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Film to salute Michigan's role in Civil War

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GRAND BLANC, Michigan — It's been more than 150 years since Flint citizen Sarah Emma Edmonds donned a pair of pants and the name Frank Thompson and took the battlefields of the Civil War.

Edmonds is one of numerous Michiganders who make an appearance in the hourlong documentary, "The Michigan Experience," which details Michigan's contributions to the Civil War.

The movie, created and filmed by Grand Blanc-based iMichigan Productions, airs on all the PBS stations in Michigan this November and will be available on DVD afterward, said writer and producer Rodney Brown.

People often don't think of Michigan as a player in the Civil War since most of the battles took place several hundred miles south of the state's borders, Brown said. But, in fact, Michigan sent about 90,000 men to the war effort, nearly a quarter of its male population.

"It struck me as strange when I heard that Michigan was involved in the Civil War, and I did research, and the more research I did, I found out they were heavily involved," Brown said.

The state contributed famous figures, such as Gen. George Armstrong Custer, who later gained infamy for “Custer’s Last Stand” at the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn; Sen. Jacob Howard, a Civil War-era Michigan senator who played a large role in drafting and passing the 13th and 14th amendments; and, of course, Edmonds.

For nearly the past 20 years, Thetford Township resident Alyse Parker, 54, has been researching and portraying Edmonds for Civil War re-enactments.

She plays a post-Civil War Edmonds in “The Michigan Experience,” having filmed an interview with Brown in Crossroads Village about five or eight years ago, she said.

“I’ve known (Edmonds) for so long. I’ve done so much research,” Parker said. “I also think (she) is really relevant today, because I don’t know what the modern women do now in uniform, but I think we need to remember it isn’t a new phenomena. It’s been going on since (the Revolutionary War Battle of) Bunker Hill — they just didn’t know it.”

Brown began working on the movie five years ago, although he started his research and interviewed sources before that. He plans three more films in coming years, one for each year of the Civil War.

He said the film project still is seeking sponsors and is hoping to raise $1 million during the next four years.

Fred Priebe, 63, of Belleville portrays President Abraham Lincoln in the movie. He grew a Lincoln-like beard in 1973, and after hearing continual references to how much he resembled the famed president, began playing the leader in re-enactments in 1996.

“(Brown is) putting together a very nice project of Michigan’s involvement in the Civil War, and that is a story that Michigan residents need to see, to know what their history is,” Priebe said.

For more details on the film and the PBS channels where it will be shown, visit imichiganproductions.org.

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