

Museum re-creates mission atmosphere

By Tammy Conklin
Guest contributor

LIVERPOOL — It's late morning at the mission. A young Jesuit priest, newly ordained and new to this land, looks out to the calm body of water that has long been the local Iroquois tribes' lifeline. A *donné* is busy repairing the church doors. Two more are preparing the midday meal over an open flame. Odds are that it will include eel and cornmeal, again.

If any of this sounds familiar, you've probably made a visit to Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois on the Onondaga Parkway. The living-history museum recreates the combination of cultures between French Jesuits and the Iroquois Indians. Great care has been taken to accurately recapture the mission's atmosphere as it was in 1656.

Relatively little has been written about the importance of the time period between the 30 Years War and the Civil War. Bill Perks — who portrays an interpreter for the Jesuit priest at the mission and who also performs public relations for the museum — and the rest of the staff at Sainte Marie are trying to change that.

Visitors are encouraged to take a walk through the Visitor Center before meeting with interpreters. The center's contemporary design is a sharp contrast to the mission buildings' simple 17th-century construction, but the interactive exhibits provide a helpful background on the mission.

The main source of inspiration and

reference for the re-enactment is a collection of writings known as the *Jesuit Relations*. Passages document life along Onondaga Lake during the original mission's time. Perks said he has found the writings helpful in providing a better understanding of the character he portrays.

During that period in history, the Jesuit was highly respected. *Donnés* would bow and remove their hats before speaking to them. In return, the highly educated Jesuits showed little emotion, adhering to a serious, well-disciplined code of conduct.

Jesuit Masses were also quite different from those of today. The priests tended to conduct their sermons with their backs to the congregation. Perks said that they considered themselves "messengers of God" and did not deem it necessary to constantly talk to their congregations.

Not everyone shares the respect Perks has for the Jesuits. The Catholic hierarchy often criticized the French missionaries for incorporating aspects of native religious practices into their Masses, such as having tribal women assisting. Here, the Jesuits' fluency with tribal languages was important.

The mission was established, in part, to help maintain the uneasy peace established among the five nations of the Iroquois confederacy. The peace bound together the Oneida, Mohawk, Keuka and Seneca nations with the Onondagas at the center. It took Jesuit missionary René Menard two months to reach the Onondaga Lake site by canoe

from Quebec.

About 50 men served the mission during its 20 months of operation, living on the lake's once edible fish and the "sister" crops of the Onondagas, better known today as corn, beans, and pumpkin squash.

By January 1658, Onondaga Chief Garakontie could no longer encourage native support for the mission and it was abandoned in March of that year.

While the Onondaga Lake site met its obsolescence, the Jesuits did not abandon their cause. Missionaries returned to Iroquois villages in smaller numbers during the 1670s and '80s.

The first replica, architecturally inaccurate and an inspiration for the "Old French Fort," was built in 1933. Onondaga County started a living-history museum at the site in 1975 and the present buildings, much closer in design to the originals, were constructed about two years ago.

Sainte Marie will host an Iroquois Mass and supper on Saturday, June 12. The Mass will link the mission interpreters with members of the Native American apostolate at St. Lucy Church in Syracuse.

Father James Carey, pastor, will conduct the service in the native language of the Mohawks and supper will include the three "sister crops."

The Iroquois Mass and supper will begin at 6 p.m. Admission is \$6 for adults and \$3 for children.

The museum will also offer workshops in woodworking and blacksmithing this summer. In August, the



Onondaga County Parks Museum Office
When the Angelus bell traditionally rang three times a day, the Jesuits would stop working and pray.

"Taste of New France" series will give visitors an idea of the food served at the mission. This will be taken a step further on Aug. 21 when an entire 17th-century St. Marie Feast is served.

Call Elaine Wisowaty, 315/453-6767 for information. The museum is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday, from now until Dec. 31.

Tammy Conklin is a contributing writer to the Catholic Sun in Syracuse.

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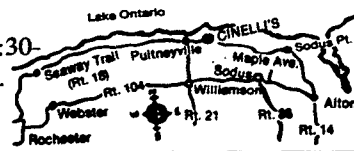
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