

History in song

Warren Nelson brings historic musical to Mankato West

Amanda Dyslin; The Free Press; February 06, 2006

MANKATO - Forget Seabiscuit. Minnesota was home to one of the most famous horses of all time.

What surprises folk musician and historian Warren Nelson is that many young people haven't even heard the name Dan Patch, the "World's Champion Harness Horse." And to him, that's a shame.

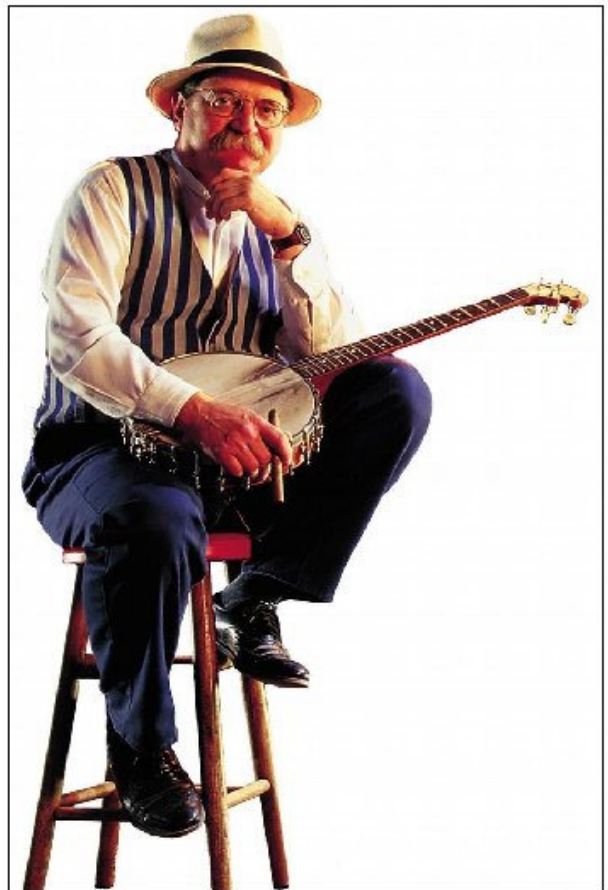
That's why it's so fun for him to teach history to people through music and humor and a whole lot of fun. That way, he says - as a short film of Dan Patch plays and Nelson sings a little folk tune about the horse thousands of people attended the State Fair to see his audience will never forget what they've learned.

This is why Scott Urban, social studies teacher at Mankato West High School, worked so hard to bring Nelson and his new production, "Old Minnesota: Song of the North Star," to the school Friday.

Nelson and his team will perform parts of the show, which celebrates 150 years of Minnesota history, for students during the day and the full show for the public at 7 p.m. The musical combines slide shows, readings, songs, dramatic reenactments and dancing in one two-hour history lesson.

"What I'm most looking forward to is having students exposed to the creative side of history," Urban said. "History is so much more than the textbook (and) the test."

Nelson's felt the same way his whole life. A Fairmont native, he's always been interested in history and music, and somewhere along the line, he decided to combine the two.



"I like doing concerts. I like reading history. I like doing comedy. I like storytelling," he said. "I thought, 'Why not combine all those things?'"

Nelson wrote his first historic production set to music in 1976, "A Martin County Hornpipe," about the history of Martin County of which Fairmont is the county seat.

Later he moved to northern Wisconsin, where he was commissioned to write and perform other such productions about the history of Washburn, Bayfield and, eventually, the state's history in celebration of the sesquicentennial, called "30th Star," and still tours the state.

Nelson's home base is Lake Superior Big Top Chautauqua – an 850-seat tent theater near Bayfield, which was built for him about 20 years ago to perform his historic productions. Touring artists also perform there.

"Our tent went up and we continued the parade of putting these shows together," said Nelson, who has co-written a dozen of them with his longtime friends and fellow musicians.

"Old Minnesota," his most recent show, came about when Nelson got to thinking several years ago that his home state would be turning 150 in 2008.

"I said, 'Hey, I gotta do a show in my home state - the land I love,'" he said.



Nelson hit the books, did dozens of hours of research and spent even more time editing, paring down 150 years of history into a two-hour show. His band helped with the vocal and instrumental arrangements once the scenes were written.

There are songs and skits about Minnesota rivers, steamboats, the railroad and the Dakota Conflict. He touches on agriculture, Lake Superior, fur trading and harsh Minnesota winters.

As with every show, he'll tailor a segment to Mankato. He recently received books in the mail about Blue Earth County's history so he could begin writing the section, which will open the second half.

Nelson said what makes the shows so fun is the music and the humorous skits. One funny moment of the show is when a 1920s film is played showing people on sleds.

"I love this show," he said. "It's such a big show."

Urban hasn't seen this production, which Nelson first performed at the Fairmont Opera House spring 2004. But every time he and his friend go camping at the Apostle Islands near Washburn, they always take in a Big Top Chautauqua show - which is how he first discovered Nelson and Co. years ago.

"I thought, 'I'm a history teacher; this is incredible,'" he said. "This is what we do here at West, in a way, in trying to motivate kids to learn and understand history in new and different ways."

Urban said the students will greatly benefit from seeing history as being a collection of stories about neighbors and communities.

"It's just as valuable as presidents and Congress and laws and legislation," he said. "Real people living lives."