



Living History

Joseph Conte '14 is passionate about the past. As a history major with a minor in military history, Conte is devoting his academic life to learning its lessons. As a reenactor with the Von Prueschenk Feldjaeger Corps, he is devoting the rest of his time and energy to bringing a bygone era to vivid and accurate life.

Born in Indiana, Conte's family moved east when he was a year old and he grew up in Delaware County. From first through eighth grade, Conte was home-schooled, an outside-of-the-mainstream educational experience he shares with more than a few of his classmates. "I've actually met a lot of home-schoolers at Immaculata," said Conte. "There are three or four in my class alone."

Coinciding with his entrance into "regular" high school, Conte joined the reenactment unit he belongs to today. "I went to an event, threw together a haphazard outfit, and decided I was going to do this," he said. Though only 14, Conte researched the unit, called the commander and, after exercising due diligence, convinced his mother that this was the hobby tailor-made for him.

Calling reenactment a hobby doesn't do justice to the hours and effort dedicated to recreating events in painstakingly authentic detail. "Reenacting can be a bit pricey," warned Conte, who has built a collection of 15 military uniforms over the past seven years. "I have original stuff from World War II,

the Civil War, the Revolutionary War—it becomes a personal museum."

Von Prueschenk Feldjaeger Corps is a participating unit in the American Brigade, the British Brigade, and the German Brigade, all national historic associations dedicated to recreating the life and times of the common soldier of the American War for Independence. The British employed large numbers of German soldiers, known as Hessians, during the American Revolution and the Jaegers were especially well-trained and well-equipped. According to Conte, "Jaeger means 'hunter' in German and these were riflemen. When I joined, I became the signaler for my unit even though I was only 14, and I used a gun called a Jaeger rifle."

In addition to a firearm, a member of the Corps must acquire and assemble all the uniform accessories and accoutrements—a Jaeger's kit—a lengthy and exacting list of items that covers everything from head to toe, from the tri-cornered hat known as a Kevenhueller to a pair of 18th-century shoes complete with brass buckles—hobnails optional.

Just as in the days of the American Revolution, there are modern-day sutlers—merchants who specialize in providing supplies for troops, in this instance, historical reenactors—which is one way to collect the necessary reproductions. An alternative is to do it yourself. "That is a very challenging and really unacknowledged hobby," said Conte. "It's not easy."

Building things "from scratch" is never easy, which is why Conte emphasizes that, for anyone interested in starting his own unit, "getting into the British Brigade is key." The Brigade, an ed-ucational association with more than 1,500 members nationwide, offers expert logistical assistance to its participating organiza-tions. The reenactment season, which features spectacular battles and skirmishes along with camp displays, historical demonstra-tions and activities for all ages, runs from April to December with about two events planned every month. "I've done some traveling," said Conte, whose busy reenactment schedule takes him throughout Pennsylvania, upstate New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia.

Not surprisingly, as a young historian Conte also participated in the famed Duffy's Cut excavation, an archival and archaeological project spearheaded by William Watson, Ph.D., chair of IU's History Department, and his twin brother, Frank, a Lutheran minister. The dig, which focused on uncovering the fate and the remains of a group of Irish immigrants, was the subject of numerous articles and the 2006 documentary *The Ghosts of Duffy's Cut* as well as a film now in production titled *Death on the Railroad*.

"I've been involved as a student digger since freshman year," said Conte, who is now a junior. "That experience has opened doors and provided opportunities that have made me so grateful. I have Dr. Watson to thank for that. He would see me as he was on his way to the dig and he would always invite me to join in."

Finally, Conte decided to see what Duffy's Cut was all about and the rest, as they say, is history. "I ended up being a pallbearer at the burial," said Conte, referring to the solemn reinterment ceremony held in March 2012 at West Laurel Hill Cemetery." For anyone with a passion for history, seeing these men finally given honorable burials-it's any historian's dream to be involved in something like that."

Conte's dream, for now, is to complete his degree and then move into a position that allows him to do what inspires him most: sharing his love of history. "There are a couple of routes I could take," he said, mentioning the possibility of museum work, pursuing a graduate degree, or going right into teaching at a Catholic high school.

Conte already has some teaching experience under his belt-black belt, that is. As a second-degree black belt (soon to be tested for promotion to third-degree), Conte instructs youngsters at East Coast Karate Institute in Glen Mills, PA, where he has studied Tang Soo Do for the last decade, a martial art with medieval and pre-medieval origins in Korea. "We have kids di-agnosed with autism and Asperger's, and I've worked with them quite a bit," he said. "I've always known I wanted to teach since very early on."

Another thing Conte knew early on was that Immaculata was the school for him. "It was in my top three," said Conte, "but it ended up being the only school I applied to."

On his first visit to IU, Conte sat in on a history class where the documentary shown that day just happened to be the one he had watched the night before on his iPod. If that weren't sign enough, Conte ended up talking with Watson for hours afterward, learning that something that had always intrigued him-medieval military history-just happened to be Watson's specialty.

"I couldn't believe Dr. Watson's generosity, that kind of hos-pitality, to spend so much time talking to a prospective student," said Conte. "I thought to myself, if this doesn't mean Immacu-lata is the place for me, I don't know what would."

And, spoken like a true historian, Conte added, "I will never forget that."



Conte is a member of the IU Cross Country Team