

Volunteers Maintain Historic Parks' Vital Interpreters Program

By Ryan Schlehuber

When tourists visit Colonial Michilimackinac in Mackinaw City, they may see a British soldier who looks oddly like the French voyageur or the French wedding narrator they just saw a couple of buildings away. That would be interpreter Jim Evans, doing what today's interpreters at Mackinac State Historic Parks sites commonly have to do in these lean economic times, multi-task.

It is not uncommon these days for businesses and state agencies to spread a person's responsibilities among several jobs to save a penny. Jim Evans attests that nowhere within Mackinac Island State Parks has there been more multi-tasking needed than at Colonial Michilimackinac.

Mr. Evans has been working at Colonial Michilimackinac for the past 29 years, beginning by cataloging artifacts in 1977. Since then, his primary job at the fort has been to depict a British soldier.

Through the years he has worn many hats, but more recently, with budget cuts and decreasing attendance, he and four other interpreters now do what 10 people used to do to interpret the lives of the people who inhabited the fort for the visitors who come to see it.

A typical day for Mr. Evans begins by preparing the many houses inside the fort for the day's guests, mostly starting fires for the cooking demonstrations. Dressed in his 1770s British military uniform, depicting a private for the King's 8th Regiment, Mr. Evans then inspects all of the fort's muskets and cannons for firing demonstrations. He will change costumes up to three times a day, from a Red Coat to a French voyageur to a French notary for wedding demonstrations, held twice a day during the peak season, after which, he then switches back to his British military uniform.

Playing multiple roles is common among the interpretative staff at all four of Mackinac State Historic Parks sites, Colonial Michilimackinac, Historic Mill Creek, and Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, all in Mackinaw City, and Fort Mackinac on Mackinac Island, even though some programs, like the American Indian depic-



With a musket resting on his arm, Jim Evans, an interpreter depicting a 1770s British soldier at Colonial Michilimackinac in Mackinaw City, discusses history with visitors following a cannon firing demonstration Thursday, June 1. He also plays a French voyageur and a French wedding notary. Multi-tasking and playing several positions at the fort has become common for the interpretive program at Mackinac State Historic Parks.

tion at Colonial Michilimackinac, have been cut.

"We've done some creative repositioning with our seasonal staff to allow us to have close to what we had before," said Bruce Linn, Historic Parks group traffic coordinator. "We're splitting positions in some places. Basically, we are trying to keep as many interpreters visible as possible."

Mackinac State Historic Parks has put much thought and care into its interpretive program, said Steve Brisson, supervisor of the agency's museum units, including the interpretive program, because interpreters are the ones on the front line with the visitors.

"Interpreters are very important because they are in direct contact with our visitors," he said. "The name 'interpreters' says it all. They are directly fulfilling our mission in presenting and teaching the history of the Straits of Mackinac."

With a short staff, training new interpreters to play multiple roles can be difficult, especially when the fort is busy right at the beginning of the year, said Jeff Dykehouse, who supervises the interpreters.

"All four of our female interpreters at Colonial Michilimackinac work part-time at Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, too," he said. "You only have so much time to train them before

you have to throw them out there."

First-year interpreter Christine Walker of Mackinaw City said the transition has, so far, not been difficult.

"We're having a lot fun," she said. "We love our jobs."

Timing becomes most important during the daily skits, as interpreters need to be at their stations when a group comes in.

"The staff really has to work together and have their watches coordinated," said Mr. Dykehouse, a task made a little more difficult because they must keep their watches out of view when reenacting a 1770s character who didn't have a watch. "Someone has to be at the blacksmith station when our interpreter for the wedding ceremony introduces the blacksmith, for example. If someone is not there on time, it doesn't look good."

"The wedding ceremony takes everyone we have," he added. "Once that is finished, they all scramble back to their

stations."

Volunteers include retirees, such as Lee Ann Ayotte of Onaway, an eight-year volunteer known as "Grandma," and families like the Miillers of the Grand Rapids area and the Napierkowskis of Pinconning have become valuable assets to Mr. Dykehouse's program.

The Miillers and Napierkowskis spent the first week of June volunteering as interpreters, this summer being the Napierkowski family's fourth consecutive year. The family contributes 12 members, including family friend Autumn Kruger.

In early spring, Mr. Dykehouse said he relies a lot on volunteers as schools across the state send thousands of students to learn history. The school groups comprise a significant portion of spring attendance.

About 90 percent of the volunteers are at Colonial Michilimackinac and 90 percent of those volunteers are in the

interpretive program, said Mr. Dykehouse. With the help of volunteers, said Mr. Dykehouse, scrambling to cover roles or stations is lessened.

Technology, such as the Listening Wand, has helped Colonial Michilimackinac's interpretive program, as well, allowing visitors to venture on their own without the guidance of a real-life interpreter.

The Listening Wand, a hand-held device introduced three years ago, looks like a telephone and operates like a tape recorder and offers visitors a tour at their own pace. There are 17 recordings, including frontier music, for visitors to choose from. It is only offered at Colonial Michilimackinac.

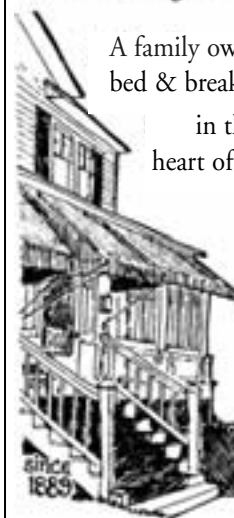
At Fort Mackinac, an audio-animatronic figure of a War of 1812 American soldier in the North Blockhouse was added in spring 2002. In all of the newer exhibits, except at the lighthouse, visitors are greeted by a narrator's voice, which explains each exhibit. Interpretive signs are also common at all the historic sites.

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