

SIOUX EMPIRE ARGUS LEADER
Sioux Falls, SD, August 1, 2002

PRESIDENTS, MOVIES UNIQUE ADDITION TO FAIR

Events Provide Fairgoers Evening Entertainment

By Denise D. Tucker

Huron—Musical acts such as Tonic Sol Fa and Mogen's Heroes performing on the Freedom Stage might be customary at the South Dakota State Fair.

And celebrity guests such as Clifford the Big Red Dog are welcome to the venue.

But two new attractions to the fair this year are a little unusual.

Fairgoers can learn more about history as Gary Gray portrays different presidents in his program, or they can relax and watch a movie under the night sky. Both events are at the Freedom Stage and are attracting good-sized audiences.

Fair organizers say the free events add some diversity to the fair. The movies give those staying at the campsites an alternative to the rides. And the history program brings the themes of freedom and patriotism to the fair.

Gray, from Oklahoma, dons wigs and period costumes to portray Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson at the fair. His performance, which involves speeches and a question-and-answer period, takes the audience back to 1789, 1809 and 1910.

Huron resident Char Busch, who has seen Gray perform before, watched him act as Washington this week at the fair.

"I like the fact that it's spoken and not read or a tape playing and he is mouthing the words. He's very knowledgeable," said Busch, who had her picture taken with Gray.

Marian Starr of Frankfurt agrees. "I thought it was great and very educational," she said, "He's very gifted and a forceful speaker."

Gray, 56, began impersonating president in 1996, with a Chautauqua in Tulsa, OK. He is a fulltime adjunct professor at Northwestern Oklahoma State University in Enid, OK.

Huron resident Jim Hohm assists Gray with his performances at the fair.

"History is my plaything." Said Gray, who travels nationwide and gives about 25 presentations a year. His performances last 40 minutes.

Kris Graham, fair manager, said Gray "truly takes over the character" he portrays.

This year's history entertainment is the first of its kind at the fair, but its success has Graham thinking about the future.

Organizers are considering adding people who would roam the fair in costume talking about their characters.

"We're trying a lot of new things," Graham said.

Gray also portrays Presidents James Garfield, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Andrew Johnson. With the bicentennial of Meriweather Lewis and William Clark's expedition approaching, Gray added Jefferson to his list. He will spend 2003-2006 performing as Jefferson at spots along the Lewis & Clark Trail.

He spends a year researching each president he portrays.

"I read about 20 books per year on that president. I go to his home. I pick his top biographer and ask questions for about five hours. And then it takes about one month for the talk to come together," Gray said.

In his research, he learned that Washington contracted anthrax around June 15, 1789.

"He was mortally ill for five days and barely pulled through," Gray said.

Despite all of his research, Gray says questions from children often catch him off guard.

"Kids ask about siblings and their names, and that usually stumps me," he said.

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