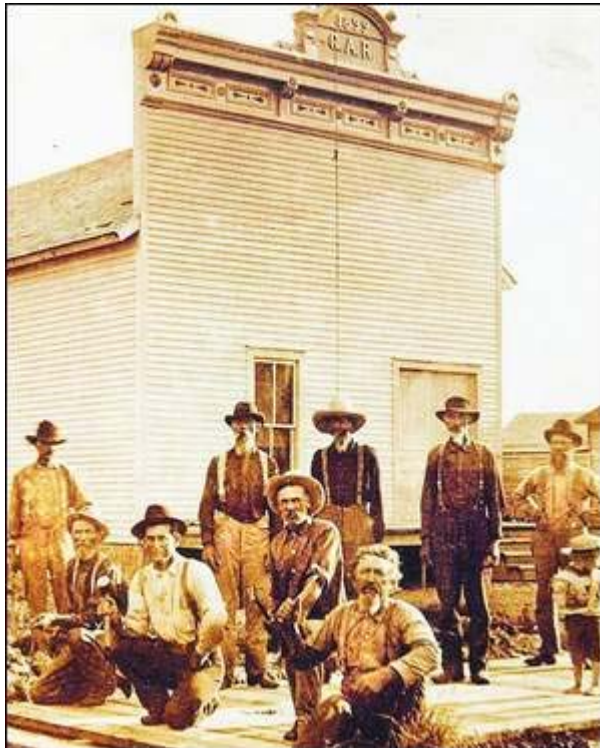




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(Photo by Courtesy photo)

Members of the Sunfield chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic in front of the hall that they built, laying down a plank road in about 1900. Except for the child on the right, they were all Civil War veterans.

Keeping the Civil War faith living

By SCOTT YOSHONIS
Staff Writer

SUNFIELD — As the United States of America celebrated its 231st birthday last week, some folks celebrated with a personal connection to the nation's history.

The Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War is a group of people who can trace its ancestry back to someone who fought in the Civil War, and a local chapter, or "camp," is based in Sunfield.

The group, whose organization is the institutional descendant of the Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal benevolent society of Civil War veterans founded in 1866, proudly meets and conducts its business in the last remaining original GAR hall that has been in continuous use.

The Sons of Union Veterans does not re-enact Civil War battles, although some of the members also belong to re-enactment groups.

Its focus is on community service projects relating to the Civil War, according to Keith Harrison, one of the founders of the Sunfield camp, the Curtenius Guard Camp 17, and its current secretary.

Finding every soldier

"Locally, each camp is different," Harrison said. "One of the things that the Sons are doing nationally is locating and identifying every grave of every Union soldier who served during the Civil War, throughout the world. There are between 350,000-400,000, so it's a long-term project, but we've been around since 1881. We're not going anywhere."

Locally, the Lansing-Sunfield camp is working at Mt. Hope Cemetery in Lansing, finding and restoring headstones of Union veterans buried within, as well as restoring the GAR monument there.

One of the Union soldiers buried in the Lansing cemetery is Luther Baker, who helped track down, and was the last person to talk to, John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of Abraham Lincoln. Baker Street in Lansing is named for him.

The Sons also seek to remedy what Harrison sees as the inadequate teaching of the history of the conflict.

"We go into schools and give school programs," Harrison said, "bringing them the history of what actually occurred in the Civil War."

Proud of hall

But the camp's proudest piece of history is their hall in Sunfield, which was built by the Union veterans of the town themselves in 1899.

It is where the GAR conducted its meetings and carried out its business until taken over by the Daughters of the Union Veterans in 1926.

The Curtenius Guard Camp 17 was founded in 1983 in Harrison's basement, and the group is delighted to be able to carry the torch handed down from the Grand Army of the Republic in the Army's spiritual, as well as actual, home.

"This is a direct tie to the past," Harrison said. "The country was changing, both during the war and after it, and the men who built this hall were the ones who changed it."

Five members of the GAR were elected President of the United States. The organization, which consisted solely of Civil War veterans, had over 400,000 members at its peak in 1890, and faded into history when its last remaining member died in 1956 at the age of 109.

Those who wish to learn more about the Sons of Union Veterans, or help out with their community projects, are encouraged to contact the camp's Junior Vice Commander, Dave Arnold, at 321-6013, or by e-mail at arnoldsuvcwmi@sbcglobal.net.

