

SIUE Chancellor Revisits Edwardsville's History with SJ Morrison



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Located in the third oldest city in the state, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is enhanced by the overwhelming history and vitality connected to its surrounding community.

On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show that discusses the idea and issues on campus and beyond, Chancellor Randy Pembroke, looks back at Edwardsville's history with SJ Morrison, director of marketing and planning for Madison County Transit, and Ward Four Alderman for the City of Edwardsville.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, May 13, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

In 2002, Morrison received his Bachelor of Arts in mass communications from SIUE. He stays connected to the University as a past president of the SIUE Alumni Association and was the past chair for the Edwardsville/SIUE Destination Committee. Recently, he was awarded the Kimmel Community Service Award from the SIUE Kimmel Student Involvement Center.

According to Pembroke, Morrison is constantly on the lookout for ways to improve the city for its residents, as well as for many of SIUE's students, faculty and staff members who call Edwardsville their home. He is a volunteer for many different organizations and boards, including the Edwardsville Rotary Criterium Festival and Bike Race, Friends of the Wildey Theatre, the Edwardsville Beautification and Tree Commission, and many other groups.

"If people are visiting Edwardsville and ask you about architecture, old housing or streets not to miss, what are some of the things you like to tell them?" Pembroke inquires.

"Edwardsville is the third oldest city in the state of Illinois," Morrison says. "As a result, we have a lot of old neighborhoods, including the Historic St. Louis Street Association and the LeClaire National Historic District. Our downtown area has held up over the years and recently has had a bit of a facelift."

St. Louis Street, in particular, features historic homes built in the 1850s and '60s until the 1920s. A series of two and three-story Victorian homes adorned with captivating architectural features line the street.

"I always encourage visitors to take a drive, or better yet, a bike ride or a walk, down St. Louis Street when they come to town," Morrison says. "Right now, it's under a bit of a renovation as

we're working to resurface the street and put in a new sidewalk. It's become one of our primary entrance points into the community, especially from the SIUE campus.

"Every single house has a story, and we're excited to tell our visitors about them!"

"Let's talk a bit about LeClaire," Pembroke says. "Does that have somewhat of a French background?"

"Sort of!" Morrison exclaims. "It is named after Maison LeClaire and was an interesting social experiment of sorts that was tied to a factory town.

"A plumbing manufacturer named N. O. Nelson came from St. Louis to set up what he would consider an ideal community where people could work in factories that looked like a college campus. His factories had large windows, and even had some of the first ventilation systems and sprinkler systems in the country.

"Beyond that, the well-being of his staff was important to him. He wanted his staff to own their own homes, for those homes to have yards, and for his staff to be educated and culturally enriched. So, from 1890 to 1934, there was a wonderful little enclave south of Edwardsville that was its own little city. I'm fortunate that my great-grandparents settled there, and I'm a child of LeClaire myself!"

LeClaire was annexed to the city of Edwardsville in 1934, but a lot of those values in the community still remain prominent. Lewis and Clark Community College's N.O. Nelson campus is housed in the old manufacturing building, and the former LeClaire Academy is now home to the Edwardsville Children's Museum.

The city of Glen Carbon came along a bit later, Morrison states. Edwardsville was founded in 1819, and Glen Carbon was incorporated in 1892. LeClaire and Edwardsville grew so quickly due in part to the proximity to the local railroad tracks.

"It became natural for our cities' growth, and where there were jobs, residents closely followed," Morrison says."

Later in the episode, Morrison and Pembroke discuss the history of the Wildey Theatre. Located at 252 N. Main Street, the theater was home to a variety of vaudeville and opera performances after its grand opening in 1909. In 1984, the Wildey closed its doors. In 1999, the city of Edwardsville acquired the property and later began planning for a complete restoration of the historic landmark. On April 12, 2011, the Wildey Theatre reopened to the public.

"We are so happy to have the Wildey back, and it has once again become a staple for our community's events and has welcomed national acts," Morrison says. "It's an important part of who we are as a city."

Also in this episode, Pembroke and Morrison elaborate on Edwardsville's connection to Route 66, the yearly festival named in its honor, and the Lincoln School, which is now known as the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities.

The duo also discuss some of the ways visitors, residents and students alike can experience Edwardsville's beautiful surrounding nature areas, including the Bohm woods and many of its parks and recreation areas. Madison County Transit's pedestrian and bike trail system, which were once abandoned railroad lines, has also become a local staple for healthy recreation and transportation throughout the community.

To hear this episode in its entirety, tune in at 9 a.m. this Sunday, May 13, to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications