

Jefferson lives on

By Joe Marks, Herald Staff Writer
Published Saturday, March 15, 2008

It's an odd mix when Clay Jenkinson puts on his ponytail wig and knee breeches to portray Thomas Jefferson for an audience — part history coming alive and part history coming unmoored, racing forward more than 200 years to mix with and inform the present.


An author and Dickinson State University professor, Jenkinson has impersonated for more than 20 years the nation's third president and chief drafter of the Declaration of Independence. Jenkinson does so most famously on "The Thomas Jefferson Hour," which airs on public radio stations throughout the country.

From the beginning, Jenkinson said, he's never felt compelled to follow what he called "the Williamsburg model," referring to the Virginia site of a colonial museum-village where historical re-enactors often steadfastly refuse to answer questions that creep outside of their characters' historical world view.



Clay Jenkinson as Thomas Jefferson talks about the founding of the University of Virginia at the Memorial Union at UND. Herald photo by Jackie Lorentz.

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Knowledgeable

Jenkinson's Jefferson knows quite a bit about modern culture and evidently keeps up with current events, as demonstrated during a presentation Friday at the UND Memorial Union.

When an audience member asked him about a journalist he'd paid to write political attacks on John Adams during the 1800 presidential campaign, Jenkinson's Jefferson first joked he might challenge the man to a duel for asking such a "scurrilous question."

"I understand that's done in your era," he said, "but in my era, you'd be hearing from my second."

Then, he acknowledged the ubiquity of political attacks since soon before the nation's founding, at one point referencing former vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro's recent withdrawal from the Hillary Clinton campaign after making controversial statements about Barack Obama's race.

At another point, when asked Friday about the role of women in public life, Jenkinson's Jefferson first announced that women properly belonged "in the nursery," caring for children.

Then, he complicated his answer. He acknowledging how different contemporary life must be for women, compared with his own day when the lack of birth control and high infant mortality

rates meant that many women spent more than half of their lives either pregnant or raising babies who would not survive to be young children.

Careful

In an interview after the presentation, Jenkinson said he's always careful when he extrapolates outside of Jefferson's own experience, and often won't do so unless he can point to a particular letter or other text Jefferson wrote to back him up.

Jenkinson's Jefferson also is imbued with much of Jenkinson's own knowledge and love of North Dakota, which he called the best example of his (Jefferson's) vision of the United States as a country of independent farmers rooted to the land.

Jenkinson, scheduled to participate in a Friday afternoon panel discussion on the future of education in North Dakota, ended his morning presentation as Jefferson by discussing that topic.

His speech focused on the University of Virginia, which Jefferson built with that state's Legislature after his final term as president. *But Jenkinson's Jefferson several times drew parallels between that school and UND and other North Dakota universities, which he said too often fail to teach students what's unique about their state.*

"Your mission is to teach your children about the agrarian vision of North Dakota," he said. "If you become a university like others, you will have failed."

Jenkinson, a native North Dakotan, expanded on that statement after the presentation, saying he feared that UND, North Dakota State University and the state's other public colleges had sacrificed their unique characters in their drive for national respectability.

As a result, he said, the universities have become "floating platforms that could be in Winnipeg, Duluth or Mankato.

"There's higher respectability but lower value because only the schools here can teach about this place."



Clay Jenkinson as Thomas Jefferson. Herald photo by Jackie Lorentz.