

Parlour Theatre Company's Off Site Performances Are a Hit!

By – Michelle Bostwick & Gail Loskill
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

The Parlour Theatre Company at Ushers Ferry Historic Village expanded its programming this year to take its performances off site. The company performed the radio play, *Around the World in 80 Days*, and the melodrama, *The Snobl Ultimatum*, at the Cedar Rapids Parks and Recreation Department's Riverside Roundhouse.

The Parlour Theatre program began ten years ago at Ushers Ferry Historic Village as a tool to introduce visitors to evening life in a small Iowa town at the turn of the 20th century. The goal of the program was to incorporate historic literature and foodways with a relaxed social setting that as closely as possible replicated turn-of-the-century life. The first program, *Love Letters and Lamplight*, took visitors on a progressive dining tour of the Village. Along with sampling historic dishes prepared on wood burning stoves, the guests became part of a series of sketches based on the poetry of western author Bret Harte.

The Ushers Ferry staff was inspired by the success of that program to create a Halloween program, *Morbid Curiosities: An Evening with Edgar Allan Poe*. This one-person performance led the audience through the life and writings of Poe and then ushered them to various Village homes for dessert and coffee by candlelight.

From there staff set about creating a series of performances and events, usually about seven to nine a year, that have attracted a loyal and growing following. Generally the series includes a winter melodrama, a spring storytelling and music program, a silent movie night, a barn dance, a 19th century novel, and a Halloween show.

One of the most important features of the programs is the dessert and coffee served afterwards. Because the program is intended to interpret small town evening life, community interaction is vital. The opportunity for guests, staff, and volunteers to sit and talk together over food has played a large role in shaping the program. Through this camaraderie, the Village has developed several loyal families who attend all the programs and can be counted on for help—whether physical or financial—whenever there is a need. A true community of friends who may go to dinner together before the shows or meet socially for non-Village events has formed.

The Parlour Theatre series has also been a useful tool for building partnerships with area individuals and organizations. Previously, a staff member was responsible for directing and performing in most of the programs. The programs are now done almost entirely by volunteers. Dessert served after the performances is either purchased from a local farmers' market baker or is made by volunteers, and local high school and college drama groups assist with performances and scenery construction.

This winter's performances of the radio play and the melodrama were held off site at the Riverside Roundhouse. The Roundhouse is another facility operated by the Cedar Rapids Parks and Recreation Department. It is located about ten miles from Ushers Ferry Historic Village in Czech Village, an ethnic Czech neighborhood in downtown Cedar Rapids. There were three reasons for moving the events to the Roundhouse. First, the Department was looking for a way to increase the visibility of the Roundhouse and boost facility rentals. Second, the heavy snow and cold winter made getting people safely into and out of the Village next to impossible. Third, the programs had gotten too large for the Village Grange Hall to hold safely or comfortably.

One appeal of the Parlour Theatre program at Ushers Ferry Historic Village is its intimate feeling and historic setting. One of the challenges of performing in the much larger setting of the Roundhouse was maintaining the parlor ambiance. To solve this problem, the Village's head carpenter built a portable stage so that the backdrops and settings of the Grange Hall could be brought to the Roundhouse. Staff made the large space more intimate by using Christmas lights and candles rather than overhead lighting. But the most important part of making the

change successful was ensuring that the volunteers who greeted, served, and interacted with the guests really emphasized friendliness and customer service.

The Parlour Theatre program is one that easily adapts to a number of themes, venues, and sites. Many institutions from historic homes to science museums are seeing the value of simple, intimate performance opportunities ranging from chamber theater to storytelling and music. This great program gives visitors a new perspective on the story told by a site or exhibit and can help build and strengthen community. It can also help an organization build partnerships with other community groups. In short, it is a useful, simple, and effective tool.

For additional information or for questions, please call 319-286-5731 or visit www.cedar-rapids.org.