

realm of theater. Their sole focus is instead on making their impression “museum perfect.” If anything, as opposed to the mainstream, campaigners are lost in the details of their impression. They want to get what they do correct, even down to the last stitch. A campaigner can talk at length about the thread count of any particular uniform fabric or discuss at length whether a basting thread was originally dyed with black indigo or naturally brown. It is because campaigners are known for this level of detail that they are often referred to by the sometimes derogatory title of “Stitch Counters.”

In addition to the myriad details of construction, campaigners are also masters of the Quartermaster and Commissary report. They can follow the sometimes monthly variations in uniform and equipment as easily as an urbanite can follow a bus schedule. It is not enough for them to merely be a Civil War soldier. They need to know whether it is early or late war as well as if they will be representing the Eastern or the Western theater of the war. The impression is all about the details. Those who are “in the know” can easily tell.

Lastly come the “Living Historians.” Most living historians are closet campaigners, but are limited in their impressions by budget. To accurately portray the past is very expensive. These historians focus on the person



Photo by Synthia Santos

A living history reenactor plays the melodeon in Quarters 1.

portrayed as closely as they also focus on the material culture of the times. Their outfits will generally bear up under the closest scrutiny, but will most often be all machine sewn. The living historian’s focus is instead on the how and the why of their portrayal. This is where you will run across the concept of “First Person,” a portrayal of an actual personality associated with a historic site. How did this person come to be there? What were his life experiences up to the point of his arrival at this particular place and time? How did he talk? How did he walk? Why did he do the things that he did?

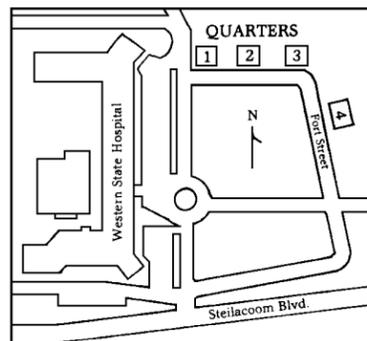
By understanding the details of the lives of specific people in a specific

setting, one can begin to get a clearer picture of why history played out the way that it did. History is comprised not only of places and things, but also of people and ideas.

Here at Fort Steilacoom we try as best we can to bring the history of the Fort all together. The HFSA is rapidly moving away from the “dusty glass case” mode (although we certainly still have plenty of those) to a Living History site where visitors can not only see where it all happened, but also, in a very real way, converse with many of the personalities that made it happen. Come and see what the new HSFA is all about.

Annual Meeting and Program – October 19, 2008, 2 p.m., Quarters 2

Historic Fort Steilacoom
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What on Earth is “Living History?”

by Gideon Pete

History, by definition, is something that has happened in times past. This past can be of recent memory, as in the first Iraq war. More often than not, though, history refers instead to a time long ago from which all those who once participated in it are now dead. How, then, can something that once occurred but now no longer exists be alive?

Museums have always been plagued with the onerous task of attempting to make the remembrance of past events relevant to the people living in the present. To be sure, there have ever been those few wonderful folks who, for whatever reason, have always been fascinated with the past. Then again, we have always been blessed with devoted teachers who annually drag their captive audiences out of the school rooms into the waiting arms of the curators of the past. Such are the museums’ bread and butter. Places like Historic Fort Steilacoom, quite simply, could not exist without them.

The mid 1960s, however, found museum attendance at an all time low. America was once again embroiled in an unpopular war. One result of this conflict was a general public too distracted with current events to give much thought to the country’s past. They found it to be too much effort to make the trek down to their community’s collective attic only to stare mutely at endless glass cases of dusty relics. All across the nation, facilities were closing their doors for the very last time. Something had to give. Something had to be found that would once



Photo by Synthia Santos

Reenactors participating in Living History day show what life was like in the 1860s at Fort Steilacoom.

again spark an interest in America’s past. That “something” was the introduction of what has come to be referred to as “Living History.”

Today, the phenomenon of living history can be roughly broken down into three basic groups. These groups are: (1) costumed docents, (2) the reenacting community, and (3) living historians. A costumed docent, who is sometimes referred to as a mannequin, is just what the name implies. A mannequin’s purpose is to display clothing. The Living History movement had its beginnings with the introduction of costumed docents at various historic sites on the East

coast. I use the term “costume” because in the beginning the clothing that these docents wore was just that. The idea was not to display museum perfect attire, but rather to present to the public an “impression” of what the people who once populated that particular historic site looked like. These docents and their “impressions” were an immediate hit. No attempt was made to convey either the speech or mannerisms of the people portrayed, and none was needed. The public lived it! Museums began the slow return from the brink of oblivion.

(Continued on page 3)

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President's Message



This column marks the end of my run as president of Historic Fort Steilacoom Association. I have chosen not to run again as president

for the coming year. I will instead be working "behind the scenes" for a while down here at the Fort.

The hosting of monthly speakers, and teas and living history events is not only the most visible, but also inevitably the most enjoyable work that we do down here at Fort Steilacoom. Along with all of this, however, there are also the most necessary and sometimes more tedious and hidden tasks of curation, preservation and inventory control. These all exist above and beyond the ever present battle that we also wage against the ancient enemies of Fort Steilacoom: Rust, Rot and the ever opportunistic Carpenter Ant.

As it is written in the Good Book, "The fields are white for the harvest, but the laborers are few." This holds as true with museum work as with any other venture. There is always a lot to do here at Fort Steilacoom and there is often not enough help available to see things through.

I am very pleased to say, though, that the HFSA Board of Directors is A WORKING BOARD! You can

believe me when I say that not even one person is a member in name only or only "signed on" for the prestige of being on a board. Every single person on the board has the love of this old Fort, along with its special place in Washington history, embedded deep in their heart. A quick look at all that this association has accomplished in the past couple of years is proof of that. It has been a collective effort.

Carol Neufeld Stout, our past president, and also one of our most experienced board members, has once again graciously volunteered to "labor at the harvest" for 2009. Like the trooper that she is, she has acquiesced to all of our entreaties and will once again be taking the tiller of Historic Fort Steilacoom Association and will be directing the agenda of HFSA as it marks the 160th anniversary of the arrival of Company M of the First U.S. Artillery to the shores of south Puget Sound. Be sure to keep a frequent eye on www.historicfortsteilacoom.com, our new web site, for all that will be going on to celebrate this important milestone. You most certainly won't want to miss out on a thing!

Farewell to all of you for now. I remain, as always, your most obedient servant.

Gideon Pete

Farewell to Alan Archambault

Alan Archambault, who has been the curator of the Fort Lewis Military Museum for 21 years, is leaving to take a position at the Center of Military History at Fort McNair in Washington DC. We at Fort Steilacoom will miss him, his knowledge of the military history of this area, and his art work portraying soldiers, especially of the Northwest. He has generously shared his spare time with us giving lectures, reenacting at Fort Steilacoom's events and providing research material for our members and organization.

Alan, thank you for all of your help. We wish you well in your new position, but plan to keep in contact with you and rejoice in your achievements.

Notice of Annual Meeting & Program

Historic Fort Steilacoom Association will hold its Annual Meeting on October 19, 2008, at 2 p.m. in Quarters 2. The Nominating Committee presents the following slate of candidates of officers and directors:

President: Carol Neufeld Stout
1st Vice President: Thomas Melberg
2nd Vice President: Robert Demorest
Secretary: Joseph Lewis
Treasurer: Kenneth Morgan
Directors 2008-2011:

Lawrence Bateman
 Bill Arends
 Laurie Sterling

Following the brief business meeting, John McPherson and Lawrence Bateman will share impressions of their recent experience at the 2008 national Gettysburg battlefield re-enactment.



Photo by Synthia Santos

Ladies from Fort Nisqually visit Fort Steilacoom for Living History.

Living History (From page 1)

At the same time that costumed docents were beginning to appear at historic sites, another phenomenon was beginning to take shape. With the advent of the 100th anniversary of the American civil war came the re-enactor. Many major battlefields of that conflict had long been set aside as national parks. The early 1960s found these expanses of open fields and creeks along with their ever present orchards as dead as the monumentation that dotted their byways. The re-enactor changed all of that forever. He brought "the War" to life! Early attempts at re-enacting were pretty crude by today's standards. In the beginning the standard uniform consisted of a pair of Levis, a Penny's work shirt, and a homemade kepi (fatigue cap). The weapon of choice was an original Springfield musket. There were plenty of them laying around, and they were cheap. Many "soldiers" no longer knew how to properly operate a musket, but this was no problem to the early re-enacting community. Most any long arm would do. A lot of World War I 30-06's with their bolt actions were pressed into service for "the Cause."

By the early 1970s the number of re-enactors had grown to the point where there were tens of thousands world wide. With this growth, along with the proliferation of excellently made replica arms and accouterments, re-enacting has split into two distinct camps (in addition to the Blue and the Gray).

These camps are differentiated by the names "Mainstream" and "Campaigner." A mainstream re-enactor is one who still harkens back to the days of the costumed docent. A common criteria for his acquisitions is the "Rule of Thirty Feet." Basically stated, the thirty foot rule goes like this: "If the item looks authentic from thirty feet away, it's just fine." The concept of the mainstream re-enactor is to present a good "impression" of what a Civil War army may have looked like in the field.

Mainstream re-enactors certainly do look good in their impression.



Photo by Synthia Santos

Fort Steilacoom Museum presents living history to the public in its mission to create an accurate experience of 1860s military and family life.

Their numbers also, as the name implies, are such that at a major event, they definitely can field a respectable army, indeed. What is lacking in the mainstreamer's camp, from a museum's perspective, are the details, all the minutiae of the soldier's life. In focusing on an "impression" only, the majority of mainstreamers pay little regard to several glaring anachronisms. While often individually attired in upwards of \$1,500 worth of authentic uniform and equipment, they lose it in the details. The museum going public used to be wondrously naive when it came to authenticity of apparel, but now are becoming ever more savvy due to the influence of living history in general and a better level of historic portrayal in film and on television in particular. The public now readily discerns what is period correct and what is not. Upon close inspection, most re-enactors still cling to modern eye wear, modern footwear, and also cheap, modern head coverings. Mainstreamers are also very fond of an over abundance of tentage and other camp equipment all held together with the ever present modern Phillip's screw. A single company of these mainstream soldiers will take to the field with enough of

the Quartermaster's stores to do justice to an entire regiment, if not a full brigade. Another major failing with this style of camping from an authentic point of view is the mainstreamer's use of the hobby as "theater." Once the paying public has disappeared from view, all authenticity standards that once were present are either greatly relaxed or disappear entirely. What earlier in the day had contained the appearance of a nineteenth century society, quickly devolves back into the modern era. Uniforms and crinoline are replaced by comfortable "sweats" and out come the Fritos and six packs of Coca-Cola.

"Campaigners" are another breed of re-enactor entirely. Once in the fringe minority, their numbers are presently growing by leaps and bounds as ever increasing numbers of mainstreamers, disillusioned with the thirty foot rule, join their ranks. A campaigner is the re-enacting equivalent of a Navy Seal. Their credo is "by us and for us" or BUFU for short. With BUFU the focus is not on massed numbers of troops or even on the paying public. At many campaigner events, there is no public! Likewise, campaigners do not consider what they do to be in the