

# Mackinaw City Mill Creek Visitors Center Dedicated to Dr. David Armour

By Ryan Schlehuber

For only the second time in its long history, the Mackinac Island State Park Commission has dedicated one of its 110 buildings to a person. The visitor center at Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park is now called the David A. Armour Visitor's Center, in honor of the man who spearheaded the project of recreating a historic sawmill compound just outside Mackinaw City.

The dedication, held at the 625-acre Mill Creek site Tuesday evening, June 17, coincided with the opening ceremony of the site's newest features, an adventure tour that includes a 450-foot aerial cable ride over a pond, a forest canopy bridge, a climbing wall and 50-foot lookout tower, and an extended nature trail. There is also a water power station and a Forest Friends playground.

With the newly added features, the site now includes 18 educational activities.

"I'm absolutely delighted with what they have accomplished here today," said Dr. Armour before the dedication. "This is very much in line with the master plan we made for this site."

A Man on a Mission

"Run the forts," Superintendent Eugene Petersen told his new deputy in the 1960s.

It was a simple statement, yet, for Dr. Armour, it was a daunting

task to promote the living history museum and preservation programs at Fort Mackinac on Mackinac Island and Fort Michilimackinac in Mackinaw City.

"When I was hired full time as deputy director in June 1967, I really didn't know what I was doing," admitted Dr. Armour, who began work for the Mackinac Island State Park Commission as a summer employee, working at Fort Michilimackinac's archaeology program and supervising interpretive guides in Mackinaw City and on the Island.

He soon proved that he could handle the assignment.

Mackinac Island had been a state park since 1895, but the idea of creating a museum and preservation program was not implemented until 1958, when the park commissioned opened Fort Mackinac as a museum. The following year, the commission focused on recreating Fort Michilimackinac, now called Colonial Michilimackinac. Following archaeological excavations to determine the original layout of the buildings (a project that still continues today), the fort was rebuilt and opened June 26, 1960.

Both projects were backed by revenue bonds, which provided the commission with funds to develop its museum and preservation programs and pay off the debt with the revenues received from admissions to the new exhibits.



Dr. David Armour

With two sites now up and running, it was Dr. Armour's task to maintain and build on the success that Dr. Petersen and a team of historians, archaeologists, and exhibit creators had begun.

By the time Dr. Petersen retired in 1985, Dr. Armour had settled in to what he calls "the best job in the United States," and his responsibilities had broadened to include supervising not only the forts and its many programs, but the operation of the Mackinac Island Airport.

His work at Mill Creek began in 1972, when Margaret Lentini and Mary and Ellis Olson of Cheboygan unearthed early 1800s artifacts at the site, like a British military brass hat plate and gun lock.

The hat plate was from the period of the War of 1812, when



One of the more exhilarating new features of Historic Mill Creek Discovery Park is the 450-foot-long Eagle Flight Zip Line, where people "fly" down over a pond, securely strapped to a harness and rope and pulley system. Large fish can be seen in the water from the zip line, as well. On the left is the new water power station for younger children to enjoy.

British soldiers captured Fort Mackinac from the Americans. Subsequent investigation proved the exciting discovery that the site was, indeed, linked to Fort Mackinac and had actually supplied lumber for its construction by the British during the American Revolution. In 1975, the Michigan Legislature transferred 500 acres of state forest land to the commission so that archaeological excavation could begin in earnest.

The research found that a community survived there from about 1780, when Fort Mackinac was built, until about 1840.

Dr. Armour spearheaded the development at the new site and Victor Hogg, who had contributed significantly to museum development at Fort Mackinac and Fort Michilimackinac, was again recruited to develop Historic Mill Creek into a living historical site. Staff archaeologist Lyle Stone mapped out the sawmill and other buildings at the site, based on excavations of their foundations.

"We found the most spectacular items right away, artifacts that are on display today," said Dr. Armour of the digging. "It was very exciting."

Historic Mill Creek officially opened June 15, 1984. On the 625-acre site was an operating water-powered sawmill and a visitors center that included a theater,

exhibits, and a nine-projector audio-visual program.

"It was a Spartan operation," said Dr. Armour. "We had a small staff, about two to three interpreters, so we could keep operating costs in line with expected revenue."

That first summer, he site drew 75,000 visitors.

"We only anticipated 35,000," said Dr. Armour.

The initial success allowed the park commission to expand the program and extend the season at Mill Creek, but Dr. Armour is quick to give credit for the development to the visionaries and designers.

"I was simply a caretaker" of the project, he said. "I'm proud to have created something that people today have and people in the future will have."

Mackinac Island State Park Commissioner Jim Williams dedi-

cated the visitors center to Dr. Armour on behalf of the commission at Tuesday's ceremony, the retired priest praising Dr. Armour's professional and spiritual life. Parks Director Phil Porter and many staff members from the past attended in support of his 38 years of service to the park commission. Dr. Armour was accompanied by his wife, Grace, his two daughters, Anneke Myers, with her husband Matt, and Marian Gemmen, and two granddaughters, Angelyn and Ellena Gemmen.

During the dedication, Mr. Porter unveiled the new sign for the Visitor's Center that bears Dr. Armour's name, and now hangs on the front of the building.

"I just received a tremendous honor," said Dr. Armour to the crowd in the theater. "I might get emotional, but today I am pumped up. This is the highest honor the commission could give. It's almost overwhelming for me."

Father Williams said Dr. Armour was not only a dedicated and successful park administrator, he and Mrs. Armour were great assets to the Island community, Ste. Anne's Catholic Church, and the Jamaican worship services.

"He is a man of imagination, a man of vision," said Father Williams. "He helped secure a number of grants, he oversaw the interpretations, exhibits, and displays, and the park staff and administration are very grateful for what he has accomplished at this site."

"There are a number of people to list who have helped establish our museums, and Dr. Armour is on top of that list."

Dr. Armour retired as deputy director in 2003 and he and Mrs. Armour now live in Dr. Armour's hometown of Grove City, Pennsylvania.

## Historic Parks Mark 50th Year of Museum Programs

By Ryan Schlehuber

Sunday, June 15, exactly 50 years since the Mackinac Island State Park Commission established its preservation program by opening Fort Mackinac, the agency celebrated its accomplishments at Fort Mackinac with speeches, music, and 50¢ admission.

Mackinac Island had been a state park since 1895, but serious efforts to preserve and restore its many historic buildings, including Fort Mackinac, which was built by the British during the American Revolution, didn't begin until 1957, when Governor G. Mennen Williams appointed Grand Hotel owner W. Stewart Woodfill to the complacent park commission to goad it into action.

Mr. Woodfill's goal was to sell revenue bonds to restore Fort Mackinac.

Among those helping in the early efforts were Dr. Eugene Petersen, the director of the

Michigan Historical Museum in Lansing (who later became park superintendent in 1966), and his wife, Marian, who volunteered secretarial duties, later becoming chief fiscal officer and administrative assistant.

With \$50,000 from the sale of revenue bonds, the commission cleaned up the deteriorating Fort Mackinac, created several large murals and dioramas depicting early life at the fort, and borrowed several original 19th century artifacts from museums in Detroit and Dearborn.

The project took six months, and the doors to the fort were opened in June 1958, with an admission charge of 50¢ to repay the bonds.

"I began helping practically right away," remembers Mrs. Petersen. "Mr. Woodfill asked my husband if I could type, and from there I began helping. It was very exciting, and though we had a deadline, we didn't run into many

problems."

The murals were painted by artists Victor Hogg, Dirk Gringhuis, and Cal Peters.

"We were very fortunate to find very talented people like them," said Mrs. Petersen.

Things were moving along at a fast pace, with opening day approaching, remembers Mrs. Petersen, and with Mr. Woodfill calling her at least twice a day.

"I really enjoyed Mr. Woodfill," she said. "He was always down to business, but he was also always very considerate. He appreciated what you did and never forgot that."

Knowing that the money from the state was not going to come in time to prepare for a 1958 summer opening, Mr. Woodfill donated the needed money to the program, writing to the commission that "any funds that I may advance or loan to the Commission...which for any reason can not be repaid to me...is to be considered by me...as a gift or donation to your Commission."

The commission set admission rates to Fort Mackinac at 50¢ per adult and 25¢ per child and opened the doors June 15, 1958. The first year was a huge success, generating \$54,119 in revenue from 118,000 visitors.

"The revenue bond program was the foundation that made this happen," said David Armour, who retired after 38 years as deputy director of the park. "It provided the money and freedom from any bureaucratic delays."

The success of the first year led to the reconstruction of Fort Michilimackinac in Mackinaw City, with another \$500,000 in revenue bonds.

Mackinac State Historic Parks continues to operate its preservation and reconstruction programs through the sale of revenue bonds, and the commission continues to add new features every year, said Phil Porter, the current director of Mackinac State Historic Parks, who has been with the agency for 36 years. Finding and creating new ways to bring visitors back to the Parks is the underlying motivation.

"Our operation is dynamic," said Dr. Armour. "Something is always better next year than this year. It's an alive organization, it's not static."

"We have never been an ivory tower; everything was for our visitors. Our goal was to help them enjoy and understand what they were experiencing and we wanted them to be pleased and wanted them to come back."

Mrs. Petersen, who has resided in St. Ignace since she and her husband retired in 1985, believes Dr. Petersen and Mr. Woodfill's legacy has been kept intact through the continued commitment to preservation.



U.S. Congressman Bart Stupak presents a resolution passed by both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives recognizing Mackinac State Historic Parks' 50 years of museums and historic preservation programs Sunday, June 15, on Mackinac Island. Pictured are (from left) Mackinac Island State Park Commissioners Dennis Cawthorne, Richard Manoogian, Parks Director Phil Porter, Congressman Stupak, and his wife, Laurie Stupak, also a member of the Park Commission.



Fort Mackinac interpretive soldiers fire 50 rounds in a symbolic salute to the day of celebration June 15 on Mackinac Island.

## Families Enjoy 'Summer Bash' at St. Ignace



Harold Kriesche, owner of the Deer Ranch west of St. Ignace, brought a 22-day-old fawn to the Totally Toddlers Summer Bash Saturday, June 21. The young deer is one of 36 other newborn animals at the ranch this year. Taking turns petting the small deer are (front row, from left) Chelsey Coleman, 5, Katlynn Anderson, 4, Drew Coleman, 3; (back, left) Mr. Kriesche, and Maddy Coleman, 8.

Arriving in family vans, pushing strollers, and pulling wagons, more than 150 people, including 23 volunteers, enjoyed a day of fun at the Totally Toddlers Summer Bash Saturday, June 21, in St. Ignace.

Children rushed from one activity to another set up on the grass in front of LaSalle High School. Using spray bottles, children made their mark on a large white sheet, helping to create an artistic design. Horses were saddled and available for riding and

many youngsters were drawn to a young fawn, which they were able to pet. Tours of a St. Ignace Fire Department truck and a mud run truck were offered, a clown entertained families, and other activities and games were available for children.

Five-year-old Chelsey Coleman won the door prize of a red wagon. The wagon, other prizes, and lunch were donated by area businesses.

The free event was organized by facilitator Heather Bird and

other volunteers from the Great Start Parent Coalition in St. Ignace. The organization is part of the Eastern Upper Peninsula Great Start Collaborative, which hosts events and support groups in communities throughout the area. The group offers educational materials and programs for parents of toddlers.

The St. Ignace group also has monthly play groups for children and their families. More information is available from Ms. Bird at 643-0096.