jerry began driving her to the meetings.

"Next thing I knew, I was the president of it. And I still am. I haven't given it up," Wilkinson said.

Wilkinson became a resident expert on Keys history and began traveling the state and country to track down tidbits of information and text. It began, he said, when

he was invited by David Whitney, founder of the Florida Keys Free Press (originally the Islamorada Free Press) in 1987, to write an article about the former Planter community, where “K” Wilkinson first lived in 1934. When Jerry went to research the article, he was unable to find much historical information at the Upper Keys libraries, so he was forced to drive the Key West and photocopy articles to bring back up.

“I just thought having to go to Key West to write an article on Keys history is ridiculous,” he said.

After a while, he had a vertical file of Keys historical information. He finished his article, which ran in one of the Free Press’ early editions, “and it just went from there.”

Through the decades of searching, Wilkinson bought his own copy machine to use at home and said he has amassed around 7,500 historical photos of the Keys. Albritton, however, said the number might be closer to 10,000.

Wilkinson said his focus remained mostly on “printed history,” photos, documents and news clippings.

“My particular thing was trying to preserve written history. Stories of people who were here originally. The Parkers and Pinders and ‘K’ Wilkinson for that matter,” he

said.

He collected newspapers from all over the southeastern U.S., he said. His collection now resides in the Keys History and Discovery Center in an upstairs research library named in his honor.

“Fortunately I got all of them out of my house before (Hurricane) Irma, into a building that’s not going to get washed away by a hurricane,” he said.

One aspect of Wilkinson’s research has been a focus on Henry Flagler’s railroad, which allowed what was then unprecedented access to travel between the Keys and the mainland. Flagler was an oil and railroad tycoon who was an associate of John D. Rockefeller. Flagler’s railroad was heavily damaged and then removed after the Labor Day hurricane in 1935, one of the most destructive hurricanes in U.S. history.

Wilkinson met with the Krome family, whose father, William J. Krome, had been the designer of the railroad. Slowly gaining access, Wilkinson made copies of all of the Krome materials detailing the time period and the railroad’s construction. Fortunately for modern historians, the railway got plenty of publicity at the time.

“He didn’t have a press problem,” Wilkinson said of Flagler. That was due to him owning seven newspapers, including the Florida Times-Union, and providing financing to others, such as the Key West Citizen.

When asked what she believed the most important or impressive part of Wilkinson’s collection is, Albritton said the diaries of William Krome.



“If we didn’t have these scrapbooks from William Krome, we would not know certain things today,” Albritton said.

Even though Wilkinson had success in preserving written and photographed history, he said, “I preserved very little physically.” He saw many buildings and landmarks over the years, older ones with historical significance, taken down. Developers and home-builders, he said, “just had way too much money and power.” Some houses were taken down after having sat unoccupied for years.

“I would have loved to save the structure to say ‘this is the house that so and so lived in,’” Wilkinson said.

Wilkinson began to work on books with his history group’s vice president, Brad Bertelli, who Wilkinson said is more savvy than he is when it came to dealing with book publishers. Things sort of came together in a convenient way, Wilkinson said. He found the right people. He said he didn’t have a ton of money, but being retired, he had the time.

“It was kind of serendipity, I guess,” he said.

In the making of the film, Albritton, who has known and worked with Wilkinson for a few years now, said she learned that his wife, Mary Lou, was also an “integral”

part of the historical projects.

“That comes out in the film I think,” she said.

She began to notice how humorous the two are together in the making of the film as well.

“Jerry has a very wry sense of humor,” she added.

The new book will be the fourth collaboration between Wilkinson and Albritton. She had the idea to make a film about him about four years ago before “life and then Irma got in the way.” Then during the pandemic, the idea resurfaced and the roughly 20-minute film was completed.

“Knowing him, I thought he’d be a wonderful subject. He’s led a colorful and interesting life. I call him the pied piper of Florida Keys history,” she said.

Indeed, Wilkinson’s work has inspired many. Bertelli, for one, has taken to writing and documenting Florida Keys history himself.

“Jerry was my mentor for a decade and I will always be grateful for his impact on my life,” Bertelli said. “I met him when I was working on my first book, ‘Snorkeling Florida.’ While I was doing research, every dive captain and local had their own

story about how this reef was named and I got curious and began looking into the local history. I wrote some sketches of the local history and sent them to Jerry via email. It was a blind email as we had never met. I just wanted his opinion because I had learned he was a local historian. From there, we met every week to talk history for years.”

A synopsis of the film says that it “reflects on the importance of unearthing history and the unlikely quest of a single man.” Other Wilkinson colleagues also participated in the film and speak to his storied efforts.

“Jerry Wilkinson is a national treasure, I think, a Keys treasure for the repository of history that he has to share,” said Sally Bauer of Islamorada’s History of Diving Museum in a trailer of the film.

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