

Actor brings 'Famous Hoosiers' to Jasper County

By Nick Fiala reporter@rensselaerrepUBLICAN.com Sep 18, 2018



Photo by Nick Fiala

Danny Russell in character as Daniel Boone during the Little Cousin Jasper Festival in Rensselaer earlier this year.

Photo by Nick Fiala

Anyone who has attended the Jasper County Fair or the Little Cousin Jasper Festival over the years has likely caught at least a glimpse or two of actor Danny Russell.

Indeed, he's a bit hard to miss, given that he's typically wielding a musket or wearing a colorful three-piece suit or a tall stovepipe hat. But one's going to need a few of those things in order to portray "Famous Hoosiers," the property which Russell uses to promote himself at famoushoosiers.com.

According to Russell, he has been a professional actor for over 30 years and has specialized in portraying historical figures for about half of that time. So far, his roster includes legendary explorer Daniel Boone, the poet James Whitcomb-Riley and, last but not least, President Abraham Lincoln. With a specialty for portraying historical figures, it is perhaps fitting that Russell's prior career was to be teaching.

"Both my parents were teachers, and I was going to be a college professor," he said. "And they died over that when I said, 'I'm going to become an actor.'"

Russell headed for the Chicago Actor's Studio to pursue his dream. From there, he tried to eek out a living through stage plays and commercials. After some time, though, he hit on the idea of putting on his own shows.

"Rather than auditioning for a play or waiting for permission to act, I could hire myself out to a school, a library, a museum, a fair, a festival and bring to life one of my historical characters," he said.

Acting might not be manual labor, but it does take work and dedication, as Russell discovered when Lincoln became his first project.

"It was my wife who said, 'You're tall and skinny; you should think about Abraham Lincoln,'" he recalled. "And I said, 'Dear, you're talking about the man on the tallest mountain with the brightest torch.' And she said, 'You can learn Shakespeare. You could learn some speeches!'"

Through grant funding, Russell was able to travel to places like Washington D.C., Springfield, Illinois, Hodgenville, Kentucky and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to learn about the life of one of the nation's most fascinating and important leaders.

"After about three years of research, I was able to write a script and then get it approved for touring purposes," he said.

To get away with the idea that a realistic Lincoln is touring around, Russell has to be vetted first.

"Of course, everything has to be historically accurate," he said. "I have to get approval from the Indiana Arts Commission of my material and to tour ... And they vet everything. And, once I have the okay, then I can take it out on the road. So it's not a one-man operation. It's funding, it's research."

Though Russell can propose some show opportunities, many of his appearances occur by word-of-mouth.

"Tomorrow, I'm headed to a private ladies luncheon to play Mr. Lincoln," he said earlier this year. "Someone saw me and got my contact information and told this group about me."

According to Russell, the Daniel Boone character came along when he found himself as a runner-up in an audition process to play Boone and decided to use what research material he had to form his own show.

Riley came about in a more organic way, when Russell found success as the character in a different show.

"I was performing a play about the life of Riley," he said. "And it was in a children's museum in Indianapolis. And we were such a success, we bused kids in from all over the state."

Though the play premiered on October 7, Riley's birthday, it ended up running for months, surprising Russell and the others involved. It was then brought back every October for several years.

"I fell in love with Riley," Russell said. "I said, 'I'm so protective of that, I don't want to just stop.' And so I developed a show for touring purposes, just a natural extension out of what I was already doing."

Russell said his many routines keep him able to work as an actor for the entire year. And though he does need publicity as much as any performer at times, he remains optimistic about his work and his unconventional job of making history come to life for a little while.

"I'm one of the fortunate few," he said during this year's Jasper County Fair. "I've never had to stand on the street corner with a sign saying, 'Will act for food.'"