

Parel, Lecturer for Hire: Resident Invites Visitors To Hear Mackinac's Story

By Ryan Schlehuder

Islander Larry Parel will offer visitors this summer a chance to hear about Mackinac Island from a resident's perspective. Targeting conferences and other groups, he says he will provide a bit of local flavor and history to the visitors as a break from their meeting schedules and golf games.

"Hearing about Mackinac Island from someone who lives here and grew up here makes it more personable for them," said Mr. Parel. "There are many people who are shocked that people live here year-around."

Mr. Parel, 65, already has several tours lined up, including one for the International Lilac Society in June. He is working with the Mackinac Island Tourism Bureau.

His family has lived here for four generations, since his great-grandfather was a soldier at Fort Mackinac. And his past jobs have groomed him to become a storyteller. He has been a tour driver for Mackinac Island Carriage Tours, a waiter at Grand Hotel, a greeter at restaurants and ferry docks, and a wedding planner.

He even ran for mayor of Mackinac Island in 1992, but lost to long-time incumbent Margaret Doud.

He will draw from this family history and experience in his new career as a lecturer and local guide.

"This is a type of idea that will be my reward from all the other jobs I did to get to this

point," he said.

He said he has a passion for telling stories.

"The early 1950s on the Island was the nicest time of my life," he said. "It seemed the entire island was one big family. Everybody took care of everybody, especially in the winters."

Snowmobiles, he noted, were not allowed on the Island until the 1970s.

He remembers Mackinac Island Mayor Jack Gough calling U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, pleading for help for Island residents who were stranded on the Island in the middle of winter without transportation to the mainland.

"I remember Mayor Gough saying, 'We have women with children over here, women who are going to have children, and women who want children,'" he laughed.

Not too long after that, a U.S. Coast Guard cutter arrived on the Island with supplies, although Mr. Parel isn't sure it was in response to the mayor's call.

Larry Parel attended Thomas Ferry School, housed in the former Indian Dormitory in Marquette Park. The school held classes from kindergarten through 10th grade, after which Island children had to enroll in schools on the mainland or start working.

"I remember my grade school teacher on the Island, Mr. C.P. Wellington," said Mr. Parel. "He always had answers



Long-time Mackinac Island resident Larry Parel will talk about life on the Island with convention participants and other conferees meeting on the Island this summer.



Islander Larry Parel has had much experience talking about life on Mackinac Island, having worked as a tour driver for Mackinac Island Carriage Tours in the early 1960s. (Larry Parel photograph)

to our questions and when he didn't, he would research it that night."

He also remembers Mr. Wellington keeping track of detention minutes for each student.

After completing 10th grade, Mr. Parel moved to Detroit to live with relatives, enrolling at Detroit Denby High School, from which he was graduated in 1959. He then served in the Army until 1962 and was stationed in Berlin, Germany.

One of his favorite pastimes as a youth was skating on Haldimand Bay, just in front of what used to be the U.S. Coast Guard Station, now the State Park's Visitors Center.

"We used to take thick, corrugated meat boxes from [Doud Mercantile] and hold them up over our heads as we skated," remembers Mr. Parel. "The wind would get you going and you'd be going so fast that you couldn't bring the box down!"

In the evening, Coast Guard personnel would illuminate the ice with the station's spotlight.

"They were so nice to the kids," he said of the Coast Guard officers. "They used to always invite us in and we'd watch them play cards or cribbage."

He remembers annual Christmas dinners hosted by the fire department at the Community Hall.

"The firemen would stuff stockings for the kids, show movies at the Community Hall, and even pick up kids with the fire truck," said Mr. Parel. "Movies were 25 cents per person, but no one was refused, whether you had money or not. That was just how the Island operated back then."

Back then, he added, kids were allowed to roller skate at the Community Hall.

Mr. Parel said living on Mackinac Island year-around is not for everyone.

"You either like the Island or you don't," he said; "there's no in between. Living here year-around, it takes a type of person who can deal with not having today's amenities and with the isolation."

He believes this is the type of story in which visitors will be interested.

"Mackinac Island is the most majestic place on the planet," he said. "There are so many good memories that residents have of the place, and I think visitors would love to hear that side of the story."

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