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Alumni Perform at Civil War Sites

September 24, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Five Illinois Wesleyan University alumni are recreating music history. C. Roland Hill '51, Marie Ann Hill '52, Sara Simpson '70, Bob Jackson '76 and Mark Lareau '93 are all members of the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band, an authentic recreation of a Civil War Era band from McLean County.

The 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band is a not-for-profit group that performs for historic programs, civic and school events and military balls. In 2005, they performed at the 55th Presidential Inaugural Parade in Washington, D.C. The band has performed at Illinois Wesleyan twice: for University's sesquicentennial in 2000 and again in 2007. This past summer the group made another trip to Washington, D.C. to tour the nation's capital, also playing at the Gettysburg National Battlefield Visitors Center in Gettysburg, Pa. and in the Dunker Church at Antietam National Battlefield in Sharpsburg, Md. They band was accompanied by several members of the Central Illinois Civil War Dance Society, a group that regularly joins them to perform period dances to the "hits of the 1860s."

U.S. Army veteran Gary Borling formed the band in 1995 as part of a reenactment of a Lincoln-Douglas debate performed at the David Davis Mansion in Bloomington, Ill. "We [the band] had so much fun at our first concert that we begged Gary to let us continue performing," said Sara Simpson, who has been with the band since that performance.

The group is comprised of 24 members, mostly from the Bloomington-Normal community. It was modeled after the original band that was mustered at State Normal University, now Illinois State University, in 1861 to accompany the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment. The regiment fought throughout the Mississippi Valley and distinguished itself at Vicksburg, Miss. having lost 11 of 32 men, all the rest wounded save one.

The restoration of brass horns dating from the Civil War era is a priority for the band. Since joining the group, Simpson has played everything from Albert system clarinet to percussion to an E-flat alto horn dating from around 1857. The alto horn was a treasure "that was found in someone's garage and was flat as a pancake," said Simpson. The horn was restored to playing condition specifically for the band.

The band's goal of authenticity allows its audience to hear melodies just as soldiers in the 19th century would have. The quicksteps, marches, overtures, ballads and polkas played by the band are the same pieces that would have provided comfort to Civil War soldiers and led them into battle. These include the patriotic classic "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," as well as favorites of General Ulysses S. Grant, President Abraham Lincoln and even Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

"I have always been a Civil War History buff," said Bob Jackson, who has been playing E-flat alto horn with the band since 2006, "and the band has been a great place to learn more about Civil War history."

Music is not the only authentic element of the band's performances. The performers' costumes are patterned after actual garments worn by Union soldiers and sewn from natural wool fibers. Non-playing members, such as Marie Ann Hill, accompany the band in period dress in order to give the audience a sense of what civilian fashion would have looked like during the Civil War Era. "I am a 'groupie' and follow the band wherever it goes," Hill said. "Dressing in period costumes and helping out wherever I am needed is a big part of my participation."

Hill joined the Regimental Band shortly after its inception in 1995 along with her husband C. Roland Hill, who plays D-flat piccolo and says it is a privilege to play with band members of all ages. “We have a tremendous camaraderie,” he said. “We all feel like family.”

All members of the current band are volunteers, and are selected according to the band’s needs. New recruits are often invited to a rehearsal or to sit in for an absent member at a performance. Lareau was invited to fill in for another member during the band’s second season and has been playing E-flat cornet with them ever since. He is now serving as president of the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band Board.

The Illinois Wesleyan alumni band members graduated with a wide variety of majors. C. Roland Hill majored in speech, Marie Ann Hill majored in theatre, and Lareau majored in biology and nursing. Simpson and Jackson both majored in music education, with Simpson continuing on to receive a master’s degree in music from Northwestern University in 1972.

For additional information on the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band, visit their website at www.33rdband.org.

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