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New film explores the Schuylkill

A Schuylkill County premiere is scheduled for March 27 at the Sovereign Majestic Theatre in Pottsville.

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A click on the Web site for the National Park Service conjures a sense of local pride in the form of Pennsylvania's map, and an adjoining link to a map of the Schuylkill River National Heritage Area.

To Kurt Zwinkl, there is perhaps no better feeling than knowing that a unique cultural and historic region right in his own back yard is out in plain view for all the world to see.

Very soon, the region will get even more exposure with the release of the documentary "Revolutionary River," the first in a six-part film series highlighting a handful of National Heritage Area's east of the Mississippi.

"We thought a film was something that would attract a lot of attention," said Zwinkl, executive director of the Schuylkill River National and State Heritage Area.

Zwinkl first learned about the film project about two years ago, when a partner with Connecticut-based Telemark Films expressed interest in drawing attention to what could be referred to as the modern equivalent of national parks.

Zwinkl was soon introduced to Telemark President and CEO Bailey Pryor, who asked Zwinkl what he thought about the company starting its planned documentary series with a feature on the Schuylkill River.

"I said, 'absolutely,'" Zwinkl recalled on his response.

Fast forward more than two years, and "Revolutionary River" enters center stage as the first film in the "Our National Heritage" series, a project that took Pryor and his crew to various locales in the eastern United States.

The film, which eventually will run nationwide on PBS, had its official premiere in Philadelphia

March 21 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Unlike national parks, the National Heritage program focuses not on geographical areas, but rather highlights the cultural, historic and environmental aspects of a locale. There are currently 49 heritage areas in the country, according to the National Park Service. The program began in 1984.

While Pryor lives in New England, he has strong ties to the Philadelphia area; his mother lives in Bryn Mawr and other family members call the region home.

"We're very connected to Philadelphia," Pryor said in a recent phone interview from his office in Connecticut.

Pryor chose six areas "based on their merit ... who has the most compelling stories and who has the most unique stories. We're looking for storylines that don't repeat themselves."

As for the Schuylkill as a chosen subject, Pryor said he sought to educate viewers on the importance of the river, how it played an important role in the area's history, helping to shape the local landscape and offering modern-day benefits.

The film contains information about early Native American tribes that inhabited what is today the Schuylkill Heritage Area and the European settlers who made their way through the region. It will also touch on environmental factors, such as the pollution that once threatened the river, and the efforts that help bring it back to life.

"We thought it was a very powerful and all-encompassing story," Pryor said. "We wanted to show how the people shaped the land and how the land shaped the people over the centuries."

Shooting on the film began in mid 2008 and ended in mid 2009, Pryor said. The entire project, including editing and post-production, wrapped up in September.

The filmmaking experience was interesting, Pryor said, since his crew was able to do everything from kayak, hike, and drive along the waterway, as well as rent a helicopter and fly over the river, offering a one-of-a-kind view.

"I don't think you could have transported yourself around the Schuylkill anymore than we did," he said.

The crew was made up of 25 people, everyone from writers and researchers to producers and editors.

Pryor interviewed several people, including a University of Pennsylvania professor, a scholar from Bartram's Garden, and Zwikl. The educators, authors and historians he met with gave Pryor a newfound appreciation for the 128-mile long waterway.

"This was absolutely a learning process," Pryor said. "It was a learning process, it was a cathartic process."

Pryor said it was interesting to make a documentary that didn't follow specific individuals, but rather a geographical region.

"This story really looks at this particular piece of land," he said.

As he navigated through the filmmaking process, Pryor said he tried to picture how the river would have appeared 15,000 years ago all the way up to its modern look and purpose. Zwickl was particularly helpful, Pryor said, since the director of the heritage area, who co-authored a book on the river as part of the "Images of America" series, is a wealth of knowledge.

"He and his team were extremely proactive, they recognized the importance of having a film made in their cultural area," Pryor said. "He's a real go-getter and a very talented guy."

Zwickl said there are many ways for people to become interested in a specific place or thing, perhaps none better than through the viewing of a film. The fact that "Revolutionary River" will be shown on public television across the country means more exposure for the Schuylkill, a river and nationally designated heritage region close to his heart.

"I think it's an interesting history," Zwickl said. "It's a different look at Southeastern Pennsylvania."

Zwickl hopes the film will become available for school use, and thinks it would serve as a great educational tool.


There will be a Schuylkill County premiere of the film as well, scheduled for March 27 at 7 p.m. at the Sovereign Majestic Theatre in Pottsville. That event is \$30 per person or \$50 per couple.

To learn more about either event, call 484-945-0200 or visit www.schuylkillriver.org.

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