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## Learning history the hard way



Matt Cassady (above) drills with the 104th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, who set up camp for a day on the Eckley Quadrangle. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

**History major Matt Cassady experiences the tough, everyday life of a Union soldier.**

By Carlie Bliss '04

On the sunny Saturday afternoon in April, most Illinois Wesleyan students flocked to the quad to enjoy one of the first 80-degree days of the year. History major Matt Cassady '06 was no exception. But instead of sporting the standard t-shirt and shorts, Cassady was decked out in full regalia as a Union Army Civil War soldier, complete with a brimmed hat, water canteen, and musket.

Obviously out of breath and sweating through their authentic navy-blue wool jerseys, Cassady and more than 15 other men assumed the identity of the

104th Illinois Volunteer Infantry as part of a “living history” presentation that recreated what would have been a typical Union Army encampment.

“When you start reenacting or doing living histories, it takes your knowledge of the Civil War to a whole new level because you’re actually experiencing it,” says Cassady, who helped to bring the event to IWU through the sponsorship of Phi Alpha Theta. The history honors society was looking for a way to promote history on campus and decided that a “living history” would be more effective than simply bringing in a speaker, which had been done in the past.

“Reenactments help people see the reality of the Civil War because we’re wearing the heavy wool uniforms and marching in the hot sun,” Cassady says. “We’re doing all the maneuvers that they did, and that’s what really drew me to it.”

Cassady began reenacting when he was 18 years old, but his passion for history in general and the Civil War in particular can be traced back to a paper he wrote in the fourth grade.

“My teacher mentioned that the southern states were a separate country at one time, and that struck me,” he says. “Being the overachiever that I was, I decided to write an extra credit report about it, and I’ve been a Civil War buff ever since.”

After attending a reenactment with his parents, Cassady became enthralled with the idea that he could come so close to experiencing the life of a Civil War soldier. He chose to become involved

in the 104th Illinois Volunteer Infantry when he attended one of their reenactments and realized their concern for accuracy in the portrayal of all aspects of the war.

“Some reenactment groups are just a bunch of guys who like to get together with their families and go out and burn gunpowder on the weekends,” he says. “I was really concerned about the history of it and trying to experience that.”

As part of their quest for authenticity, the 60 members of the 104th, most of whom are from the Chicago area, assume the first-person identities of soldiers who actually fought in the war. Cassady chose to research a man named Ira McConnell and sent away to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., for information. In a strange coincidence, Cassady was surprised to find that McConnell was originally from Streator, Ill., only 10 miles from his own hometown of Ancona. “It was kind of spooky,” he says.

Cassady’s involvement in the 104th means not only having to do research and endure the burdensome uniforms. He also must learn the marching, drilling, and firing demonstrations that recreate the everyday life of a Union soldier. To an outside observer, these maneuvers may appear to be quite simple, but according to Cassady, they actually require much practice.

The reenactment season typically begins in the spring, when Cassady can expect to participate in at least one per month. By the time summer rolls around, the 104th Volunteer Infantry is often booked for two or more weekends each month, a schedule that tends to taper down by September.

For Cassady, the most rewarding part of his experience with reenactments is when he gets to interact with the public. During the living history on the IWU quad, the men were approached several times by intrigued spectators who wanted to know more about their uniforms, equipment, weapons, and the war in general. Cassady admits to occasionally breaking character in his role as Ira McConnell to engage in conversations with those who attended the event.

“When we stage reenactments, we want to educate the people,” he says. “The best part of it is when a young child will come up to me and ask questions. If I can talk to young people and impress upon them the importance of the Civil War and how it has shaped our nation, I feel like I’m doing something positive and keeping the memory of the soldiers alive.”

Cassady, who currently has an internship at the historical David Davis Mansion in Bloomington, eventually hopes to expand his interest in history to a career as a museum curator or author. In the meantime, he’ll continue doing Civil War reenactments.

“As General Sherman said, war is hell, and we do reenactments to show people that the Civil War was not glamorous; it was horrible,” he says. “It’s very idealistic to think that war will never happen again, but at least we can show people the human side of the story that they may not get from their history textbooks. The men who died were sons, brothers, and husbands. They were real people.”