

CURIOSITIES

VOLUME XXXIX



2021 ISSUE 1

JIM EVANS RETIREMENT

It would have been very easy for Jim Evans to take a victory lap during the 2020 season.

2020 was his 50th season at Colonial Michilimackinac (as in, half a century), and he made the decision during the 2019–20 offseason that it would be his last. He'd be turning 70 after the season, and he wanted to get out and take some well-deserved time to fish, hunt, and be outdoors.

He could have announced his retirement early, took that victory lap, and rode off into the sunset. But, despite possibly being the most photographed man in Michigan, he wanted no part of the spotlight. He just wanted to be part of the team, like he has every summer since 1970.

So, in typical fashion, Jim worked the season and then quietly announced his retirement to staff in November, effective January 22, closing the book on an incredible career of teaching, entertaining, and being a stabilizing and welcoming presence at Colonial Michilimackinac.

In addition to being a constant at Colonial Michilimackinac, Jim was also one of the driving forces of the award-winning and Mackinac Associates-funded *Historic Mackinac on Tour* educational outreach program that has visited classrooms across the state for more than 30 years. Oh, and those cannon, mortar, rifle, and musket firings that are as much a part of the Mackinac tradition as anything else? Jim spent

his winters making the powder charges for them.

It's estimated that Jim saw nearly 6,500,000 visitors during his time at Colonial Michilimackinac. Additionally, it's estimated he saw more than 250,000 kids in classrooms across the state in the winter months. The numbers are truly staggering.

"It went pretty quick," Jim says. "I've worked with a lot of great people. You remember your coworkers, supervisors. You really think of the people. I truly did have the best job, and I mean that seriously. It is truly a hard job to leave, which is why I worked here as long as I did.

"This was a hard decision," he continued. "Things got a little harder as I got older, and I want to have a little quality for a few years. I didn't want to say goodbye on my last hurrah, I really wanted to enjoy that last season, and I did, immensely."

"Jim has been an example and leader for the interpretive staff at Michilimackinac, as well as an important part of the Michilimackinac experience for visitors," said Craig Wilson, Mackinac State Historic Parks Chief Curator. "People ask if he's at work all the time because he has been such an important part of a visit to Michilimackinac for so many people over the years."

Jim grew up in Mackinaw City and volunteered at the Michilimackinac Pageant every summer from 7th grade through high school. After his freshman year at Lake Superior State University, he came home for the summer and got a job as a seasonal interpreter at Michilimackinac. He's been back every summer since. He was promoted to lead historic interpreter in 1977.

"I believe I was meant to do public service," he says. "It's rewarding to give an interesting, educational, but making it real, program. When I first started, as a young college student, it wasn't where I'm at now. As I got older I think I got better. You have to try to feel out how much they (the guest) want to know, then give it to them. Craig (Wilson) made us a lot better. We know so much more, and we gear it to the people that I'm talking to."

The *Historic Mackinac on Tour* program started going on the road in 1989. Along with Dennis Havlena, who served as lead historic interpreter at Fort Mackinac, Jim spread Michilimackinac's history to thousands of classrooms around Michigan.

"To do that program was a joy," he says. "I had the chance to work with Dennis until he retired, which was pretty special. We did a lot of hands-on stuff. Dennis would do a dance, we'd do activities. To see those kids' eyes light up... it was pretty neat stuff.

"Those teachers, who are gifted at what they do, they thank us, even now, and I thank them for what they do and allowing us in," Jim continued. "It's really special to get thank-yous from teachers when we appreciate so much what they do."

Any conversation with Jim about his career usually moves toward talking about those that worked with him. While he's loved that he's



Jim Evans at work at Colonial Michilimackinac.

been able to meet and interact with so many people, he worries that the interpretive staff gets too much attention because they're the most public face of the organization. "It's a team. I never tried to lose that. It's a team. I sometimes feel bad that I'm the one they recognize, because there are lots of others," he said.

"A skilled and dedicated interpreter, Jim has always provided our guests with outstanding programs and presentations," said Phil Porter, Director Emeritus for Mackinac State Historic Parks. "He used those same assets to serve students throughout Michigan in our Education Outreach Program, *Historic Mackinac on Tour*. Hundreds of thousands of visitors and students have a better appreciation and understanding of Mackinac history as a result of Jim's great work."

Jim is comfortable with the state of the organization and Colonial Michilimackinac, which is another factor allowing him to retire comfortably. He mentioned the entire staff at Michilimackinac, with Wilson and Interpretive Assistant LeeAnn Ewer mentioned in particular.

The other reason Michilimackinac is in good hands is the presence of Dr. Lynn Evans, Curator of Archaeology, and Jim's wife. She'll be in the fort overseeing the archaeological field season. Jim and Lynn met in 1989 and were married in 1997—at Michilimackinac, of course.

"The fort has done everything for me—I even met my wife, Lynn," Jim said. "She's the best thing to ever happen to me. I owe the park more than the park owes me."

"Through all of the decades his love of this place remained evident," said Steve Brisson, Mackinac State Historic Parks Director. "His great legacy, the wonderful thing about working with him is his changeless-ness, in that he was always so positive and always so committed to this place. He will truly be missed."

So, what's next for Jim Evans? He actually has a pretty strict schedule that will feature some

Continued on page 2

EDUCATION OUTREACH GOES VIRTUAL

Every year, Mackinac Associates helps to fund Mackinac State Historic Parks' education outreach efforts, which send historic interpreters into classrooms to share the diverse historic and natural history of the straits area with Michigan students. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in-classroom outreach has been suspended. However, Mackinac State Historic Parks, with the assistance of Mackinac Associates, is excited to debut its lineup of six virtual offerings, headlined by the award-winning *Historic Mackinac on Tour* program.

"Our new online education programs allow us to reach students across the state, regardless of whether they are learning in the classroom or at home," said Craig Wilson, MSHP Chief Curator. "Additionally, our new programs significantly broaden the scope of MSHP's educational offerings, allowing us to address a variety of curriculum standards across multiple grade levels."

More information can be found at mackinacparks.com/education

JIM EVANS, Continued from page 1

variation: first it will be ice fishing, followed by steelhead fishing season, then turkey season, then walleye fishing, followed by goose season, then small game with his dog, followed by bow season, and then firearms season.

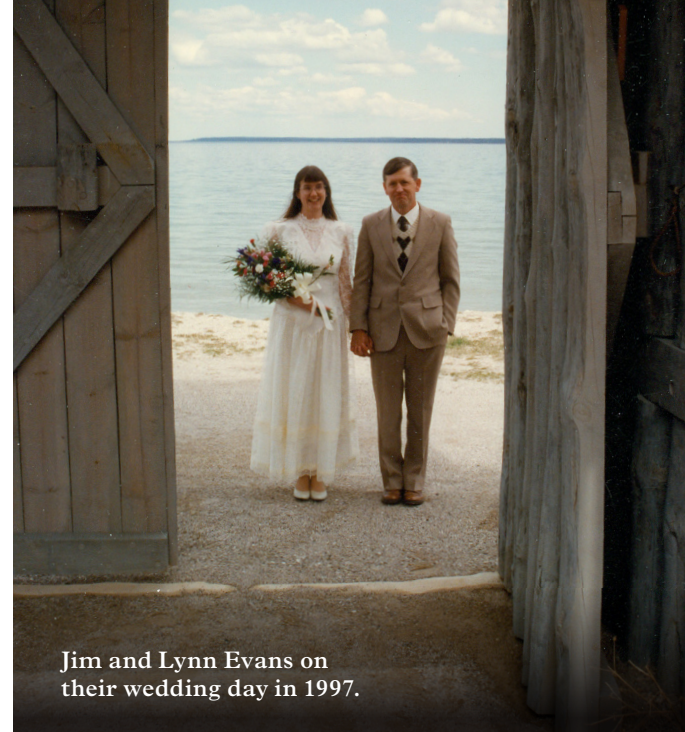
“I’ll have to pace myself,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ll have the opportunity to rest up and do activities, do the chores, have some more responsibility with cooking. It’s a cycle.”

Jim was leery of trying to start giving names of people he’d like to thank or remember, as he was nervous he’d miss some. He did reach out and call Keith Widder, who originally hired him. “I thanked him, and I need to thank him more.” He also very fondly remembers the time working with Havlena on outreach, and thanked Porter, especially for his support with education outreach.

Jim was also very appreciative of Mackinac Associates, especially for support of the education outreach programs. “I thank them so much for their support. They need to know that a lot of those students come to our sites, and we build on that history when they come. We make these great connections with these groups that come from across the state. Thank you, Mackinac Associates, for helping us educate these young people in a fun, entertaining way.”

While Colonial Michilimackinac will open next spring as it always does, it will, undoubtedly, be different. There is no easy way to replace someone like Jim Evans, and his legacy will not be forgotten.

“It’s nice to be remembered—I guess you’re doing something right if they do remember you,” he said. “It truly has been a joy, and I’m leaving with no regrets. It’s been such rewarding work, and I really mean that. I’ve been blessed.”



Jim and Lynn Evans on their wedding day in 1997.

2021 OPENING DATES

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, these dates are tentative and are subject to change.

May 1 | Fort Mackinac

May 1 | Biddle House, featuring the Mackinac Island Native American Museum

May 1 | The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum

May 5 | Colonial Michilimackinac

May 6 | Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse

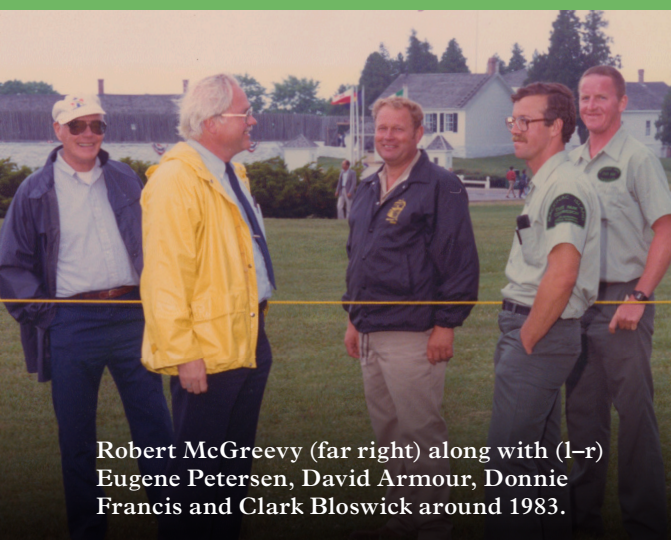
May 7 | Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park

June 5 | Historic Downtown Mackinac

ROBERT MCGREEVY HAS RETIRED

One of the more unsung heroes of Mackinac State Historic Parks, Heavy Equipment Operator Robert McGreevy, retired in November after nearly 37 years of service. McGreevy controlled the engines that literally kept Mackinac Island State Park running, operating the Korean War-era LCM (Landing Craft Mechanized) that moved equipment and supplies to the island, repairing roads, and snow plowing.

“Robert was one of those critical ‘behind-the-scenes’ staff members that kept Mackinac State Historic Parks moving,” said Steve Brisson, Mackinac State Historic Parks Director. “Millions of Mackinac Island State Park visitors were able to enjoy their vacation thanks to Robert’s hard work. We certainly wish him well in retirement.”



Robert McGreevy (far right) along with (l-r) Eugene Petersen, David Armour, Donnie Francis and Clark Blowski around 1983.

STEVE BRISSON, NEW DIRECTOR

Steve Brisson has settled comfortably into the director position with Mackinac State Historic Parks. Starting October 4, Brisson navigated the organization through the end of the 2020 operating season and into the offseason as he moves forward to the 2021 season.

Brisson is overseeing a number of projects that he is excited to see open for the 2021 season. Included is the full-season opening of the Biddle House, featuring the Mackinac Island Native American Museum; a brand new experience in the Kids’ Quarters at Fort Mackinac; the continued work on M-185 to ensure visitors to Mackinac Island will be able to enjoy it; the publication of *Preservation at Mackinac—A History of the Mackinac Island State Park Commission 1895–2020*; and the background work and eventual groundbreaking on the Milliken Center at Arch Rock, among others.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic hovers over everything. “We were extremely fortunate that we were able to do what we did last year, and do it safely,” Brisson said. “We consider ourselves lucky. For 2021 we hope to build on what we started and expand a little beyond what we did last year. We’re optimistic 2021 will be a better year.”

With the effects of the abbreviated 2020 season still fresh, Mackinac Associates was able to step up to offer operational support for the 2021 season, beyond the normal project support they’ve offered in the past.

“With the current crisis we are blessed to have the support of Mackinac Associates,” Brisson said. “It says a lot for them that they are in the position that they could do that. Thirty years ago this might not have been the case.

“I’m looking forward to continuing to maintain and grow this great relationship we’ve had,” Brisson continued. “It’s a great legacy, and it’s been inspiring to watch the growth of the organization through the years, as part of Mackinac State Historic Parks and as a member.”

It has been a steady climb to the directorship for Brisson. He was originally hired on January 2, 1996, as the curator of collections. In December 2003 he was appointed MSHP chief curator responsible for the agency’s museum programs, a position he held until being appointed deputy director, in 2011. As deputy director, he oversaw and managed the newly created Museum Programs and Marketing Unit. He has served on the organization’s executive staff committee and budget committee for seventeen years and been involved with drafting the agency’s strategic plans since 1996. His work has included curating over a dozen long-term exhibits and administering numerous grant projects. He has authored six books for MSHP including *Picturesque Mackinac*, *Wish You Were Here* and *Downtown Mackinac Island* and the forthcoming *Architectural Missionary* with MSU Press.

“I was humbled and honored to be offered this position,” Brisson said. “As Phil (Porter,

former MSHP Director) often notes, we have an incredibly talented and dedicated staff whom I look forward to continue working with in my new role. It is also heartening to see how seriously the commission takes its role as stewards of the treasures under their care, and I look forward to assisting them in preserving these remarkable places.”

A sixth-generation native of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Brisson grew up in western Alger County. He received a B.A. in History from Northern Michigan University and a M.A. from the Cooperstown Graduate Program in History Museum Studies. His museum career began as a student assistant with the Michigan Bureau of History at the Michigan Iron Industry Museum and Fayette Historic Townsite. He completed a senior internship at the Henry Ford Museum in 1991. He was hired as curator for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin Sites Division from 1992–1995, before moving to Mackinac State Historic Parks.

Brisson lives on Mackinac Island in the summer and in Cheboygan in the winter with his wife Lisa, executive director of the Michigan Museums Association. They have three children—Emma, Matthew, and Andrew.

Brisson is active professionally and in the local community, having served two terms on the Michigan Humanities Council and is currently vice-president of the Association for Great Lakes Maritime History. He is also current vice-chair of the Cheboygan Area Arts Council and treasurer of Northland Players, Inc. He is a member of St. Mary’s/St. Charles’ Parish in Cheboygan and Ste. Anne’s on Mackinac Island.

“I look forward to working with an extremely talented staff to continue to welcome visitors from across the nation and world to enjoy the exceptional programs, exhibitions, and galleries we offer,” Brisson said.



Steve Brisson and his wife Lisa at the Mackinac Associates History of Mackinac Through Costume event last summer.



DIRECTOR'S OUTLOOK

To celebrate the 125th anniversary of Mackinac Island State Park we had planned fireworks, a concert, and a gala dinner. Instead, some of these funds were reallocated to Covid relief. More significantly our season was shortened by six weeks and we curtailed numerous popular programs. This included the Adventure Tour at Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park, the tower tour at Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse, the Kids' Art Studio, Fort Fright and An American Picnic. Also, the 91-year-old Scout Service Camp was put on hiatus. All of this to protect our guests, staff and the bottom line.

Amid the gloom, however, we moved forward. Core programs continued. Cannons, muskets, and rifles boomed from our forts. The gardens bloomed at Colonial Michilimackinac. We launched the annual art show at The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum; had seven individuals creating art at our Artist-in-Residence program; and completed the 62nd consecutive season of the Michilimackinac archaeological excavation. Numbers were down across all our sites, but we still welcomed over 180,000 visitors, adjusting the facilities and programs to do so safely. While delayed, we were able to complete the new restroom/shelter building behind Fort Mackinac, the transformation of the Biddle House to the Mackinac Island Native American Museum, and the restoration of the second floor of Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse. On some days, with programs in full swing, happy and excited guests within earshot, and the crews busy on various projects, things could, if one squinted, almost seem normal.

All of this only happened due to strong leadership from outgoing director Phil Porter, the support of the Park Commission, and a dedicated professional staff. Our seasonal staff also deserve a shout out. Staff numbers were reduced drastically to allow us to house everyone safely, so nearly everyone had additional responsibilities. They handled it with grace and commitment. We are especially grateful, as always, for what Mackinac Associates did for us. Not only in the funding of the numerous projects for the season, but in shifting funds to cover Covid response efforts.

As we enter 2021 many things remain uncertain. We move forward with trepidation along with the rest of the historic museum community, tourist industry, and our local governments and business partners. While we see the glimmer of light at the end of the Covid tunnel, we are aware that 2021 will not be a normal year. Group visitation will likely remain almost non-existent and there is no way of knowing how quickly summer travel will rebound. But rest assured; we are moving forward. Resources are being leveraged to make 2021 as great as can be.

We have maintained state funding levels and the commission has carefully adjusted the park's budget to allow us to cautiously move forward to operate our public programs for the coming summer. The Mackinac Island Community Foundation has approved two grants. One from the Martin Petersen Fund to allow the publications programs to move forward and the



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– STEVE BRISSON, DIRECTOR

other from the Manoogian Fund for Mackinac Island State Park enhancements. In addition, through a gift from the Timmons family, we will be able to complete and publish the revised and updated edition of the Park Commission's history. Finally, the Mackinac Associates board has provided funds, for the first time ever, to help shore up our operational budget.

We hope to reopen the Adventure Tour at Mill Creek this season. In addition, even with a still reduced staff, new programs are being introduced at most of the sites. The Native American Museum at the Biddle House will be fully open. The all-new Fort Mackinac Kids' Quarters exhibit, funded by Mackinac

Associates, will also open this season. We were extremely grateful to receive a \$2.5 million appropriation to build the Milliken Nature Center at Arch Rock. Planning is already underway, and we hope to have it completed by 2022.

In a way, perhaps dealing with our part of this shared crisis was simply a different way to acknowledge our 125-year milestone. Fireworks would have been fun, but instead we simply persevered, rolled up our sleeves and did whatever we could to fulfill our mission. I am grateful that we had the resources to persevere and thank all of you who helped make it possible.

PHOTO ALBUM: TOOTLE COTTAGE, EAST BLUFF

In 1888 this cottage was built by carpenter Charles Caskey on an East Bluff park leasehold for George Smith of Chicago. Smith owned the cottage until 1900 when it was purchased by Milton Tootle Jr. of St. Joseph, Missouri. Tootle had the home remodeled by island builder Patrick Doud into the Neoclassical Revival style that exists today. Along with alterations to the home, Tootle designed elegant Japanese gardens surrounding the cottage, which became a famous island feature. This rare image was taken around 1895 showing the cottage before the renovations. The photo is a recent donation by Tootle descendant Walter Hannabass.



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2021 MSHP CALENDAR OF EVENTS

May

- 1 | Fort Mackinac, The Richard and Jane Manoogian Mackinac Art Museum, Biddle House, featuring the Mackinac Island Native American Museum, open for season
- 5 | Colonial Michilimackinac open for season
- 6 | Old Mackinac Point Lighthouse open for season
- 7 | Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park open for season
- 15 | Fort2Fort Five Mile Challenge, Fort Mackinac, 9:00 a.m.
- 31 | Memorial Day Observance, Fort Mackinac Post Cemetery, 8:30 a.m.

June

- 5 | Historic Downtown Mackinac open for season
- 19 | G. Mennen Williams Mackinac Celebration, Michigan Governor's Summer Residence

July

- 4 | A Star Spangled Fourth of July, Fort Mackinac, 2:30 p.m.
- 4 | Red, White & Blue Celebration, Huron Road Pavilion, 5:30 p.m.
- 4 | An American Picnic, Fort Mackinac, 6:30 p.m.
- 24 | Vintage Base Ball, Fort Mackinac, 6:30 p.m.

August

- 14 | Mackinac Associates Annual Meeting, Mackinac Island

October

- 4-5 | Fort Fright, Colonial Michilimackinac, 6:30 p.m. – 9:30 p.m.

December

- 11 | A Colonial Christmas, Colonial Michilimackinac, 4:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

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