

A guide's port-city tour takes its show on the road The Boston Globe

By James Sullivan, Globe Correspondent | November 26, 2006

It was a good day for Michael DeCastro. He'd just learned that the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay spent part of her childhood on Rings Island in Salisbury.

For DeCastro, any day that brings fresh trivia about his adopted home near the mouth of the Merrimack River is a good day: Since June, he has operated a tour of historic sites around Newburyport and Amesbury.

"See, I learn more from locals than in books," the 38-year-old tour guide said on a recent Saturday afternoon, thanking a passenger for offering up that little piece of lore about the poet.

Since opening for business, DeCastro's Port City Tours has held almost as much appeal for area residents as visitors. Not because they think they can stump the guide: Despite being raised in New Orleans and initiated into the tour business in Washington, D.C., new Amesbury resident DeCastro already knows more about the environs than most lifelong townies.

From the well-known (the grave marker of poet and Amesbury resident John Greenleaf Whittier, who was "way famous back in the day") to the esoteric (the fact, for instance, that taverns were once known as "ordinaries"), DeCastro stuffs his two-hour tour with more tidbits than a Petco warehouse. Driving a new burgundy E350 Ford van that can seat as many as 12 passengers, he regales his customers with tales of the region, speaking through a headset on a custom-installed, state-of-the-art Bose sound system.

"Let's get this show on the road!" he whooped as he kicked off a recent excursion, cueing the first of several sound effects -- canned applause. DeCastro laughed gleefully, as he would throughout the tour.

Though business has been "slow but steady," he already has had some memorable fares, including a large group of Italian tour guides and a rambunctious gaggle of women from the Red Hat Society. Over the summer, he booked a tour with a single passenger who identified himself as "Tom from Florida." When DeCastro arrived at the information booth alongside Newburyport's Firehouse Center for the Arts to pick up his customer, he was surprised to find it was actor Tommy Lee Jones.

"He was especially interested in stuff about Benedict Arnold," the guide recalled.

Dressed in a short-sleeve polo shirt embroidered with the tour logo, DeCastro, a practicing musician, typically has his long hair pulled back in a ponytail. His enthusiasm for his subjects is obvious, as he peppers his spiel with a recurring cry reminiscent of the late baseball announcer Mel Allen -- "How about that!"

"Can y'all see it back there?" he asked at one point, looking in his rearview mirror as he idled the van near Newburyport's Market Square, site of the first "Tea Party" rebellion against British taxation.

When he pointed out that the forbidding-looking former jailhouse adjacent to Newburyport's Old Hill Burying Ground is now privately owned, one rider had a thought.

"If you grounded your kids in there, they couldn't get out," mused 10-year-old Caitlin O'Reilly, who was taking the tour with her 4-year-old sister, Alanna, and their mother, Amesbury resident Jodi DiLibertis. Joining them was DiLibertis's friend, Sarah Chapman, who lives in Haverhill.

DeCastro's wife, Lydia Watts, is an Amesbury native who met her husband when both were living in Washington, where she was cofounder of a nonprofit organization for women. The more she told DeCastro about the rich history of her childhood stomping grounds, the more he felt he could make a go starting a tour there.

"This place was begging for a tour," he said. "I mean, 1635" -- the year the land that would become Newburyport was first settled by Europeans -- "it doesn't get much older than that."

It does in Salem, however, which is where the tour guide hopes to take his business next. He said he plans to be up and running there by January. He is also considering a tour of Portsmouth.

Near the end of the tour, after noting that George Washington once greeted well-wishers inside Amesbury's Rocky Hill Meeting House, DeCastro jokingly pointed out the sites at a busy intersection.

"There's our Mobil station," he said. "There's Burger King. . . . You can't get away from progress."

But you can duck back in time, at least for the moment.

For more information, visit portcitytours.net.