

History aplenty at Civil War reenactment

By CRAIG MURPHY
Of the Keizertimes

Don Benson was one of the Civil War reenactors last weekend at Willamette Mission State Park north of Keizer.

But you could say he was reenacting family history.

For the 25th time, the Northwest Civil War Council had its Civil War reenactment on the 4th of July weekend. Nearly 1,000 reenactors came out, taking visitors back to what it was like 150 years ago.

Benson was on hand for the ninth time.

“It’s a family affair,” said Benson, who was participating with wife Julie and their children.

That wasn’t the only family affair aspect. Benson had four grandfathers and eight of their brothers who fought in the bloody 1860s battle. When Benson started doing the reenactments, he didn’t realize the family connection.

“Then I started researching it and found out about one uncle,” he said. “It expanded from there.”

Back in January, Benson learned an uncle had been killed during the battle at Petersburg, which started in June 1864 and concluded the following April. It’s estimated a total of 70,000 troops were killed during the long battle. Benson said his uncle was among the 6,500 killed in the initial Petersburg battle – June 17, 1864 to be precise.

“I went to see it in April,” Benson said. “My uncle’s in an unknown grave. There were 4,500 soldiers who were never identified.”

Union soldiers like Benson’s uncle were buried at the site.

“It was weird to walk through the cemetery and see rows of unknown tombs,” Benson said. “It took 100 men three years to clean the battlefield of union soldiers. Petersburg was a big battlefield. It was a pretty moving experience. My family has been serving the country a



KEIZERTIMES/Craig Murphy
A: Confederate soldiers move a cannon into place during a morning parade at the Civil War reenactments July 3 at Willamette Mission State Park just north of Keizer.
B: Makenna, Melissa and Justine Colby try to stay cool on July 3.
C: Cooper Tom Harper demonstrates an 1860s job. For more photos, check out *Keizertimes* on Facebook and watch video of a battle on our YouTube page.



long time. My uncle was in the Wisconsin infantry and told family he joined the army to save the Union. That was in my great-grandma’s notes.”

Learning the history and seeing the site in Virginia had an impact on Benson.

“It was moving to know my uncle died there,” said Benson, a resident of Yamhill. “It gives extra meaning for doing this.”

During the reenactments, Benson is a captain in the 7th Michigan Calvary. During the war, Gen. George Cluster oversaw the entire Michigan Calvary Brigade.

“They were known as Custer’s Brigade or the Wolverines,” Benson said. “Custer was given the command of the entire brigade. They got the nickname Wolverine be-

cause they never lost a battle. They had the best record of any regiment in the war.”

Benson said Civil War reenactments need to continue being done.

“It’s very important,” he said. “We’ve got to keep our history alive. It’s not taught well in our public schools, so we have to go out here and do

it. It’s for both sides, because both sides fought for what they felt was right.”

The family history of serving in Benson’s family has continued through the generations and includes Benson himself, who has served for 26 years, including the last 12 as a member of the Oregon Army National Guard.

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