



2011 MIDWEST CIVIL WAR CIVILIAN CONFERENCE: SPRINGFIELD, IL

28 January -30 January 2011, the place to be was Springfield, Illinois, for the eleventh annual Mid-West Civilian Conference. If you were there, you know just how much fun and information was shared; if you weren't able to make it this year, start planning to attend in 2012!

Vendors, organizers, presenters, and even some attendees started arriving at the President Abraham Lincoln Hotel Thursday evening, to be on hand for Friday set-up and registration bright and early. Cheri Fry had registration in full swing by 7:30 a.m., with smiles and chocolate greeting each conference attendee. A National Park Service ranger from the Lincoln Home site just down the street was on hand to share information about the site as just a brief introduction to a special presentation and tour the next day.

One big part of the fun of any conference is the opportunity for pre-conference workshops, and the set offered this year did not disappoint. Compact class sizes were set to provide individual attention. The buzz from the workshop on Sourcing: Where To Get Stuff For An Authentic Impression, led by Kay Gnagey and Sue Pfeiffer, was audible from the registration tables, and watching the excitement as ladies learned the tricks of Tunisian Crochet with Kathy Yurkonis was lovely. Cheri amazed me with her ability to pinpoint the precise stylist for each person's hair after the Hair Dressing workshop with Sue, Joseph Reed, and Mary Bogumill; each style remained faithful to mid-century aesthetics, while suiting the individual personality



Sally Nobsch is participating in the "Hair Dressing for Men and Women" with Mary Bogumill doing the honors

and showing just a touch of the stylist's hand. It was an invigorating preview for the historic-dress reception that night! The afternoon rounded out with a hands-on workshop by Elaine Masciale on Making Period Bandboxes, and from the look of the finished boxes, they'll be a grand addition to living history settings.

If you're like most, you may have read recipes in historic cookbooks, and wondered what they might be like in real life. Friday's historic-dress reception at the historic Elijah Iles home was a great opportunity to find out. Chef

Tim LaFayette served a variety of modern Greek-inspired nibbles (spanikopita! olives! baklava!), as well as a nicely-stocked selection taken from mid-19th century recipes. The various "tea" sandwiches, gingerbread, ginger biscuits, and macaroons were some of my particular favorites. Several hours of congenial visiting accompanied the feast, as new attendees got to know returning participants, and on-line friends became in-person friends. Even the weather cooperated; it was cold, but clear, and safe for walking back to the hotel.

The siren call of breakfast and fresh coffee drew everyone to the conference hall first thing Saturday morning. Our Master of Ceremonies, Dr Russ Gilliom, handled introductions and between-presentation trivia challenges. With so many history buffs, he did quite a lot of research to try and stump us, but was forced to hand out copious amounts of chocolate, books, and other prizes throughout the weekend.

The presentations kicked off with Westering Home: Settling



Left: Elizabeth Stewart Clark and "Westering Home: Settling the American West" - Center and Right: "Mechanization: The Sewing Machine of the Mid 19th Century and What it Could Do" with Ken Gough

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"The Flowers Of Secession: Secession & Federal Cockades, and Other Ways to Show Convictions In Clothing"-Tom Arliskas

the American West, followed by Ken Gough's workshop on the sewing machine at the mid-century. I was particularly impressed by the way Mr Gough involved the audience, and his readiness to share his sources for the hard-to-replace mechanical bits for original machines; we all got a chance to see period machines in action, too. Joseph Reed shared dozens of images of original fans in his presentation Keeping Your Cool: Fans of the Mid-19th Century (Not Just For The Ladies). I found myself jotting several pages of notes, and making plans to bribe my daughter into recreating some of the hand-painted Chinese-export fans from his slides. Fortunately, she is easily bribed by millinery.

Park Service Ranger David Wachtveitl took the podium just before lunch, sharing some of the great events planned for the sesquicentennial at the Lincoln Home site in Springfield, as well as some vital information to help living history enthusiasts more easily get involved in Park Service living history. With a basic understanding of how Park Service interpretive policies work, it's much simpler to find ways to cooperate with local and regional sites, expanding the scope of our living history efforts. He also invited conference attendees to a special tour opportunity that evening, which many of us enjoyed.

Quality vendors made it a difficult choice: eat lunch and visit, or go shopping? Quite a few of us took the chance to shop, and were rewarded with a wide selection of ready-made clothing, gorgeous millinery, books, fabrics, notions, patterns,

fervor, taken from primary sources and accented with dozens of original images and examples, amply demonstrated yet another connection between modern and historic life: the common need to connect to others of like mind through the use of symbols. Today, we recognize the meanings and feelings behind magnetic "ribbons" on car bumpers; in the mid-century, cockades, ribbons, and other symbolic accessories displayed meaning in the same ways. As a final highlight, Mr Arliskas

brought out two wonderfully-dressed ladies, each accessorized to the gills with patriotic sentiment, from Secession and Union aprons, to numerous cockades and ribbons, to Union and Secession bonnets!



"Ring Ring de Banjo: From a Slave's Instrument To One of the Most Popular of the 19th Century" - John Masciale

John Masciale ably filled the last presentation of the afternoon, teaching us about this history of the banjo, and its wild ride to fame and popularity through the first half of the 19th century. A talented musician, he not only spoke well, he played for us! Hearing mid-century music, played in mid-century styles, on mid-century instruments is a true delight in any setting. Listening to the musical sections, I can only imagine what a layer of reality such music would add to any living history setting. Mr Masciale's stories of mid-century theater started me immediately thinking just how many interesting events and scenarios we still have to develop in the living history world! (One of my favorite stories he shared was of African-American minstrel sensation William Henry "Juba" Lane, whom PT Barnum

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The "Show & Tell" sessions and the vendor shopping are always highlights of the conference

dressed in blackface and wig before presenting to paying audiences. By the time this duplicity was discovered, Lane's popularity rendered his natural skin color a moot point, and he continued on as one of the premier stars of popular theater.)

Sunday morning found us enjoying period images and discussion of the many clothing options for teens and tweens in their "Awkward Years", followed by Kay Gnagey's non-threatening math lessons on ratios, and how using simple math formulae can help us conquer the proportions of the true mid-century look. Small differences in scale make a big difference in the finished look of a garment! Her step-by-step process made it easy to understand and replicate at home.

One of the most pleasant aspects of the Conference was the overall atmosphere. The presenters were all excited to share their information with the Conference, and very open to comments and questions from attendees; several times, quick tangent topics were introduced for discussion during the presentation, and each time, the tone was helpful, encouraging, and supportive, making the Conference a great place for living history newcomers (and veterans as well) to gain confidence and absorb the collegial atmosphere we all enjoy as a part of historic research. Add it to the "Yes, Please" list for your 2012 living history goals!



This lucky group of conference attendees got a very special tour of the Lincoln Home with Park Service Ranger David Wachtveitl.