

Local legend Igo visits with historians

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By Sarah Snyder
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John Igo recalls his parents dropping him off at a storyteller's house in lieu of a babysitter's. It was the first carpeted floor he could remember. The storyteller, a Mr. Bearing, sat in a giant wicker chair amid Igo and the other children present.

If a child became tired or bored, he would just "tilt over and sleep on the carpet," Igo recollected.

"Every time they came back I was still wide awake, regardless. And he (Bearing) talked," Igo said. "Endless stories, stories, stories. All folk stories. He wasn't telling jokes. He wasn't telling us about Peter Rabbit."

At a recent meeting of the Helotes Historical Society, Igo regaled a meager crowd with his own tales.

After two hours, nobody was even close to tipping to the floor.

The 81-year-old retired professor, writer, playwright, theater critic, civic volunteer and public figure has spent his entire life in Northwest Bexar County. A public library on Kyle Seale Parkway is named after him; you can actually call him on a Monday morning to request a personal tour of the site that afternoon.

Igo's mother's descended from the Wollers, Bavarian stonemasons who have been in the region for more than 140 years. Igo says there was once a rental receipt that proved residency prior to 1867, but the scrap of paper was lost in the aftermath of an aunt's death.

Igo says his great-grandmother complained that the trip from the Texas coast to San Antonio was worse than from Europe to the Texas coast, and that the Bavarians chose the Hill Country because it looked familiar.

"This was more like their home than anywhere else because of the hills, because of the creeks, because of the small culverts," Igo said. "It was green and they must have arrived at the right time; the flowers, the creeks were flowing between the hills. They chose this to be their home."

The Wollers helped build St. Joseph's and St. Henry's Catholic churches in San Antonio and Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Helotes. His mother would later help demonstrate that the Helotes Catholic Cemetery belongs to the "Catholic people of Helotes," not the church.

Igo kept his audience in stitches by telling them of a postmistress who allegedly looked at people's mail, brought to the settlement in a cart drawn by a mule wearing a straw hat.

Two of his aunts married into the area's historical Marnoch family, and two more would have if the parents hadn't forbidden it over concerns that it would overcomplicate the family tree.

Igo recalled getting his hair cut by Pete, the same guy who cut his father's hair. The man's barber shop was burned down because he wouldn't lower his prices at the request of the local barber's union, said Igo, who followed Pete to another barber shop.

"I said, 'If people are going to be burning you out and you need to protect yourself, I am available,'" Igo said. "I have a double-barreled shotgun … and I will sit in the barber shop, if you want me to, with my shotgun, and they will pay the penalty."

Pete never asked, so Igo never delivered, he said. After Pete passed on, Igo frequented Ella's Barber & Beauty Salon. It was there that he learned that his grandmother and salon namesake Ella Dunford's were sisters.

"I keep telling her, 'We are successful because it is genetic,'" he quipped.

Igo graduated from Trinity University and taught English at San Antonio College for 45 years. He has published 12 books of poetry, written 25 plays, was a radio personality at one time and has received countless local to global accolades, including an Emmy in the 1980s.

The rustic John Igo Library sits at 13330 Kyle Seale Parkway on a 24-acre site near the intersection of Hausman and Woller roads, on a portion of the former Woller Ranch.