Shane Bernard, historian and curator of the McIlhenny Company, holds a uniform worn by John Avery McIlhenny when he was one of Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. The uniform will be part of the exhibit that will be in the company’s New Orleans museum.

Inspirating ‘fakelore’

Myths abound about fabled Tabasco hot sauce

Jim Bradshaw
jbradshaw@theadvertiser.com

AVERY ISLAND — The truth about Tabasco is that some of the things we “know” about it just aren’t true. There’s a lot of “fakelore” mixed in with the folklore about the legendary south Louisiana product, according to the company historian.

When the McIlhenny Co., manufacturers of the fabled hot sauce, opens a museum in New Orleans early next year, part of its raison d’etre will be to dispel several myths — some of them that have been kept alive by the company itself over the 136-year-old history of the famous hot sauce, according to Shane Bernard, the McIlhenny historian and curator.

First of all, the company wants to set the record straight on how the inventor of the hot sauce, Edmund McIlhenny, got his first peppers in the 1860s: Nobody knows for sure.

The story has long circulated that McIlhenny got a few pepper pods from an ex-soldier from the Mexican-American War, Friend Gleason, when the two men in New Orleans. Gleason supposedly had picked them up in Mexico.

But Bernard says that story cannot be verified.

“He never recorded the story for posterity, and his wife, brother-in-law, and children held diverse views on the subject, some mutually exclusive,” Bernard said.

Nonetheless, the company perpetuated the story in its own promotional materials and news releases for many years, with the result that it has been reported in thousands of articles about Tabasco’s origins.

Bernard also discounts a story that McIlhenny got his first pods from Col. Maunuel White, a prominent businessman in antebellum Louisiana. White has

new cologne bottles, Bernard said.

Tabasco did not become an overnight success, as it has been reported.

Business records show that it took a decade for Tabasco to gain in popularity, Bernard said. Also untrue is a version that Tabasco was popular in Europe by the early 1700s. It wasn’t exported until the late 1870s.

The museum hopes to put to rest another tale: That E.A. McIlhenny, one of the company’s early presidents, introduced nutria to Louisiana.

McIlhenny even claimed to have done just that, but Bernard said McIlhenny’s own business records show that he was at least the third nutria farmer to the state, and at least the second to sell nutria free.

And a hurricane didn’t blow the pen down and trigger a mass escape, Bernard said. Rather, E.A. McIlhenny fixed them “of his own volition.”

The museum will include some stone-wear jars with hand-carved cypress lids McIlhenny used in the early days; a Rough Rider uniform with cowboy hat worn by J.A. McIlhenny; war medals from Walter McIlhenny, a brigadier general; items from E.A. McIlhenny’s Arctic expeditions; and Indian artifacts from Avery Island, the McIlhenny plantation where Tabasco was created.

Also on display will be a bass guitar from the rock band Von Halen in the shape of a Tabasco bottle. Bernard said the band gave the autographed guitar to the company about 10 years ago and that it was subsequently stolen.

And a hurricane didn’t blow the pen down and trigger a mass escape, Bernard said. Rather, E.A. McIlhenny fixed them “of his own volition.”

The museum will include some stone-wear jars with hand-carved cypress lids McIlhenny used in the early days; a Rough Rider uniform with cowboy hat worn by J.A. McIlhenny; war medals from Walter McIlhenny, a brigadier general; items from E.A. McIlhenny’s Arctic expeditions; and Indian artifacts from Avery Island, the McIlhenny plantation where Tabasco was created.

Also on display will be a bass guitar from the rock band Von Halen in the shape of a Tabasco bottle. Bernard said the band gave the autographed guitar to the company about 10 years ago and that it was subsequently stolen. It was spotted for sale on the Internet earlier this year and the company reclaimed it.

The 3,700 square foot museum near the National D-Day Museum will be part of Tabasco’s new 16,000 square foot New Orleans corporate offices.

(Cain Burdeau of The Associated Press contributed to this story.)