

## **Appalachian Journal: Battle for preservation**

Teachers, volunteers help coax Militia Hill to tell story of its war

By FRED BROWN, APPALACHIAN JOURNAL

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LAKE CITY - War had arrived in Anderson County. The year was 1891, a scant three decades since the Civil War. This time, clean-cheeked soldiers tromped up a dusty Vowell Mountain road and camped on ground they named Fort Anderson on top of Militia Hill.

Although many of the crisply clad soldiers were young, many were armed with the weapons of their fathers and grandfathers, vintage Civil War equipment. They were up against a ragged, but tough, enemy: Coal miners of Coal Creek, who were as hungry as wolves and mad as a stirred nest of hornets.

The miners wore no uniforms but tied red bandanas around their necks and carried vintage weapons as well. They had no cannons, no Gatlin guns and no bold maneuvers up their sleeves. Their strategy was in owning the ridges around Vowell Mountain. The soldiers were surrounded.

That war, which ended in 1892, brought to a dramatic conclusion Tennessee's hated convict lease system in coal mines as well as in other endeavors. Tennessee's politicians and governor had allowed coal mine operators to use convicts to work in the mines for virtually nothing and watered-down meals.

Prisoners, many of them former slaves and the poorest of the poor, were forced into the mines, where the saying was: "Kill a man, get another; kill a mule, buy another." Mules were more important than men in those mines.

Tennessee's soldiers were simply carrying out their duties as state militia, to put down an uprising in the hills of East Tennessee. The miners, grouped under the romantic and perhaps daring name of the Knights of Labor, were fighting for the right to work, to feed their families, to be free of oppression, in the style and character of their forefathers.

Right and wrong was in the eye of the individual, patriot, miner or prisoner.

Over the decades since, Vowell Mountain has witnessed a variety of events: coal mining, mine explosions, death, destruction, the vile scene of piles of trash and garbage, isolation and indifference.

Today, a new sound rings out in the thick, mosquito-infested forests of the mountainside. It is the sound of preservation, the joy of discovery and the sublime act of digging into the ground in an attempt to understand just what took place on this mountain 115 years ago this August.

Archaeologists, volunteers, folklorists and even East Tennessee school teachers, funded through the No Child Left Behind Act and a hard-to-get math and science grant from NASA, are spending time this summer on the mountain, mapping, digging, finding the relics and shards of history to help understand just what happened here so long ago.

Led by University of Tennessee research archaeologist Elizabeth Kellar DeCorse, who is in charge of the dig, Fort Anderson is being plumbed through a geographic information system, which uses laser beams to determine elevation and such. Later, that information will be fed into a computer software program that will create a map, showing the precise locations of relics found on the site.

This is phase one of the archaeological dig in the restoration and preservation of a historic site.

DeCorse says the crews have begun researching a four-acre area as a test to see if a larger archaeological dig is required before changes are made on Militia Hill, which is under the protection of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, started by Geo-Environmental founder Barry Thacker, an engineer who is also president of the foundation.

Heirs of the George Camp family donated the mountain, which contained all of the historic fort environs, to the foundation, which hopes to one day add a driving trail tour and a coal miners' museum, which will reflect the war on Militia Hill and will be open to the public so the history of the Coal Creek miners is never forgotten.

On this day, Desiree Ketteringham, a UT GIS technician, swatted mosquitoes and beamed lasers at plots on the fort's earthen floor as a group of middle school teachers - Veronica Watson, Nikki Presnell and Alison Hardison - from Jones Cove School in Sevier County, the NASA grant recipients, dug in one-meter plots and recorded the stuff sifted from the litter and dirt. In addition, teachers from Roane and Loudoun counties were helping in the dig.

The teachers will take these skills back to students in the classroom and on field trips to work on archaeological projects. All of this effort by the teachers is to encourage students to become excited about learning, about being able to go beyond their perceived boundaries, about the adventure math and science hold.

Earlier in the week, the teachers along with Charlie Susano, crew chief for the Fort Anderson/Militia Hill operation and an archaeologist researcher with DeCorse and the Archaeological Research Laboratory at UT, made a startling discovery.

Sentry trenches were found near the bottom of the mountain. Here, soldiers would get an early warning if the miners attempted to storm the hill or start shooting. The miners, however, were behind trees and rocks on a high ridge across from Fort Anderson.

Previously, all that had been known was that the soldiers had built an earthen fort with trenches on the crest of Militia Hill.

Susano also found fragments of a beer bottle dating from the 1890s. Its label read: "Knoxville Brewing Co." The bottle company was in operation from 1889-1893, on 613 McGhee and Chamberlain streets.

Susano's crews also uncovered pieces of a whiskey bottle, a panel syrup bottle and some stoneware.

This indicates the soldiers had a little time on their hands to deal with the elixirs of life.

Before the crew finished their work on a hot day last week, Bob Fulcher, Park Manager of the Cumberland Trail State Park, founder and longtime director of the Tennessee State Parks Folklife Project, stopped by to help with the dig and to sing the song "Coal Creek March," about the battle of Fort Anderson and Militia Hill.



*Bob Fulcher, park manager of the Cumberland Trail State Park and founder and longtime director of the Tennessee State Parks Folklife Project, plays "Coal Creek March" for archaeologists taking part in the Militia Hill dig in Anderson County. Listening to the tune are, from left in background, Charlie Susano, Russell Fulcher, 11, Jennifer Kirkmeyer, Carol Moore, Desiree Ketteringham, Elizabeth Kellar DeCorse, Stephanie White and Veronica Watson.*

And he sang,

"It's a long way to Coal Creek

It's a long way to the mines

It's a dark day in Coal Creek

It's a dark day in the mines

It's dark day in Coal Creek

Trouble at the Coal Creek mines."

The song brought tears to the eyes of some gathered at the site listening to the twang of Fulcher's banjo as he played the parts of forlorn miners, the shooting of the soldiers and the haunting sound of a war in the bosom of this old mountain.

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