



Top left photo by David Sheakley / Juneau Empire; middle and right photo courtesy of John Venables



John Henry Venables portraying (left to right), Judge James Wickersham in spring of 2008, William Henry Seward in 2009, and Mark Twain in the fall of 2008. On his statewide tour currently in progress, Venables will play Wickersham and Seward and also assume the role of E. L. "Bob" Bartlett.

# The many historic faces of John Venables

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If you run into John Venables in street clothes, you might not recognize him — he's most often seen in disguise.

But after this week, a large group of Southeast Alaskans will be able to recognize Judge James Wickersham and William Henry Seward, thanks to Venables' portrayals of these and other historical figures as part of a statewide program in celebration of statehood.

If you search the Internet for pictures of Judge James Wickersham, you're just as likely to end up with a photo of Venables dressed up as Wickersham as one of the judge himself.

Venables, 69, received a Rasmuson Foundation grant to present his Alaska history program, "Journey to Statehood - Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Alaska Statehood" in 20 towns across the state.

The week preceding Seward's Day, which is celebrated on March 30, Venables began his 2009 statewide tour. His schedule for six days included stops in Sitka, Wrangell, Petersburg, Ketchikan and Juneau. At each stop, he will be not one, but three characters: Judge James Wickersham, William Henry Seward, and E.L. Bartlett.

## FIRST ACT

Venables began his career portraying historic Alaskans in Haines in July, 2005, when he was approached in the Haines library and asked if he would like to dress up as John Muir for a program at the library.

"I was not the first person (they asked), but I was the first person who said yes," he said.

He proposed that in addition to portraying John Muir, he could also dress up as William Henry Seward, whom he felt people did not know enough about.

Over thirty people showed up for the performance, and Venables was eager to perform for others.

He next tried to entice cruise ship passengers to trek over to the library for his next performance. Not a single passenger showed up, so Venables got a better idea. He went back to the cruise ship director and told him he would be available on a two-hour notice to give historic presentations to the passengers.

He was spending that day volunteering at the American Bald Eagle Foundation, and when he returned to the building after forty minutes, he found out the cruise director had called three times! Venables was hired.

"(They'd) rounded up 150 people," he said. "When it was over, I got a standing ovation and two curtain calls. Not bad

for an amateur!"

At the encouragement of others, Venables began applying for grants to present his historic programs around the state.

## ALL FOUR CORNERS

His latest venture is his biggest yet: Venables has received \$20,000 from the Rasmuson foundation to travel to all four corners of the state — "And 16 more towns!" he added.

He proudly displays stories about his performances in newspapers from around the state. One of his favorites appeared on the front page of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. He points out that on either side of his large center photo, there are smaller shots of then-President George W. Bush and Gov. Sarah Palin.

Venables performs his shows on a shoestring budget, he said, pointing to his judicial robe worn to play Wickersham as an example.

"Two dollars at St. Vincent de Paul's (thrift store)," he said.

He has played all three characters many times before, but this statewide tour is the first time he is performing all three at the same time.

"I have a scripted beginning and a scripted ending, and end up telling seven, eight, nine (or) ten stories in between," he said.

"These are three incredible characters," he said. "We as Americans do not know the things these men had to do for statehood to come about."

Listening to Venables speak about Seward, Bartlett and Wickersham, it's hard to believe he didn't grow up in Alaska or have any experience in state politics. Barely skipping a beat, he tells about Seward's involvement in politics in the lower 48 before ending up as the Secretary of the Interior who would purchase Alaska from Russia for less than two cents an acre.

"Seward was neck in neck with Lincoln to become the Republican party (nominee)," he said. "He was heartbroken (when Lincoln won the nomination), but he made a decision: He was going to campaign for Lincoln."

Had he not been in bed recovering from an accident two weeks prior, Seward would have been in the same theatre box with Lincoln when he was assassinated, Venables said, and likely would have had a bullet aimed his way as well.

Venables believes E.L. "Bob" Bartlett, Alaska's first senior state senator, is at the risk of being forgotten. His reenactment may help breathe new life into the man.

"Bob Bartlett was an incredible man and people have almost forgotten about him," Venables said.

Venables has read nearly everything written by and about the figures he portrays.

"I like being as thorough and complete as possible," he said. "I've read six, seven ... ten books on all of them."

That is, if enough books exist, he added. "Bob Bartlett only has about two books (about him)."

Venables first traveled to Alaska in 1977 and made quite a few visits to the state before finally settling in Haines.

"It took me 25 years and 11 round trips to get a one-way trip out of the deal," he said.

Now he's happily settled in Haines and doing what he loves.

"I'm having a wonderful time," he said.

John Henry Venables will appear in period attire as William Henry Seward, Judge James Wickersham and E.L. "Bob" Bartlett, giving historical vignettes of the times they lived, in Petersburg on Wednesday, March 25 at 7 p.m. in the High School auditorium; in Ketchikan on Thursday, March 26 at 6:30 p.m. in the Ketchikan Public Library; and in Juneau on Saturday, March 28 at 7 p.m. in the Downtown Public Library. All events are free and open to the public. For details, e-mail johnhenryvenables@yahoo.com.