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Daughter and son-in-law finish father's historical diorama after 16 years



The late Tallahassee educator Frank Howard diorama depicts Narvarz boat building at St. Marks.

Gerald Ensley, Tallahassee Democrat 12:17 p.m. EDT June 13, 2014



Mary Howard, Susan Saponetti, Eric Saponetti, Marie Saponetti and Julia Saponetti pose at San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park. The diorama, started by Franklin Howard, depicts the Spanish building boats at St. Marks in 1528 and was completed after Howard's death. (Photo: Michael Schwarz/Special to the Democrat)

Nearly 500 years ago, the first Europeans in the Big Bend spent weeks at St. Marks building boats in an attempt to sail home. Now an exhibit in tribute to their travail has come home.

The display is a diorama of that Spanish boat building in 1528, which is now on display at the San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park museum. The diorama – or miniature model – was created by the late Tallahassee educator Frank Howard.

Howard, 65, died in 1998 before completing the project. But his daughter, Susan Saponetti, promised him she would complete the diorama and put it on public display. And on this Father's Day, 16 years after Howard's death, Saponetti has fulfilled that promise.

"I just wanted to get it where it should be and show people the history," Saponetti said. "Most of the people looking at this area wouldn't know boats were built here."

The San Marcos de Aplache Historic State Park museum commemorates the long history of its site at the confluence of the St. Marks and Wakulla Rivers on the Gulf of Mexico. A fort was first built on the site in 1679 and that fort plus two successors served the Spanish, English, United States and Confederacy.

In 1966, the site was added to the National Register of Historic Places, became a state park and the museum was built.

But the site's history began in 1528, when Spanish explorer Panfilo de Narvaez encamped in the area with about 300 soldiers after being stranded in Florida. Narvaez had disembarked in Tampa to explore the interior of Florida, instructing his ships' captains to meet him farther up the coast. Despite a year's search, the ships never reconnected with Narvaez and sailed on to Mexico.

Narvaez and his men, starving and sick and exhausted from battles with Native Americans, wound up in St. Marks at a location believed to be near the current state park. They spent six weeks building five boats to carry them to Mexico and eventually return to Spain. But near present-day Galveston, Texas, the homemade armada was hit by a hurricane, destroying the ships and killing all but 80 men. The survivors wandered the Southwest and Mexico for nearly eight years, before the only four remaining survivors

returned to Spain. One of those survivors, Cabeza de Vaca, wrote a famous journal about the Narvaez expedition.

The diorama depicts the St. Marks boat-building efforts, which were arduous. The stranded soldiers killed their horses for food and skin to carry water on the sea voyage. They melted their swords and other metals to make hammers, saws, nails and other tools. They cut down trees and fashioned boards.

Howard recreated their enterprise in painstaking detail. He crafted tiny Army soldier figures into Spanish soldiers and Native Americans – right down to a red-haired, eye-patched Narvaez. He created tiny horseskin water bags, bleached horse skulls, pottery, bows and arrows.

He built five sailing ships, showing them in stages from just frames to full sailing vessels: "Everyone thinks (Narvaez built) rafts, but (her father) did lots of research into what the common people of that time would have built," Saprionetti said.

Then Howard placed the whole scene along the water's edge against a backdrop painting of the forest from which trees were cut, even including a dirt path where logs had been drug.

"The more you look at it, the more detail you see," Saprionetti said of the diorama.

Howard, a native of Blountstown, came to Tallahassee in 1956. He graduated from Florida State University, and later earned a master's and Ph.D. He was a teacher and assistant principal at Raa Middle School from 1960 to his retirement in 1991.

He also was an area historian, who wrote numerous articles for the Wakulla Digest. He was a talented photographer, painter and craftsman, who built boats and violins. His painting of the Steamship Spray, a Wakulla County merchant ship pressed into duty for the Confederacy, adorns a history sign at a marina in St. Marks.

"Frank was a Renaissance man," said son-in-law, Eric Saprionetti. "He knew a lot about a lot."

Howard began creating the diorama in the mid-1990s, planning for it to be displayed at the San Marcos. But Howard died in 1998 before finishing the project. Saprionetti, the youngest of his three daughters, completed it in 2001.

Saprionetti, 49, who like her father is of Creek Indian descent, is a fabric artist, who makes colorful native dresses for Indian powwows and events. Her dresses are the cover story of the Spring 2014 edition of the Indians Arts and Crafts Association Journal. She added the water, the vegetation and other touches to her father's diorama. Her husband, Eric, 51, a painter and FSU employee, painted the backdrop before his father-in-law's death.

"My father made a lot of notes as he created it how he wanted it to turn out, and I had those to work from," Susan Saprionetti said. "The only promise I made to him before he died was I would finish it."

But after it was completed, she couldn't find a home for it. The San Marcos de Apalache museum was then filled with other exhibits. An agreement to place it at the St. Marks Lighthouse was stymied by the only recently completed transfer of the lighthouse from the Coast Guard to the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge.

Earlier this year, after visiting San Marcos and seeing many previous exhibits removed, Susan Saprionetti offered it again to the museum. Park ranger Terri Messler jumped at the offer and quickly secured approval from her bosses.

"We're always excited to get (donations) — and when we saw photos (of the diorama) we were really excited." said Messler. "Dr. Howard's plan all along was to donate it to the museum. We are so proud to have it here.."

San Marcos de Apalache Historic State Park

The historic site is at 148 Old Fort Road, in the town of St. Marks. The museum is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday through Monday. For more information call 850-925-6216 or visit: www.floridastateparks.org/sanmarcos/