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Participating in history: Re-enactors converge on Cedar Creek

By Preston Knight -- Daily Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN — For the better part of 46 years, Dusty Rhodes has heard it all.

Rhodes, 56, cuts a figure in the uniform of the 4th Virginia Cavalry Little Fork Rangers of Culpeper, and has since 1961, but that doesn't mean the unique sight deserves snickering from observers.

"I've heard some yahoos," Rhodes said. "I don't pay any attention. They're ignorant. The Civil War is being forgotten. They don't like to think about it. More than 1 million men died. That's 1 million Americans."

Steven Mark Sanders, a member of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War out of Maryland, said he gets insulted all the time when he dresses up, and has been labeled a warmonger. Such labels are signs of people who are uneducated on the matter, fellow member Michael Beard said.

"They don't understand what the country comes from," he said, "and we're here to remind them. It defines us as a people."

By the hundreds, re-enactors and visitors converged on the Cedar Creek Battlefield Saturday for the 143rd anniversary of the Battle of Cedar Creek. The weather was perfect, but the continuing drought forced organizers to maneuver around an open fire ban by Gov. Timothy M. Kaine. In the end, campfires were allowed Friday night, said Margaret Jennette, whose husband, Jake, participated in the reenactment.

"That's their food source," she said of the fires.

To non-history buffs, dressing up in old-fashioned clothes and cooking over campfires might seem a little odd. But re-enactments serve to educate people about the past, re-enactors and visitors said.

"You have to put it in context," said Phil Mobley, a first-time visitor from Fairfax. "Most people only see this as [written] blocks on a page. The typography plays a huge role. It's

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good people do volunteer to do this type of thing."

Lianna Reckard, 21, of Phoenixville, Pa., was dressed in period clothing for her first re-enactment. She said it won't be her last.

Special Sections



"This is one of the most amazing and different experiences I've ever had in my entire life," Reckard said. "It broadens your horizons, that's all."

She was with Dave Mitchell and Ryan Conroy, who comprise the Phoenix Iron Parts, a group of re-enactors. Conroy said they tend only to choose the most authentic of re-enactments, mainly ones that are invitation only.

Photo Gallery

Mitchell said critics of any re-enactment miss the point of honoring history.

"They just don't know," he said. "It's like the Amish from where we're from, people want to write us off as oddballs."

Vacation Gallery

There are perks to being a re-enactor, Rhodes said. They're a way to make friends, he said, and, for many, Cedar Creek will be the last time they see each other until next year.

Participants share not only an appreciation of history, they develop a sense of mutual trust, Rhodes said.

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"We pretty much stick together," he said. "It's like a brotherhood."

When Margaret Jennette married her husband 40 years ago, she was on the periphery of re-enacting, she said.

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"I would tell him, 'OK, you go have a good time,'" said Jennette, who lives in Swansboro, N.C. "I've made a lot of his uniforms."

Five years ago, she came to Cedar Creek and participated for the first time. Three years ago, she began dressing out.

Entertainment News

Now the Jennettes' appreciation of their heritage has been passed down to their son, Jeff, of Springfield, Va. He said he was interested as much for himself as for his own children, one of whom, playing with a gun, wanted to know if the family could move closer to the action Saturday.

"It's a history lesson," Jeff Jennette said. "It gives them some context. It's part of our history, like it or not."

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For re-enactors and their audience, it can be a defining experience.

"It's to remind people how this country used to be," said Jeffrey French, another member of the Sons of Union Veterans. "It's so we can learn from history to build and make a better future."

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