An Interview with Mark A. Baker

Part 1: The Early Years

By Mark Sage

It was late Sunday afternoon, and many of the participants and traders had already packed up and gone home. Shadows were starting to lengthen, and with that, the intense heat of the day was being replaced with a gentle, more-acceptable warmth. The wind had also picked up a bit, mercifully caressing the earth, people and livestock with soothing, cool fingers.

Although this was my third year to visit Mansker’s Station’s 18th Century Trade Fair, I was not attending the event just to shop around and meet people. This year I came to find out the truth about one man.

Sitting at a large table in the restored, 18th century Bowen house, located in Moss-Wright Park where the trade fair is held, I waited with a tape recorder and microphone. The room in which we sat seemed to exude 18th century personality, making it a fitting place to conduct this interview. Gene Shadley, a good friend, was sitting across from me and had come to take pictures.

My wife, Cindy, had told me that, when it comes to well-known people, sometimes the public figure and private one are different, often disappointingly so. I wondered if this man was as knowledgeable as he seemed to be. Would he be a braggart? Could he do the things that he claims he does? Was he the genuine article or a cardboard facade? In moments we would find out.

Our repose was suddenly broken when a man walked through the door clad in sweat-stained linen and leather. Wearing, he deposited himself on the chair provided, pulled off his tricorn straw hat, wiped his brow and stuck out his hand for a round of handshakes and introductions.

The middle-aged man appeared to be tired and haggard. At around five feet ten inches tall, he looked solidly built and in good shape. His shoulder-length hair was brown and graying. Because of the heat, it was gathered in a ponytail behind his head, revealing a face with strong and well-defined features.

Mark Sage is a resident of Minnesota, where he frequents the lakes and rivers in a birch-bark canoe. Sage depicts an Eastern longhunter or French-Canadian voyageur and speaks on various 18th century topics for schools, historical societies and other groups.

Of the two things that caught my attention, the first was his eyes. The eyes of this man looked straight at me with a penetrating, although not unfriendly, stare that never flinched, cowered or avoided my gaze. They were observant eyes that scanned and focused quickly, picking up all pertinent data with an attention to detail.

The second was his smile. Both big and broad, it immediately conveyed a warmth and friendliness that eased my nervous apprehension. When he smiled (which was often), his eyes changed from a look of intensity to merriment and mischievousness. A practical joker perhaps?

Who was this sun-smitten man dressed in 18th century attire? It was Mr. Mark A. Baker.

Mark Baker, teacher, author, reenactor and now actor. The man who trained Daniel Day Lewis in the skills of a woodsman for the movie The Last of the Mohicans. You probably knew that, but did you know that he proofread the script and edited it for historical accuracy? Or that, during filming, the producer, Michael Mann, called upon Mark for “on the spot” opinions as to whether or not something would be historically correct for the French and Indian War period?

Mark also helped train Mel Gibson for his role in the movie The Patriot. Most recently, he starred as Davy Crockett in the History Channel’s series The Hunter Heroes.

Then there is Mark’s book, Sons of a Trackless Forest. It is a definitive work on the longhunters of the 18th century. Sales have gone well on this book, and it is worth reading.

We have all read and benefited from “A Pilgrim’s Journey,” Mark’s regular articles in MUZZLELOADER. What he writes sometimes stirs controversy and frequently provokes debate. Most of all, his writings prod us to investigate, experiment and, hopefully, emulate our 18th century ancestors, especially that the group of woodsman known simply as longhunters.

If you thought you knew Mark Baker, read on. You might find some surprises. I know I did.

Mark Baker’s life began on August 22, 1956, in a small Canadian town, not as Mark Baker but Mark Bushell. He was destined to be an only child. Four and one-half years after his birth, the family pulled up stakes and moved to Phoenix, Arizona.
However, most children had little playtime and were expected to become useful contributing members of the household as soon as possible. It is, therefore, more period correct to involve your children, whatever their ages, in participating in your own chores and activities as much as their age level permits.

What difference does it make if you aren’t strictly authentic in baby/child clothing or care? In the larger scheme of things, none. But those of us who invest our time, energy and money in reenacting value the authenticity of what we do or we wouldn’t do it. Reenacting the historic baby or child gives you a wonderful opportunity for interpreting to the public, and they’ll be fascinated. Your little one’s comfort and safety come first, but beyond that, it’s just as easy to “bring up” your children in a proper 18th century manner, and everyone will enjoy the experience that much more. If you must, make the necessary compromises as your conscience dictates and save that conscience by being prepared to explain to the inquiring public why you chose those compromises and what the period-correct alternatives would have been.

At any reenactment event, children are always the center of the public’s attention. By simply being mindful of how our forebears thought about and handled their babies, you can, with little trouble, hold and care for your baby in ways that markedly improve the authenticity of your period-baby impression. Attention to the details, such as what your toddler is wearing on his head or what books your older children are reading, will fascinate visitors, gratify other reenactors and give you lots of interpretive opportunities!

References:

Mike Moore offers for sale his first book.

Heroes To Me

This overview of the fur trade is a must for your personal library. The 184 pages contain the best of his 85+ published articles, with bonus resource and reading lists. Modestly priced at $17.95 each plus shipping. Now in its third printing, for your copy call (303) 238-4656 or write amm1616@comcast.net.

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MICHAEL D. BARTON
been married for more than 24 years and have three children. Clint, their oldest, likes to work with his hands and is in an electrician's apprenticeship program. Carrie is attending Middle Tennessee State University, majoring in broadcasting with a minor in theater. Carrie shares Mark's interest in history. Clayton, their youngest, gets all A's and likes football, wrestling and baseball. With Mark, family is his number one priority.

"My woodsy talent, my woodsy discipline or my interests," Mark told us, "comes after family."

Mark met his wife, Marlys Shilling, on June 20, 1978, the summer after he graduated from college, thanks to a mutual friend from her church and his college. On their very first date, they went out water skiing on a lake east of Phoenix. Although nothing was said between them, at day's end they both knew that they would marry each other. When they related this to their parents the same day, Mark's parents were amused while Marlys's took it more seriously.

Mark was so convinced that Marlys was the one for him that two days later he proposed.

"I picked her up about 10:30 or 11:00 in the evening after she got off of work," said Mark. "She worked in a restaurant and I was taking her home. I had written a poem and hand-painted the card it was on. She recited it while I was driving. The last phrase went something like, 'therefore, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.' Marlys responded with 'does that mean you want to marry me?' I pulled my 1966 Dodge Dart over on a busy street, we kissed, and the following October we got married."

A typical day in the Baker household is a busy one. Mark teaches school, and Marlys does double duty as a restaurant manager and server. Mark's day begins at 5:30 in the morning. After breakfast, he's out of the house and off to work by 6:45. After school he involves himself as much as possible with his children's many activities. Those activities might include football, baseball, wrestling, drama, cross-country track or even a spring-musical practice. On non-game days, he will be home by 6:00 PM. Otherwise, 10:30 PM is a closer bet. Saturday is slated for household chores, and Sunday is church and family day. When does he ever have time to write, I wondered.

The family moved to Tennessee in 1993 from their previous home in Logan, Utah. Before that particular move, Mark had an interesting decision.

"I had three choices," said Mark. "I heard from some folks on the committee that I was a leading candidate for senior editor of Muzzle Blasts, the University of Southern Utah wanted to hire me to be supervisor of their writing lab and non-tenure track faculty, or I could move to Tennessee and teach high school English classes. Ron Elbert, the rifle maker, took my curriculum vitae (a Latin phrase meaning roughly, "my life in studies") and brought it to some people that were involved in Tennessee's educational system. That got me an interview, which got me the job. The folks at Friendship weren't going to make a decision until September at their annual fall shoot, but school would be starting in August and I needed to think of my children. The move to Friendship would not have been in their best interest, simply because Tennessee had some educational opportunities tailor made for them. Besides, I like to write more than I like to edit."

How did Mark Baker get involved with muzzleloading? What was the hook that caused him to make the decision to move to Logan, Utah?
pursuit of history such an important part of his life? To understand this, one needs to turn back the pages of Mark's life.

"As a boy of eight, with a lively imagination and a consuming infatuation for leather-clad frontiersmen, 20th Century-Fox's TV series Daniel Boone was the banquet upon which my youthful enthusiasm feasted each Thursday night. For six straight years, I witnessed Fess Parker portraying the Kentucky trailblazer who lived out the adventures, the exploits, the dramas which I could only dream about during my playtime" (Baker xxi).

"As a young adult, I read everything I could on the weapons and accompanying accoutrements used by the Colonial woodsmen—like Daniel Boone—who supported and defended their families by such effective means. I went to black powder rifle shoots, even won a few shooting prizes, and eventually outfitted myself in what many new reenactors like myself called 'authentic clothing of the period.' I continued to watch every TV show, everything I could about the Colonial frontier. And I watched them over and over again, for, to a great extent, I was still basing my knowledge on what I saw on the large or small silver screen. I was perfectly happy, but not always completely content to just stand in line and shoot my flintlock rifle. I wanted to do more, experience a deeper sense of

the life which men like Daniel Boone led so long ago. But I did not know how" (Baker xxii).

For all of Mark's interest and enthusiasm, he did not learn to shoot a muzzleloader until he was 21 years old. In 1977 Ken Baker took a leave of absence from his job in Phoenix to spend time with his own aging father in Ohio. That summer, between college sessions, Mark joined Ken. He didn't know it at the time, but a new day was dawning.

"One of my cousins on my dad's side had married a man named Glen Fortney, who was about the scariest man I had ever seen," Mark said. "He had long hair, a beard, wore these small glasses, never smiled and rode a Harley. Even his muzzleloading friends nicknamed him 'Crab.' But in reality he was the nicest man in the world. He taught me how to shoot a flintlock rifle, throw a tomahawk, use flint and steel and all sorts of other things—and he had a great singing voice."

Mark and Marlys were married the next year, and they moved to Michigan for his first teaching job. There he hooked up with a black-powder club just outside of Lansing called Owl Creek Muzzleloaders. At one of their monthly club shoots, he showed up with his flintlock rifle, a Thompson-Center Renegade (converted from percussion), that had been decorated with several brass tacks. One of the shooters there asked if he was Mark Baker, and Mark recognized him as his old classmate, Jud Brennan. Jud was the one who steered Mark in the direction of getting a proper rifle.

Jim Briggs, Mark Baker and Mike Cole embrace in friendship before they catch a ride with Ken Baker in the high mountains of Arizona in November of 1984. The anticipation of adventure gleams from their faces. The transition to 18th century accoutrements and clothing was well under way.

"After reading John Baird's books on the Hawken rifle, what I had in mind was a full-stocked, flintlock Hawken," Mark said. "But Jud told me I needed an earlier gun because an earlier gun could always go later, but a later gun could never go earlier."

Jud further suggested that, if Mark was to have only one gun to shoot, a .50-caliber rifle might be the ticket because it could be used for hunting both large and small game. Mark agreed and Jud built him a flintlock longrifle that is essentially scratch built except for the lock and barrel. This left-handed gun is not richly embellished and represents the type that an average woodsmen might carry in the Illinois Country during the mid-18th century. It has been Mark's companion in the woods for more than 21 years and has a special nickname.

"Because this rifle came to my house the same week that my daughter was born, I wanted it to have a fitting name," Mark said. "I named it 'Moriah,' which means 'chosen by Jehovah.' She, I believe, is a gift chosen by God for my family. The name 'Moriah' is a reflection of Carrie's birth."

What do you think Mark paid for this gun made by one of North America's most respected gunmakers? Hold on to your hats.

"Jud gave me a deal I could not refuse," Mark said. "Today, his rifles start at around $5,500.00. Back then, when he was not as well known, his starting price was $1500.00. I bought mine for $700.00 plus parts. I traded a Colt Walker pistol for
the octagon-to-round barrel at Friendship.”

Even so, that $700.00 was a sizeable amount of money for a young man with a family, just starting his career as a teacher, when his monthly salary was only $750.00. Things worked out, though, because that year the teachers received a pay increase that was retroactive, and it was enough to pay for his new rifle.

One might conclude that, since his career as a teacher was related to history and he had acquired more appropriate accoutrements, Mark would have been satisfied. He was not. A piece of the puzzle was still missing that books, movies and rendezvous were not providing. Something else was needed to help him better “connect” with the past. While he was studying for his master’s degree at Utah State University, a door of discovery was finally opened to him. The impact of this influenced and forever changed his manner of understanding history.

In pursuing his master’s degree, Mark took a course in outdoor museum management with a concentration in American studies. This included working at a “living history” farm for one year. Located north of Salt Lake City, it was at the time one of the best living history programs in the country.

The time frame that he reenacted was 1917 and he portrayed a Mormon farmer.

(Yes, you read that correctly!) To do this, he was required to wear white cotton shirts, tuck his long hair up under his hat and work the land.

Jobs at this living history farm included plowing fields, pulling hay—all with draft horses. He also got the not-so-enviable task of tending ten acres of sugar beets with a hoe. The program was tailor-made for Mark, allowing him to study both the folklore and folkways of his chosen era. In addition to the living history farm, he taught a writing class. He also took a heavy concentration of graduate courses in writing. This allowed him to combine his interest in teaching and writing with his interest in American studies.

It was at this vintage Mormon farm that Mark became acquainted with a term that we have all heard—experimental archaeology.

Since Mark uses this term in his articles, I asked him for its definition and origin.

“Professional museum people in Sweden started the concept of ‘outdoor museum-living history’ ideas in the late 1800s,” Mark said. “They developed things like a Pre-Scandinavian, Ice Age village. The idea was to try and understand how these ancient people subsisted by using original artifacts to recreate the tools used to plant gardens, build huts, hunt and prepare meals. With copies of original tools, they would experiment in the field and try to learn both how they lived and what their existence was actually like.

“In the 1960s a similar experiment was tried where people lived as cave dwellers for a year. Existing records like hieroglyphic paintings and, again, artifacts were used. By using the same tools and eating the same foods and coping with similar situations, they set out to learn. The only concession was that the women involved had to use the pill. They did not want to risk birthing a baby in such primitive conditions.” After the experiment was over, they reported their findings—that’s experimental archaeology. It is all explained very well in a book called Time Machine: A History of Living History by Dr. Jay Anderson, who was my professor in graduate school.

“So, to better understand the 18th century woodsmen, I took those principles I learned in graduate school and have tried to promote them in my magazine articles under ‘A Pilgrim’s Journey.’ It is an experiment with archaeological evidence, using tools, journals, diaries, clothing and accoutrements. Say someone writes about traveling fifteen miles a day, or like one man wrote in 1740 that the only utensils he carried were a cane fork and a wooden bowl. We might go out and try this, and that becomes experimental archaeology. Now to make it professional, you should report on it for your peers to evaluate. ‘A
Pilgrims Journey' has become my reporting, my justification for my experience. That's one reason why I try to talk about the mistakes I make, the things I learned and the things I do well."

Mark also uses the term "experiential archaeology." He makes no claim for inventing this phrase. That honor belongs to a friend.

"Mike Alton came up with that term in a letter he wrote to me," Mark said. "It means that if you practice a skill with an artifact long enough, eventually it becomes second nature—a part of you. Say, if you develop hunting, trapping or shooting skills, or maybe even rolling up your bedroll in the dark so it's small and tight enough that it doesn't bother you on the trail. That's no longer an experiment; it has become a permanent part of your ongoing experience, just like the modern skills we learn, like brushing our teeth or driving a car."

How about the term "trek?" Did Mark invent this expression?

"I think, though I am not sure, that I am the first to coin that word, and I did it in MUZZLELOADER," said Mark, "but someone else might have been using it before. I don't recall. I didn't realize till I got to graduate school that the word trek is a South African word that means a long, hard haul. It was a word used to describe crossing the South African plains, often being chased by enemies. I stopped using it in my articles when I realized how out of context it was and instead use the words scout or grand adventure, words used by the English trader George Morgan in the 1760s Illinois Country."

Sometimes people disagree with Mark, not with the theory of experimental archaeology but with Mark's methods of experimentation. People have criticized him for doing things that are unsafe. Others disagree with some of the conclusions that he has drawn from his experiences, e.g. woodsmen carrying just one blanket or primarily using walnut hulls for dye. I asked Mark if this ever bothers him.

People come up to me and say that it must be hard when letters to the editor are written criticizing me, but I don't know if it has ever really bothered me too much. As a high school teacher, we often discuss abstract ideas, and I get questioned and challenged all the time. Well, in my articles I am trying to explain abstract ideas also. Those articles are stories, narratives, where I am going from one place to another. The story is mainly a vehicle to explain an abstract idea. I know there will be misunderstandings, because I am saying it only once in print, whereas in the classroom, I get more chances to explain myself, look at the matter from different viewpoints till the answer comes to my audience. So I consider most criticisms just a natural part of the process of communication, the difference being that in the classroom I can interact right away with the person asking questions to further clarify things.

I suppose then that I should respond to these letters to the editor; but that is the one thing I have chosen not to do. I think if I started that, it would be hard to stop! Which ones would I answer and which ones leave alone? So I let people have their say and let the reader decide which side of the fence they are on. It's okay for people to have questions and comments. It's okay for people to disagree and think I am foolish or stupid or way out in left field. But there is an assurance in learning that what I am doing is right for me.

Life is easy in 21st century America, and it's not my point to go to the woods to be easy or comfortable. When I go in an 18th century manner, it's my point to understand and learn, to practice and become a little more that woodsmen of so long ago. To function in misery, if need be, as they did, and tolerate it. So if I choose not to take a water purifier, toilet paper or even medicine, that's my business. It has been my journey, my privilege, and I will never promote that for anyone else. But at the same time, no one should condemn me because I don't think as they do."

By now, over an hour and a half had elapsed and the late afternoon had evolved into early evening. We had to leave the restored 18th century Bowen house at Moss-Wright Park where we were conducting this interview, as the park staff was ready to go home. Since the sun was now low on the horizon and we were now safe from her oppressive heat, we agreed to finish the interview under a large tree not far away. As I reached into my briefcase to retrieve some batteries for the tape recorder, we started discussing his involvement with Twentieth Century Fox's The Last of the Mohicans. That's where we will pick up next time.

Reference:

During Memorial Day weekend in 1988, Joe Liechtenstein, John Howe, Mark Baker, and Mike Alton share a few moments on the parade ground of Fort Loudoun.