

From Cooking to Shooting, Historical Interpreters Live the Life

By Jessica Delaney

What could possibly be more enjoyable than putting on a pair of wool trousers on a sweltering day in July, or cooking over a hot hearth wearing petticoats? According to historic interpreters employed by Mackinac State Historic Parks, not much.

"I really enjoy this," said Stephanie Fitzwater, an interpreter spending her fourth summer on the Island. "We get paid to sit here and cook, and talk to people, and quilt, which we do as a hobby, anyway. It's much more gratifying than working at a mall. We're a part of people's vacation experience."

Ms. Fitzwater isn't alone in that sentiment, as other interpreters mirror her statement.

It's not all talk, though. Mackinac State Historic Parks, which hire the interpreters as part of their "Living History" Program, see many of their interpreters return. This year, all but one of the interpreters from the downtown historic buildings returned for another summer.

"It's nice, because the new people can be working with those who have done this before," said Katie Cederholm, who coordinates the downtown interpreters.

According to Dennis Havlena, the lead interpreter at Fort Mackinac and spending his 23rd summer at the Fort, this



Jennifer Whitener is enjoying her second summer working for Mackinac State Historic Parks as an historic interpreter. The most challenging aspect of her job is figuring out how to spark interest in the visitors.

aspect of mentoring is especially important to the program.

"These guys take the kids

under their wing, they teach them everything they know," said Mr. Havlena. "We have

three new people this year and they're all exceptional, like they've been here for years."

One reason new interpreters fit in so well is an extensive education process. Before arriving at the Island, they study literature and a training manual for their job.

"We send them all the background material," said Ms. Cederholm. "We don't expect them to be experts, but they need to be familiar with the material."

A week-long orientation process greets new interpreters upon arrival, which includes an introduction to all the activities they will be engaging in, such as rifle firing or cooking over an open hearth. At the end of the week, each interpreter must give a three-minute talk to supervisors.

"It's a very hard talk," said Ms. Cederholm. "You're in front of people who really know their history. But it's good practice, and once they get past this, which is very challenging, they're ready for anyone and anything."

From that point on, interpreters continue to learn through the summer, mentoring with more experienced interpreters. And while many interpreters enjoy the learning experience, they say they are drawn back because of their experiences with the visitors.

"People on vacation are

always happy," said Mr. Havlena. "I've been here two or three years without seeing anyone who's grumpy or upset, and that just rubs off on everyone here."

Brent Scheihagen, who is spending his second summer on the Island, agreed. "Some days, this is just like any other job," he said. "You get tired or aren't feeling well. But just being around these people who are so interested and curious helps."

Talking and interacting with guests is especially meaningful to interpreters in the downtown historic buildings. Unlike in the fort, where there are scheduled tours, demonstrations, and presentations, downtown interpreters work with free, open conversation. They speak with visitors on a more intimate basis while they perform the activities they are speaking about.

"I like the informal form where things are loose and relaxed," said Carolyn Lane, a second summer interpreter. "You interact with visitors to find out what is of top interest to them. Sometimes you can spend half an hour talking to one, which makes everything worth it."

While the men up at the fort are working on firing rifles and cannons, the women interpreters learn a multitude of skills, including quilting, cooking, spinning wool, knitting, crocheting, gardening, weaving, candle making, laundry, and making soap.

"When we make things, it gives us an appreciation for this and makes us realize how easy we have it, to go to the store and buy yarn, to turn on a faucet and have hot water," said Ms. Fitzwater. "It helps us to better understand where people are coming from."

Jennifer Whitener, a returning interpreter at both the fort and downtown, said she enjoys the tasks just for their entertainment value.

"There's so much here that's fun," she said. "I love outdoor activities, I enjoy talking to people and hearing their stories, and I love open hearth cooking, just because I love cooking and coming up with recipes."

Women interpreters often find that one of the hardest aspects of their job is convincing visitors that women's lives were not the drudgery they appear to be.

"The hardest part is just trying to find that tiny spark of interest in a person, to get the visitor to understand that while historic life was different, it wasn't worse, or harder, just different," said Ms. Whitener.

Life then, added Ms. Fitzwater, "was more similar to today than people think. It doesn't take that much longer to do things. The lifestyles are similar."

The job of the interpreter is a good match for those with a love of history and of meeting people.

"This is an experience they'll remember when they're 90," said Mr. Havlena. "What a place. Who else gets to talk to zillions of interesting people? It's all incredibly rewarding."

Interpreters Never Tire of Fielding Visitor Questions

By Jessica Delaney

Since Mackinac Island is made almost entirely of rock, what would happen if there were an earthquake here? Would the Island just collapse?

Historic interpreters at the Biddle House on Market Street were a little baffled when asked that question. One of the more experienced interpreters, Stephanie Fitzwater, came up with an answer, telling the inquisitive visitor that the Island is not near any fault lines, so the probability of an earthquake is very low.

The majority of questions asked by curious guests at Mackinac State Historic Parks sites are a little easier to answer. The staff hears many of them over and over, even some that seem obvious. It's all in the line of duty for the historic interpreters, who field the questions while they perform their other duties, like baking cherry pies or firing muskets.

Interpreters at Fort Mackinac and at downtown historic buildings are an integral part of the Mackinac State Historic Parks program. They highlight the "Living History" program, which provides interactive adventures for visitors, opportunities not only to look at an exhibit and read about life at the fort, but to actually experience it.

"This is about people and life," said Dennis Havlena, lead interpreter at Fort Mackinac.

"It's one thing to look at a display, but it's completely different to get involved with real people."

Finding the right kind of people for the job can be a bit of a challenge. Conducting the search is a hiring team of four, one representative from each park site that uses interpreters. The team includes Katie Cederholm, who works with downtown historic buildings, Mr. Havlena of Fort Mackinac, Jim Evans for Colonial Michilimackinac, and Jeffrey Dykehouse for Historic Mill Creek.

According to Ms. Cederholm, the first thing the hiring team looks for is not recommendations or prior experience, but something much more elemental: Personality.

"For interpretative staff all the way to the general service representatives, we look for attitude," she said. "That's the number-one thing we look for. We can teach them the history."

Good attitude is especially important when it comes to crazy questions, she said. Interpreters need to be upbeat, engaging, and patient when it comes to dealing with guests and providing the best hospitality possible.

"Sometimes it's difficult when they are asked a question for the hundredth time, but they need to remember that this is the first question for that person,"

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Above photograph: Carolyn Lane works on quilting in the Biddle House. Interpreters in the downtown historic buildings engage in open interpretation, where they perform tasks that would have been done in the late 19th century, and speak with visitors in an informal manner. Lower photo: Trace Dominguez, Brent Scheihagen, and Joe Frost perform 19th century music for guests at Fort Mackinac. Regularly scheduled music programs, including both military and recreational music from historical times, are an important component of the State Parks "Living History" program.