

Old soldier died, didn't fade from family's mind

Civil War vet's relatives pay their respects to ancestor

Friday, May 29, 2009

If the spirit of William H. Biles was hanging around Mount Rest Cemetery in La Plata a couple of weeks ago, he would have been pleased and proud to see how his family is honoring his memory.

Elmer Biles, Stephanie Biles McHugh and several other relatives gathered at the cemetery May 11 to dedicate a memorial stone near the place where the family thinks William Biles was buried in December 1883. Elmer Biles and McHugh, his second cousin, took a nearly two-year genealogical journey to discover the facts surrounding their great-great-grandfather, who served in the Union Army's Company A, 5th New York Heavy Artillery Regiment during the Civil War.

The journey began with research done by Elmer Biles' late wife, Evelyn, McHugh said.

"Evelyn did the beginning of the research," she said. "Without her research there would have been a big hole in my information."

McHugh said uncovering the history about her great-great-grandfather was like putting together a puzzle.

"I've been doing genealogy for six years," she said. "I wanted to know who my great-great-grandfather was



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Submitted photos

Duane Whitlock, left, senior vice commander of the James H. Harris Camp 38 of St. Mary's County Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Josh Brown, a U.S. Marine who lives in Waldorf, and Eddie Roberts, commander of the George G. Meade Camp 5 of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, pay tribute to William H. Biles who fought for the Union Army during the Civil War.



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great-great-grandfather was and it just snowballed. I loved the challenge. I'm very tenacious. When somebody says that I can't find something I usually can."

William Biles was already the father of six children when he enlisted on Dec. 31, 1863, Elmer Biles said, adding that his great-great grandfather was born in Dartford, England in 1824.

The family emigrated from England to New York around 1860 and then moved to Port Tobacco around 1880.

"Think of the adventure of the family coming over here by boat," said Biles, who serves as the historian for the Friends of Chapman State Park in Bryans Road. "They didn't know where they were going or what they were going to encounter. They were on a quest for freedom so they came to the United States."

Biles said he assumes that his great-great-grandfather enlisted in the Union Army to help feed his family. The military offered an enlistment bonus of \$60 which was a lot of money in 1863, he said.

"The Union forces were recruiting like all get out in New York City," he said.

In addition, if his great-great grandfather was honorably discharged from the Army he would become a citizen, Biles said.

William Biles was injured July 18, 1864, at the battle of Cool Spring or Snicker's Gap in Virginia near the Shenandoah River when a bullet shattered his right hand, Biles said.

Initially, William was reported as killed in action but records show that on July 19, 1864, he was taken as a prisoner of war.

William was taken to a hospital in Staunton, Va., and later transferred to a medical facility in Richmond, Va., before being exchanged with the Union forces in Annapolis, Biles said.

William served as a warden in a hospital before being mustered out April 13, 1865, Biles said, adding that his great-great-grandfather moved to Baltimore shortly after his discharge.

On Oct. 6, 1882, William Biles and his sons, Abram and Joseph, applied at the Port Tobacco Courthouse for their naturalization papers that were just recently discovered by McHugh and Elmer Biles. The papers were handwritten and hard to read, Biles said.

"I didn't know anything about this," he said. "We had the naturalization papers but we couldn't read them. He became a naturalized citizen after he was discharged from serving in the Union Army during the Civil War. It's a fascinating story."

After settling in Charles County, William Biles worked as a policeman and a "fellmonger" — a person who worked in a tannery removing fur from the hides of animals, Biles said.

It was great to be able to lay a memorial stone at the cemetery very near where church officials believe her great-great-grandfather was buried so long ago, McHugh



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Stephanie Biles McHugh, left, and her second cousin Elmer Biles admire the new memorial stone at Mount Rest Cemetery in La Plata that honors Biles, their great-great-grandfather.

said.

"He served our country so people should know that he's buried there," she said.
"Now, people will always know."

The memorial ceremony included a reading of the 23rd Psalm by Elmer Biles' 10-year-old granddaughter Isabella Biles and a performance of "Taps" by Waldorf resident and U.S. Marine Josh Brown.

Duane Whitlock, senior vice commander of the James H. Harris Camp 38 of the St. Mary's County Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War and Eddie Roberts, commander of the George G. Meade Camp 5 of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War also attended the ceremony.

"The ceremony was very touching," McHugh said. "I believe that William knew that it was going on. This was just an honorable thing to do and he deserves it. I'm proud to have him as a family member."

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