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# ***HAIL TO THE CHIEFS***

*Enid Actor Portrays Figures from U. S. History*

*By Chris Jones, Staff Writer*

When Gary Gray steps into the boots of another man, he knows he better have everything right, especially when that man is Gen. Douglas MacArthur. This means the uniform, the five-star insignia, the conversation and the corncob pipe.

Gray, 59, an Enid actor known by his friends as “Mr. President,” portrays the historic general and six U. S. presidents during 40-minute speeches at museums and historical events.

He says his buddies are George, Andrew, Tom and Teddy, known formally by most citizens as presidents George Washington, Andrew Johnson, Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt. Gray also portrays presidents James Garfield and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Gray immerses himself in the life of the president he portrays. He reads their writings, 10-15 biographies for each, and if possible, he interviews authors who have spent years researching a president. Gray visits the presidential homes, studies speeches, and then he chooses a critical time in our nation’s history to capture the essence of the person, time and place.

Nine years ago at a Chautauqua event in Enid, Gray became interested in acting and tried out for a part in the local event. He wasn’t selected but says he knew at the time he wasn’t ready.

Chautauqua events are held throughout the United States, mostly in summer. These cultural activities bring in historical re-enactors to lecture, teach and entertain.

The Chautauqua movement was named in honor of Chautauqua, NY, where in the 1870’s, a Methodist Episcopal bishop created the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle.

The purpose was to ‘promote habits of reading and study in nature, art, science and sacred literature, in connection with the routine of daily life.’”

Gray holds graduate degrees from Phillips University, Southern Methodist and Notre Dame, along with a doctorate in education from Oklahoma State. Despite all the educational background, he never majored in history.

He set out to turn himself into an historian when he decided to act. His studies have led him to write a book *MR. PRESIDENTS: Voices of Freedom, Equality, and Dignity* that he hopes to publish this summer. Gray said he goes to a McDonald’s in Enid every day and writes for three hours.

Gray knocks the dust off history and infuses his performances with the strength, character and zeal of each of the famous men he portrays.

“I believe history is not enough fun for people,” Gray said. “Our world changed because of a few key guys. I present the essence of what that person was thinking at the time. It may be FDR having a vision for the future and rallying a nation. I study every character from birth to death.”

Gray has developed a sermon for President Garfield set in 1858, at a time when the minister and Disciples of Christ follower was asked to take part in a debate on creation vs. evolution, with John Denton, a Freethinker (atheist/evolutionist).

Gray, who is 6-foot-3, delivers his speeches with a booming voice and no trouble gaining the attention of his audience.

The speeches Gray delivers are given in the first person and are spoken from the heart with reference to family member, friends and enemies. He uses his imagination and helps the audience do that, too.

During his research on Andrew Johnson, Gray discovered that positive biographies were rare. Johnson was categorized as a drunkard and a racist in the first chapter of recent books. Gray saw a different perspective of Johnson in a 1930s biography and emphasized that look in his presentation.

Gray said he examines presidents in the times they lived, not in today’s perspective.

The speeches Gray delivers are his own creation. The date and place set the stage, and he adds personality. Washington and Jefferson had the least charisma, Gray said, and in the age of television, probably wouldn’t have captured the undivided attention of today’s citizens.

“These are amazing men,” Gray said. “I want to give a feel for the person, and if I just got up and gave a speech they gave, I don’t think that would happen. I try to answer why they did what they did and who they are. I have to take liberties to do this.”

Gray said he aims to interest and entertain the crowd, inform them and possibly inspire them.

Hair, clothing and props all contribute to the scene. Gray uses wigs for Washington and Jefferson, and he grows a beard when he portrays Garfield. He needs curly hair as Johnson and extra make-up as FDR.

He would like to add Ronald Reagan to the list of president he portrays, but he said Reagan’s hair would be a problem.

It’s a lot of work being a general and six presidents, and Gray said he tries to limit his performances to 25 a year.

The roles have changed his life, and for a guy who describes himself as a ham, he is a happy man.

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