

Living

# Civil War re-enactors: The battles are only part of the experience

Updated Jan 10, 2019; Posted Jun 24, 2011

0  
shares

By Special to The Oregonian



[View full size](#)

**Doug Beghtel/The**

**Oregonian**

When the smoke clears, there aren't any Yankees or Rebels, but rather re-enactors gathered together by their passion about the Civil War.

For Oregonians, the words Civil War more often conjure up colors of yellow and green or orange and black than blue and gray.

But as the

[U.S. observes the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War \(1861-1865\)](#)

, hundreds of hardy Northwest souls pull on wool uniforms and fill paper cartridges with gunpowder to re-enact the battles and daily life of the War Between the States.

In May, the Mount Pisgah Battle Reenactment and Living History event at Howard Buford Park in Eugene drew hundreds of re-enactors and nearly as many spectators. One-thousand re-enactors are expected July 2-4 at the 21st annual Civil War re-enactment at

Willamette Mission State Park

north of Keizer.

"Some members of the public might stay away because they just see these re-enactors as fanatics," said Robert Harrison, who teaches Civil War history at

Linn-Benton Community College

in Albany and accompanied students to the Mount Pisgah event. "It's not really about living out a fantasy that maybe the South could have won. It's about teaching the public the material details of Civil War life."

Whether they're Yankees or Rebels, re-enactors spend countless hours researching everything from military maneuvers and rifled muskets to hoop skirts and 19th-century cooking.

"Their basic mission is to honor the people who fought and suffered on both sides," Harrison said.

"My friends think the whole thing is very odd, and they make fun of me constantly," said re-enactor Jemima Bentley, in the Confederate Camp at Mount Pisgah. She caught the re-enacting bug after taking Harrison's class.

"I don't really mind, since it sounds pretty odd to a lot of people. (But) my family thinks it's great."

The 20-year-old decided against portraying a civilian woman, "because, honestly, they spent a lot of time washing and baking corn bread, and I figured I can do that at home. I like being a soldier. I don't get to do this anywhere else."

Re-enacted battles like Mount Pisgah's aren't based on actual combat events, and they have pre-determined outcomes: The South won in the morning, the Union prevailed in the afternoon.

"The re-enactments ... sort of bring to life some of the things that I talk about in class," Harrison said. "If I do a lecture on the Battle of Gettysburg, then I take the students to a Civil War re-enactment. They can see what it means for a group of soldiers to move to a certain area. They didn't just march. It was difficult. They had to train even to walk in formation."

Spectators witnessed real battlefield maneuvers and got a sense of just how much noise and smoke there was 150 years ago.

"We have many descriptions from soldiers of how they couldn't see much during a battle," Harrison said. "It was all chaotic."

Re-enactments aren't all cannons and gunpowder. They also give a glimpse into daily life for civilians and soldiers during the war. Spectators are encouraged to visit the camps -- Union, Confederate and civilian -- for demonstrations of period dress, food and medicine, to meet the cavalry and their horses and to strike up conversations with in-character re-enactors.

Advertisement



[View full size](#)

**Doug Beghtel/The**

**Oregonian**

Re-enactments aren't just about the battles, but about what it was like in the 1860s as well, where the homemade banjo would have been at home, but not so much the folding chair.

The Mount Pisgah event was the first for re-enactor Mike Johnson of Lebanon. He signed with the 116th Pennsylvania on the Union side because his daughter's teacher is also a member.

"I wanted to charge into it full-tilt years ago, but just never had the time, money and organization," said Johnson, outfitted in a borrowed uniform. "I have just always loved history. (But) people definitely look at you sideways when you say, 'I'm going to a Civil War re-enactment.'"

Johnson enjoyed participating at a more casual level as an anonymous Union private, while others invest more time and effort to portray specific historic figures. After his first battle, however, Johnson already planned to ask for time off from work for re-enactment events through the rest of this year.

About re-enactments

## **Want to go to a Civil War re-enactment?**

### **Where:**

Willamette Mission State Park, 10991 Wheatland Road N.E., Gervais (about four miles north of Keizer)

### **When:**

July 2-4

### **Hours:**

9 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday

**Admission:**

Adults, \$8; seniors and students (age 6-18), \$5; children under 6, free.

**Details and daily schedule:**

[nwcwc.org/willamette.html](http://nwcwc.org/willamette.html)

**Want to be a re-enactor?**

Linn-Benton Community College professor of history Robert Harrison recommends searching online for Union and Confederate reenactment units and visiting the Northwest Civil War Council website (

[nwcwc.org](http://nwcwc.org)

). Or, show up at a re-enactment event and ask re-enactors how they got started

If you're a new soldier on the re-enactment battlefield and you're not sure where and when to "die," Confederate re-enactor Jemima Bentley advises taking a dive as soon as you're out of ammunition. On hot days, Harrison recommends picking a shady spot under a tree for your last breaths.

He estimated he can outfit himself with boots, jacket, hat and pants for about \$300 -- more if he wants his own tent and camp cookware.

After using loaner gear for several events, new re-enactors are expected to pick a side and start assembling their own kits -- whether it's authentic Civil War gear, new replicas or used items bought from other re-enactors.

"The best way to find (gear) is to talk to other re-enactors and see if they have stuff that they don't want," Bentley advised in the Confederate camp. "Re-enactors are always retiring and new people are always joining up."

## **"Ridiculously scary!"**

Spectator Timothy Carruthers of Salem was content to remain on the battlefield's sidelines. A U.S. Army veteran formerly stationed in the Kunar Valley in Afghanistan, he's seen the real thing -- and thinks Civil War soldiers had it worse.

Advertisement

"It was pretty intense there. It's not a safe place where you're free to do anything you want," Carruthers said of his experience with the 10th Mountain Division out of Fort Drum, N.Y., then gestured toward the re-enactment battlefield. "But this is like ridiculously scary! Charging at the enemy while they're shooting from behind trees and stuff? It would scare me to fight like this."

Carruthers said he's always been interested in the Civil War and has been to several re-enactments. "It's just more personal when you actually see what it's like. ... It's an interesting and very unfortunate event in American history, but I enjoy learning about it."

"We all firmly believe that history repeats itself if you don't pay attention," said Chris Gattman, 1st Lieutenant in the 4th Texas Cavalry re-enactment unit. "Most of the people (at the time of the Civil War) got their education from church. In the South, it's pretty easy to defend slavery out of the Bible. All you have to do is quote Ephesians (6:5): 'Slaves obey your masters.' For somebody who doesn't really have too advanced of an education, that's telling you how to live your life right there."

Advertisement

"I can see where the national fervor would have driven a lot of Southern people who had no stake in slavery whatsoever to join up," another 4th Texan, John Kirkpatrick, chimed in, noting that most Confederate soldiers weren't slave owners. "They didn't want to be called a traitor or a coward. And off they went."

"It's very easy for you to join to fight a war because your neighbor did," added Gattman.

### **Some have cell phones, some are purists**

Re-enactors live in their tents during reenactment events, but not everything in the camp is authentic to the period. Bentley admitted to keeping a cell phone in her tent and said her eyeglasses aren't exactly up to 19th-century specs.

"A lot of people are surprised by how invested in it a lot of re-enactors are," she said. "There are people who will just sort of sit down and talk about modern-day things, cell phones, stuff like that. Then there are re-enactors who will stay completely and utterly in persona, and just speak like they're living in 1863."

Advertisement



[View full size](#)

**Doug Beghtel/The**

**Oregonian**

A full day of re-enacting can be tiring, as Mike VanAtta of Lebanon can attest.

"We've just got a lot of really intelligent people here," Kirkpatrick explained, describing re-enactors' campfire discussions about Greek, Roman and European history and strategies of warfare. "I think the intellectual climate (in Oregon) lends itself to people that would go to all this trouble and invest all this time and money just to come out and pretend to be something 150 years ago."

North and South combined, the Civil War claimed the lives of more than 600,000 American soldiers -- 2 percent of the population. Troops in Oregon guarded forts, travel routes and reservations, but they were thousands of miles away from the war's more than 10,000 combat engagements, most of which took place in Virginia, Tennessee and Missouri.

Naturally, Civil War re-enacting isn't as common or well-attended in the Pacific Northwest as is it on the East Coast.

So, why re-enact the Civil War in Oregon?

"Because a 10-year-old in Oregon has as much right to understand it as a 10-year-old in Mississippi," Gattman said.

Advertisement



"(People) appreciate better once they've been to a re-enactment the suffering that went on during the war, the anguish and just the sheer determination of both sides to fight. What it cost people on both sides," Harrison said. "It just reinforces the idea that this was our huge epic war, here in this country."

--

[Jennifer Willis](#)

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

---

## Around the web

**ADVANCE**  
**LOCAL**

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our **[User Agreement](#)**, **[Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement](#)**, and **[Your California Privacy Rights](#)** (each updated 1/1/20).

© 2020 Advance Local Media LLC. All rights reserved (**[About Us](#)**).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Advance Local.

**[Community Rules](#)** apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

 **[Ad Choices](#)**