

Illinois State Military Museum: Citizen-Soldiers of Yesterday and Tomorrow

Written by Spc. Kristi Goodin, Illinois National Guard Historian Assistant
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SPRINGFIELD, IL (02/27/2012)(readMedia)-- The white brick castle walls of the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield surround the rich history of the Illinois National Guard. The dark wood floor and dim lights bring people to a quiet serenity and the original artifacts propel life to history. Patrons frequently ask how the museum began, but the beginning of the story barely covers the long road that led to the castle museum we know today.

The Illinois State Military Museum has a place on the National Register of Historical Places after years of uncertainty and emptiness. The castle was built between the years of 1903 and 1909 by Col. James Culver, owner of the Culver Stone Company and commander of the Illinois National Guard's 5th Illinois Infantry Regiment. The museum was to serve as a commissary and/or a quartermaster building.

"The National Guard was issued considerable quantities of federal property, such as weapons and ammunition, and it was important that this property be safeguarded and stored in a location that would protect it," said Lt. Col. Mark K. Whitlock, Carbondale native. Whitlock is Joint Force Headquarters chief historian and former director of the Illinois State Military Museum, both in Springfield.

The museum sat for years as a storage facility for artifacts of American Civil War veterans piled up since 1878. The artifacts came from generous donations of veterans, their families and from within the Army system, said Whitlock. The Illinois State Military Museum's greatest collection is the collection of more than 1,000 flags, guidons and regimental colors that are primarily from the Civil War.

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For years, the artifacts were safeguarded by retired Warrant Officer Charles "Charlie" Munie from Decatur, who also initiated historical displays and reminded people the state of Illinois has a great collection of artifacts that should be preserved and someday exhibited in a proper museum.

When Whitlock was hired as the director in 1995, he started to organize a 1920s wooden Civilian Conservation Corps barracks into a temporary museum with a yearly budget of roughly \$16,000.

"The money did not go very far, but it was all we had for purchasing supplies and exhibit building materials necessary to get the museum up and running," said Whitlock.

The museum officially opened to the public in 2003 to become the note-worthy institution it is today. Whitlock said he took many steps to ensure it would be a success, such as developing a cooperative and productive relationship between the museum, and Illinois National Guard and Militia Historical Society, Inc. He pushed the leadership to hire additional staff and left it better than he found it.

"I think it is important that we give credit to the great Illinoisans who came before me and collected and documented the treasures that we are able to enjoy in the museum today," said Whitlock.

Whitlock's hard work to receive additional support eventually worked, because the director now has a curatorial staff including a museum curator, two assistant curators, an executive director and volunteers.

"The volunteers are invaluable," said retired Brig. Gen. Stewart Reeve of Pittsfield, director of the Illinois Military Museum. "They have a vast knowledge of different periods in Illinois history that they can relay in a clear fashion to visitors."

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Reeve was appointed director Aug. 1, 2011. Since then he has made the museum more current by highlighting exhibits for black history month and women's history month, hosting events for the public, and changing the exhibits often for people who visit regularly.

Recently, Reeve planned exhibits that emphasize the parts of history he feels are sadly forgotten and sometimes not even recognized by National Guard Soldiers, such as the State Partnership Program, peacekeeping missions and Eastern Europe. He said he feels the most important purpose of the museum is to tell the story of how the Illinois National Guard has contributed to supporting and protecting Illinois citizens and U.S. citizens nationwide, which are not limited to combat operations.

"On some level, I don't think the National Guard understands what Illinois troops have done," said Reeve. "I don't think there's the institutional knowledge of what we've done and that's one of the things I think the museum can help with the most."

Whitlock and Reeve agreed the artifacts can leave someone with a deep understanding of what the service members of the past went through. Reeve said his favorite exhibit is the World War II area in the museum because one sees the way the service members lived, worked, and died. One will walk out with a deeper appreciation for what service members did.

"My favorite artifact is the damaged up-armored windshield from a humvee that is attributed with saving the lives of the Soldiers seated behind it," said Whitlock. "The connection between an inanimate object and lives that were spared because of it, always gave me goose bumps to talk about with visitors."

For more information on the Illinois State Military Museum call Reeve at [217-761-3384](tel:217-761-3384). For more information on the Illinois Militia Historical Society, Inc., contact Larry Johnson [217-761-3645](tel:217-761-3645)

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