

CONNECTION

In Their Footsteps

Civil War mobile museum brings history to Arlington.

By Jeanne Theismann

Thursday, August 11, 2011

The lights went dim as Shawn Smiley and her two sons entered the unusual tractor trailer parked at Arlington National Cemetery. Within minutes, the stillness was pierced by the sound of gunfire as the silhouette of trees on a Civil War battlefield was illuminated by a barrage of bullets. What started out as a typical tourist excursion Aug. 7 turned into an adventure aboard the Virginia Civil War HistoryMobile.

"Wow! This is cool," said Smiley's 6-year-old son Austin Green as he wandered through the displays. "It's fun learning like this."

The Civil War 150 HistoryMobile is a free, interactive "museum on wheels" housed in a 53-foot expandable tractor-trailer donated by Volvo of North America. An initiative of the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission, the HistoryMobile launched a four-year tour on July 21 in conjunction with the 150th commemoration of the First Battle of Manassas. As part of its tour, the mobile museum visited Arlington Cemetery over the weekend and will be at the Arlington County Fair through Aug. 14.

"Every Virginian was affected by the Civil War," said HistoryMobile guide Rusty Nix. "Not just the soldier, but the civilian and the slave and we're here to tell their story."

The HistoryMobile uses state-of-the-art technology to present individual stories of the Civil War from the perspectives of those who experienced it — young and old, enslaved and free, soldiers and civilians.

"No matter where you were from, no matter the color of your skin, everyone in the state was touched by the war," Nix said. "The HistoryMobile allows visitors to experience what it was like by following in the footsteps of those who were there."

The HistoryMobile is divided into four sections: Battlefield, Homefront, Journey to Freedom, and Loss-Gain-Legacy. Exhibits include a replica of a bloodstained letter written by a dying son to his father after being mortally wounded at Spotsylvania in 1864 and a reenacted conversation between a slave husband and wife considering the risks and rewards of fleeing to freedom.

"We will tour the state over the next four years, following the war through all the major battles," Nix said. "Our last stop will be Appomattox in 2015."

Other exhibits include a film that examines Virginia's decision to secede, a battlefield immersion section that conveys the intensity and suffering of a battle, and a section that offers first-person accounts of real-life dilemmas faced by civilians, soldiers and slaves in Virginia during the Civil War.

The Journey to Freedom exhibit details the overall experience of slavery amid war, both for the people who stayed and those who escaped and fought for freedom.

"It was a difficult decision for slaves to make," Nix said. "The proximity of the Union army in Virginia brought opportunities for freedom but at great risk to themselves and their families."

The final Loss-Gain-Legacy section of the exhibit explores the impact of the war on Virginia, the end of slavery and the reunification of the nation through stories of well-known and lesser known individuals from across the state.

For Smiley and her sons, the visit to the HistoryMobile was time well spent.

"We are trying to learn more about the Civil War," Smiley said. "We visited Bull Run the other day but this was a great way to experience what life was like in Virginia during that time. It's a great exhibit."

For a complete schedule of stops for the HistoryMobile, visit www.viriniacivilwar.org/historymobile_schedule.php.