

Park County Historical Society marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War

Rex Rideout sings songs of loneliness, victory, delight and defiance; tells of Lee's home at Arlington

Douglas Stephens, Correspondent



History comes to life

Rex Rideout performs at the Nov. 8 Park County Historical Society dinner for about 50 attendees. (Photo by Wade Waldrup)

"At the start of the war both sides thought the other didn't have a belly for the fight," Rex Rideout said. "Thinking was the war would end in nine months,"

The war began when the Confederates bombarded Union soldiers at Fort Sumter, S.C. on April 12, 1861. The war ended in spring, 1865. Robert E. Lee surrendered the last major Confederate army to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865. The last battle was fought at Palmito Ranch, Texas, on May 13, 1865.

Before the war, there was the Underground Railroad. Slaves seeking freedom in Canada would travel from the south to safe houses along the way.

Travel instructions couldn't be passed openly so a song was sung containing directions. Follow the Drinking Gourd was sung to guide slaves to freedom. Slaves didn't use metal dippers for water, instead they used gourds. Following the drinking gourd spoke of Polaris the North Star with the dippers as gourds.

Some say Pegleg Joe wrote the song, and as a carpenter could mingle with the slaves and teach them the song and path to freedom.

The early Confederacy used Texas' flag with one star on a field of blue. The song, "Bonnie Blue Flag" was written to the flag.

Popular on both sides before the war was the song Dixie. After becoming the Confederate anthem, however, many biting parodies of the song sprang up in the north.

March of 1862 saw the battle of Glorieta Pass in New Mexico. The 1st Colorado Volunteers, under Major John Chivington, 400 strong helped defeat the Confederates by destroying their supplies.

However, Chivington later disgraced himself by leading the massacre at Sand Creek. On Nov. 29, 1864, Chivington attacked Sand Creek, a small Cheyenne-Arapaho settlement in the Colorado Territory, with a force of roughly 700 Federal soldiers. Having recently signed

a new treaty with the federal government, the Native Americans were not expecting the attack. Most of the warriors were out hunting when Chivington's men arrived. The Federals massacred the villagers, killing roughly 100 women and children before returning to Denver to display body parts and other gruesome trophies in local saloons and theaters. Chivington and his men were subject to an official investigation but never brought up on charges for their actions.

Songs from this time included, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "The Battle Cry of Freedom."

In January 1863, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves. The 1st Arkansas Negro Regiment was formed and had a marching song to the tune of "Battle Hymn."

A popular song among recently freed slaves was, "The Year of Jubilo" from the biblical year of jubilee. The song tells of masters running away in the face of Union troops and the slaves taking over the plantation house with its store of cider and other libations.

"Better Times are Coming" by Stephen Foster was upbeat while "Lorena" made men "so homesick that is play was band in the soldier camps," Rideout said.

"All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight" is a poem first published as "The Picket Guard" by Ethel Lynn Beers in Harper's Weekly, Nov. 30, 1861. On July 4, 1863, Harper's Weekly told its readers that the poem had been written for the paper by a lady contributor whom it later identified as Beers.

"The poem was based on newspaper reports of all is quiet tonight, which was based on official telegrams sent to the Secretary of War by Major-General George B. McClellan following the First

Battle of Bull Run. Beers noticed that the report was followed by a small item telling of a picket being killed. She wrote the poem that same morning and she read it in September 1861. In 1863, the poem was set to music by John Hill Hewitt, himself a poet, newspaperman, and musician," Rideout's haunting version delighted attendees.

"Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth and dies on April 15, 1865. Today we think of other things on April 15," Rideout said.

The assassination occurred five days after the commander of the Confederate Army of Northern of the Potomac.

Lee's Virginia home, Arlington became Arlington cemetery. Lee's slaves were said to have sung "The Year of Jubilo" after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

"Now known by the National Parks Service as Arlington House, the residence of Robert E. Lee and his family before the Civil War, it has a unique and interesting story, with connections to many important figures, issues and events in American History.

"Built by George Washington Parke Custis and his slaves between 1802 and 1818, the house and grounds have served many purposes over the last two hundred years: a family home for the Lees and Custises, a plantation estate and home to 63 slaves, a monument honoring George Washington, (Custis' step grandfather) a military headquarters, and a community for emancipated slaves," Courtesy the National Parks Service.

"Rex's presentation including both north and south was absolutely wonderful," Park County Historical Society President Dee Brown said praising Rideout's chosen subject.

“The National Parks Service is going to restore Arlington House to the period of the Civil War,” she said.

“The 150th anniversary of the Civil War has been on my mind,” Rideout said when asked about the program.

“I felt compelled to share the music and emotion of the time. Song writers in the early 19th century were skilled at being sentimentalists,” he said.

Rideout was pleased that he could continue his themed presentations for the historical society. Past presentations include songs of the cowboys and Zebulon Pike.

The Tesoro Historic Lecture Series

Rideout is slated to speak on the music of the fur trade at the Denver Library on Sunday, Jan. 11, 2015. The presentation begins at 1:30 p.m. in the level five Gates Reading Room. There is no cost for this presentation.

That evening, as a part of the Tesoro Historic Lecture Series, Rideout will repeat the presentation at The Fort restaurant. Tickets to that event are \$65. To reserve a spot for the 6 p.m. lecture and dinner call 303-839-1671 or visit www.TesoroCulturalCenter.org.