
THE EDITOR'S PAGE

MUCH TIME, effort, and money were invested last summer to recreate life characteristic of the 1820s at old Fort Snelling. Male guides wore uniforms fashioned to duplicate exactly the outfits of the fort's first soldiers. The uniformed guides, following the official manual of arms of the early period, fired antique guns matching those the army used in and around Fort Snelling during the 1820s. Replica cannons, cast to specifications turned up by researchers, were also fired upon commands of the type given by early nineteenth-century army officers.

Female guides, dressed in period costumes, dipped candles, cooked, washed clothes, sewed, wove, and did other chores. They worked in the sutler's store, where replicas of merchandise known to have been sold in the original building were offered for sale to modern visitors. Two steamboats visited the fort, and on one of them members of the University of Minnesota showboat company gave "Lady of Lyons," a play known to have been performed by fort personnel in one of Minnesota's first theatrical productions.

The guides, of course, also conducted visitors through the main attraction — the continuing restoration and reconstruction of the old fort itself. Basing its efforts on the best available evidence, including current archaeological investigations, the Minnesota Historical Society is striving to recreate the atmosphere and physical structure of Fort Snelling of the 1820s. When the visitor enters the gate he should find himself suddenly immersed in a world unlike his own but related to it. Here, within the setting where white settlement in the Northwest first took root and from which our own state has evolved, the visitor may make discoveries about his past and present and perhaps even about himself.

All this is related to environment — not only that within the walls of the fort but also what surrounds it. At present, the roar of jet aircraft overhead and of freeway traffic on nearby bridges mars the setting, and large signs advertising present-day commercial concerns intrude upon the visitor's gaze from the Penta-

gonal Tower. Nevertheless, it is still possible today for a visitor to stand approximately where the half-moon battery, or lookout tower, will be constructed behind the original commandant's house and see below him an essentially unbroken view, much the same as Colonel Josiah Snelling and his men saw, of the historic and scenic confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. This is an almost unique situation within a large metropolitan area, and one that can still be preserved for future generations. The present structures along the Mendota side of the river are built within the scale of the fort and are largely obscured by trees. The St. Paul side has been saved by the park system's acquisition of land. A commercial boat works, which for a while threatened to intrude, is no longer in the picture.

Now, however, the entire setting is menaced by a proposal to build a high-rise apartment building that will loom up, a massive rectangle towering above the surrounding river banks and dwarfing the old fort buildings on the opposite side. The harmony of trees, rocks, water, and green bluffs will be destroyed by this monolith, far out of scale with anything near it. For the benefit of a few, many thousands of fort visitors will be deprived forever of an untrammelled experience in environmental preservation and interpretation.

In recent years the Fort Snelling site has survived proposals to use it for a highway interchange, an army unit's headquarters, a new federal building, a junior college, and a zoo. No doubt the future will bring other threats to the environment not only of the historic fort but of the entire Fort Snelling State Park. No matter how avidly and how well the Minnesota Historical Society and the Division of State Parks do their jobs at Fort Snelling, they are still dependent upon the citizenry — including political and commercial leaders — to help preserve a compatible environment for the state's most historic ground.

Donn Coddington, historic sites supervisor



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