



Erie County committee promotes programs - Civil War began 150 years ago

BY TOM JACKSON, ANDUSKY REGISTER

HORACE HARPER BILL SANDUSKY

The South might not rise again, but the Civil War is making a comeback of sorts. Tuesday was the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, when Confederates firing on Fort Sumter launched a war that lasted from 1861 to 1865.

History buffs across the country have taken notice, and Ohio is no exception.

The Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission — a local committee of museum officials, tourism promoters and historians — has formed to play up the local connection.

The group's chairman is Randy Koch, president of Koch Building Products. Koch is a businessman, but he majored in history in college and has studied the local area's ties to the Civil War and the Underground Railroad. Koch's son is a ranger at the Vicksburg National Military Park in Mississippi, site of the decisive battle that sealed the Confederacy's fate in the west. "So it runs in the family," Koch said. "I guess the Civil War has always been my personal focus."

The Civil War's battles were fought well to the south of Sandusky, but this area's role in the war still had its moments of drama. In 1864, for instance, the Union foiled a plot to rescue rebel prisoners on Johnson's Island, Koch said.

Koch said his committee has already met five times. The panel focuses mainly on working with other local groups to encourage special programs in connection with the Civil War.

The Sandusky Library's history blog has already posted many articles about Sandusky's ties to the Civil War. One of them tells the story of Horace Harper Bill, born in 1842 in Sandusky. His story is told in letters sent from the front that are part of the library's archives. One of his letters home, sent to his father in April 1862, describes his experiences in battles in and around Winchester, Va.: "I had many narrow escapes during the Winchester fight and the Strasburg skirmish last week. My hair was clipped twice by musket balls and one spent ball struck the leg of my boot, in the skirmish on the left flank, Sunday morning, and several times during the day shells struck and exploded within a few yards of where I stood. But, it seems almost miraculously, I escaped unhurt."



<http://sanduskyhistory.blogspot.com/2007/10/letters-from-front.html>

Bill died in the Battle of Antietam, hit by musket balls in his head, stomach and leg. The young lieutenant was leading a company in a charge against a Confederate position when he was hit. He is buried in Oakland Cemetery.

Sandusky Library is planning many events related to the Civil War, said Maggie Marconi, museum curator at Sandusky Library's Follett House. "We're in the planning stages of different things right now," Marconi said.

In Fremont, meanwhile, the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center remains a leading history museum in the area. Hayes was a U.S. president and a Civil War hero. That fact isn't lost on museum officials.

On Tuesday night — in an event timed with the Civil War's beginning — the museum launched a major new exhibit: "Civil War: Battlefield and Homefront." The exhibit runs through Jan. 29, 2012. About 150 people showed up for the opening night, said Thomas Culbertson, executive director at the Hayes Center.

History buffs soon also will be able to observe another anniversary: Next year begins the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. State Rep. Dennis Murray, D-Sandusky, sits on a state commission that's organizing events to commemorate the War of 1812.

Civil War resources:

SANDUSKY HISTORY BLOG: sanduskyhistory.blogspot.com.

ERIE COUNTY CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL COMMISSION: On Facebook. Text-message updates sent to mobile phones are available from the Facebook page.

OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY: ohiohistory.org. Also available on Facebook and Twitter (@OhioHistory)

OHIO IN THE CIVILWAR: ohiocivilwar.com.

DISUNION: A day-by-day blog at The New York Times. It chronicles the Civil War, drawing on contemporary accounts, at opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/category/disunion

The Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission:

MEMBERS INCLUDE: Chairman Randy Koch, Koch Building Products president; John Hildebrandt, Cedar Point general manager; Neil Allen, Sandusky Maritime Museum director; Joan Van Offeren, Lake Erie Shores and Islands East executive director; Angie George, Lake Erie Shores & Islands East visitor services coordinator; Maggie Marconi, Sandusky Library's Follett House museum curator; Vicki Vanden Bout, Merry-Go-Round Museum director; and Matthew Strobel, of the Ohio History Service Corps.