

(Re-enactors PRIME Magazine/Kenosha News -

http://www.primethemagazine.com/features/bringing_history_to_life_428865560.html)

Features

Bringing history to life

IMAGES 1 2 3 4 5



Pam Kibler-Ervin watches over Hamilton and Sinclair Potter, 2, sons of Angela Potter, a Northwest Territory Alliance commander. (PHOTO BY CHRISTINE VERSTRAETE)

(Christine Verstraete – cav1@wi.rr.com – chris@cverstraete.com)

Published: 8/30 1:59 p.m.

By Christine Verstraete

Dan Joyce, who is the director of the Kenosha Public Museum, could be called a traitor.

But he says he had a perfectly good reason for crossing over to the British side and donning a Royal Red uniform as part of the 52nd Co, 2nd Battalion Light Infantry out of Manchester, England.

Having already spent 12 years previously as a historical re-enactor on the Colonial side, 55-year-old Joyce says joining up with Her Majesty's soldiers has allowed him to get a different perspective on the Revolutionary War.

"I wanted to look at the war from a different viewpoint," he says, and even added to his knowledge by doing research at London's public records office. "The British side is maybe better documented. We have access to more letters. You can go there and look at the original documents. A lot do research on their unit. It really brings it alive."

That allure of bringing history to life is what draws people of all ages and from all walks of life to spend much of their spare time as historical re-enactors.

They willingly trade in their Posturepedics for a cot. Microwaves are replaced by pots over an open fire. Such comforts as shorts and summer clothes are but memories. At least during the event, breeches, long jackets, gowns, and yes, wool, albeit lightweight, are wardrobe staples.

But ask them why they do it, and most everyone will answer with a big smile. "I like that it's something we can do as a family," says Pam Kibler-Ervin, who was originally from Kenosha and now lives in Waterford. She and her husband, Dan, have been doing this for 16 years and are now joined by their 15-year-old son, Morgan.

The Northwest Territory Alliance (www.nwta.com) is one of many groups devoted to bringing history to life. The group's 500-plus members do that by making the Revolutionary War period, 1775-1783, as real as possible by living it. Or at least living as much of it as they can by dressing and taking on activities as authentic to the time period as possible, this time in Fox River Park in Silver Lake.

John Conlon of Mount Pleasant is an artist, which doesn't work too well in this setting given that his choices would be doing formal portraits, folk art, or decorative art. So, on an 80-degree day, he was sitting under a tent, sewing on buttons.

"I started sewing," he says, "because I needed the clothing."

The clothing here being proper breeches and jackets with hand-sewn buttonholes, circa mid-1700s.

3/Re-enactors PRIME Mag.

While Conlon says he may get back to painting someday, he is perfectly content to be part of the William Booth Draper business — a traveling seller of period fabric like worsted wools, linen and silk threads, button forms and authentic buttons — run since the 1970s by the Dickfoss family.

Whether the information is from the original documents when available, or via books and other sources, what makes it special to the participants is being sure they “get it right.”

For most re-enactors, their involvement stems from a love of history. Fifty-nine-year-old Nancy Sorchy got interested in re-enacting from homeschooling her kids when they were little. She started with Civil War re-enacting and switched to being a colonial tavern keeper’s wife with her husband, Terry, 51.

“If I was going to be in a military setting, did I want to be a laundress or be a woman on a (military) ration?” she asks. “I learned from the Civil War re-enacting that the women were hanging around looking pretty and not being functional.”

She wanted to play an active role, so this may mean having several giant pots boiling early with strong coffee and maple-flavored porridge for breakfast. And don’t forget this is long before refrigeration, so most meats and perishables are cured after cooking — smoked, salted or pickled for preservation.

Or she and her husband may make popular drinks from the time like Syllabub, a tasty mixture of brandy, orange, lemon, heavy cream and wine. It sounds strong, but... “None of these drinks taste like alcohol,” says Nancy, who’s been doing re-enacting for 10 years. Given that water was not safe to drink then, “they didn’t drink to get drunk. I like having people eat period food.”

Luckily for them, there are many paintings of the time showing the local establishments that they can use for reference.

Yes, re-enactors love the history and enjoy teaching others about their specialty at museums and other re-enactment events. But one of the most popular reasons many of them stay with this for years is the family aspect. Here, you’ll see several generations enjoying their time together and not a cellphone, computer or video game in sight.

“It’s a very good family hobby,” says 69-year-old Hazel Dickfoss whose son, Paul, grew up in the “family business” and now brings his 8-year-old daughter, Sara, to events. “They (the children) really get to know other adults,” Hazel explains. “They not only learn about history, they learn about teamwork. At least it gets them away from the electronics.”