

4th is history worth celebrating

Events will shine light on Civil War era and how Americans coped

By [Sue Vorenberg](#)
Columbian Staff Reporter

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What a difference 150 years makes.

Fireworks, multiple music acts and a host of activities should make this year's Independence Day at Fort Vancouver into quite the party.

But while many events at the 2011 shindig are aimed at honoring the Civil War sesquicentennial, if the crowds could travel back in time to Fort Vancouver back in 1861, they'd find a very different scene.

"It would have almost been one of these things where they would have celebrated the Fourth of July in defiance of the Civil War," said Maj. Jeff Davis, historian and chairman of the Vancouver Barracks Military Association.

The war between the North and South began on April 12, 1861, with an attack by Confederate troops on Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C.

News traveled more slowly back then, but within at least a few weeks of the first shots, soldiers in the Pacific Northwest would have heard about it and started to pick sides, Davis said.

And much like news of the war did in the rest of the country, it divided the Army troops that were stationed at Fort Vancouver.

About half of those stationed here headed south to join the Confederacy within a month or so after the war started. The other half remained, waiting for their own recall orders to fight for the North, Davis said.

"It probably would have been a somber and defiant period for the remaining garrison," Davis said. "The Southern part would have left very quickly, because they would be afraid that they'd be arrested for treason. Yet I imagine both sides probably had some sort of farewell dinner to honor their brothers in arms before they left."

The reduced numbers were just the beginning of troubles for the soldiers that remained waiting for orders, he added.

The War of 1812 against the British was still in the minds of many, with fears that England would join with the South and try to recapture lands it once owned around the fort.

And then there were growing territorial problems with the local tribes, Davis said.

“Leading up to the war, 1856, 1857, 1858, those were the times of the Yakima War, the Rogue River War, there was a lot of concern about Indian unrest in the Pacific Northwest,” Davis said.

Independence celebrations that year probably wouldn’t have included fireworks or rousing speeches by politicians, he added.

“The soldiers would have been a little paranoid,” Davis said. “It would have been like a September 11 for them. They’d be worried about Indians in the hills, about the British invading. It couldn’t have been fun.”

Back to the future

Fortunately for visitors to the 2011 event, the fun of the Fourth has returned — both from the dark days of the Civil War and from the financial woes of 2009 — said Cara Cantonwine, director of programs for Fort Vancouver National Trust, which manages the Independence Day celebration.

In 2009 there just wasn’t enough money to run the event, so it shut down that year.

The introduction of paid attendance when it relaunched in 2010 has put the event on much more stable footing, Cantonwine said.

“Last year we broke even within a few dollars,” she said. “That gave us the financial stability to continue. And we’ve added some sponsors this year, for our 48th year of the event, which should also help.”

The fireworks display will be the same size this year as last year, but the staging will be different, which should make the show seem more multidimensional for viewers at the fort, said Heather Gobet, marketing director at Western Display, the company putting on the show.

Last year, fireworks launched from three spots on the field. This year, they will launch from five spots, she said.

“The computer seeks shells in multiple locations and can fire from different areas,” Gobet said. “It gives a more dramatic quality to the display — it seems more full. And it gives us more options.”

Fireworks can move in a wave across the field, move from both edges into the center or go all across the sky, which were options that the company didn’t have when it was shooting shells from a barge on the Columbia River before 2009, she explained.

“When you go off a river it’s such a huge area that you can’t do some of the things that go closer to the ground,” Gobet said. “Bringing things back to the field allows us to use different shells.”

One type of firework the company plans to use is called a peacock box.

“It has very intense glittering comets,” Gobet said. “They shoot in a sequence with one fanned effect and then another. It’s a really intense layered display.”

The Fort Vancouver celebration will also include five entertainment zones with musical acts, games and children’s activities. One zone includes a heritage stage with demonstrations, period actors and information about the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War.

“We’ll have costumes from the 1860s, with a Civil War-era fashion show,” said Susan Parrish, communications manager for Fort Vancouver National Trust. “We have an amazing Abraham Lincoln re-enactor, who will do a press conference. We have Illinois Doug Tracy, a banjo and guitar player who will sing campaign songs from the 1860s.”

The stage will also have a black powder firearms display using weapons from the Civil War, she said.

Soldiers in 1861 probably wouldn’t have been as happy to see black powder or fireworks — which are made from black powder — during that turbulent time, but after the Civil War was over, well, that was a different story, Davis said.

“After the war fireworks were less expensive,” Davis said. “During the Civil War the government had started up all these mills producing nothing but gunpowder. So after the war there were all these shiny new mills, but they didn’t need to produce black powder for the war anymore. By the 1880s, fireworks celebrations were common.”