

# Taking aim at history

## Teacher brings Civil War back to life for Sorrows students



The real thing: Ron Jones' Civil War-era rifle belonged to a relative.

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It was almost as if their tables and chairs were set up on the rolling Gettysburg terrain, instead of in a classroom at Our Lady of Sorrows.

Civil War history literally came to life last week, during a special presentation by Sorrows teacher Ron Jones. Clad in a Union cavalry uniform, Jones provided seventh and eighth graders with a visual lesson about how 1860s soldiers lived from day to day.

For example, a myriad of seemingly trivial items covered a table in front of the classroom at the Farmington-based Catholic school. There was some hard tack, a biscuit which Jones insists was made by his wife a decade ago.

"The joke was when you ran out of bullets, just throw this at Johnny Rebel," said Jones in matter-of-fact fashion.

A small metal can of Borden's condensed milk, pouch of tobacco, deck of playing cards and miniature Holy Bible also were displayed and detailed by the Civil War expert.

Soldiers also, he explained, never went anywhere without family tintypes (1840s photographs) and a sewing kit known simply as a "housewife."

"If you needed to sew your uniform, and you lost your kit, you'd ask another soldier if you could borrow their housewife," said Jones, stressing that it was the Victorian period. "And they knew exactly what you meant."

About the family tintypes, Jones noted that images of home were something soldiers always carried close to their hearts.

"They could take them out and say, 'This is why I'm here. This is why I'm fighting.'"

Probably his most cherished Civil War memento, and the one that had students sitting on the edge of their chairs, was an antique .58-caliber rifle, complete with bayonet.

The weapon belonged to Alfred Rantz of southeastern Michigan, a member of the 24th



Worth fighting for: Civil War soldiers often carried tintype photos of their loved ones.

Infantry (which later became the "Iron Brigade.")

According to Jones, the rifle was purchased by Rantz for a mere \$19.25 in October, 1863. Because it was not issued by the U.S. Army (which was the case most of the time), Rantz did not have to return it after the war ended in April, 1865.

It turned out that Rantz was the great-grandfather of Joneses wife's aunt.

In 1989, knowing that Jones taught history, the rifle was given to him as a present.

After he scrubbed the weapon clean, it showed that it was made in 1863 in Watertown, New York. He explained that Army-issued rifles were made elsewhere.

What made the rifle especially rare was that it still had the original bayonet, which came more in handy for roasting meat on a camp fire or reading by candlelight than for actually attacking the opposition.

Jones, with the assistance of a student, demonstrated the nine-step process of loading and firing the rifle.

He discharged blanks, but the noise was still deafeningly real to the students.

Because of the cumbersome loading and firing system, Civil War soldiers could only shoot off three round or cone-shaped metal balls per minute.

Sometimes, 20 seconds wouldn't be enough to load another round, primarily if the enemy

charged from nearby trenches.

"A soldier can run 100 yards in that amount of time," Jones said. "So, if the opposition charges you before you can load, then you use this," pointing to the bayonet.

Several Sorrows students were wowed by the presentation, mostly the rifle and bayonet combo.

"That was pretty sweet," said eighth grader George Mammo.

"I liked the gun and bayonet," said Mike Volovar, also an eighth grader. "It was pretty cool how he used a blank and fired it."

Another student, Samantha Lawrence, thought the rifle was the most interesting part of the presentation "because it was actually used."

Hearing, seeing history: Student Katie Egan (near photo) listens as Ron Jones talks about Civil War staples such as (far right) hard tack.



## Geese from page A1

cerns over the environmental effects of geese and duck droppings on water retention ponds. The 70 homeowners in Pines of Farmington Hills have been especially concerned because one resident has been feeding ducks and geese, despite requests to stop.

Pines of Farmington Hills Homeowners' Association President Robert Briolat said the subdivision contains two water retention ponds that feed into the Rouge River. A substantial population of Canada geese has been the main source of water contamination not only around the ponds, but in common areas, yards and streets.

In the summer of 1998, Briolat said, the association bought several "dead" decoys to scare birds away. Despite this, the presence of food has brought up the problem all over again. The duck population now numbers 11, up from 20 at the beginning of the summer.

"Most disheartening, however, has been the return of over 50 geese since mid-October," Briolat wrote to officials on Dec. 2. "They now ignore the dead geese decoys, because they have been made aware that the area is safe to inhabit."

In early October, officials quashed a proposed ordinance, because they believed it would be nearly impossible to enforce. Similar concerns were raised Monday night.

"Corn and nuts you also put out for the squirrels," said council member Cheryl Oliviero. "Are people going to be told they can't feed the squirrels?"

Those who attract more than six geese, even if it's by accident, would be in danger of violating the ordinance, Donohue acknowledged. The letter of the law sets the standard at six or more pigeons, gulls, ducks or Canada geese in one location, encouraged by anyone who sets out corn, breadstuffs, nuts or other animal feed.

The ordinance would be enforced only if someone complained, he said. Police would conduct an investigation to ensure the city is not engaging in frivolous prosecutions.

"It will require some discretion," Donohue said.

Council member Vicki Barnett said she was more comfortable with the new ordinance than its predecessor. "I don't think there's an attempt to stop people from feeding birds. I think the intent here is to prohibit ground feeding of birds," she said. "It's a terrible situation when you have so many of them."

While council members have heard complaints from Pines of Farmington Hills residents, council member Chris McRae issued a public invitation to anyone who feeds ducks and geese. He'd like to hear their side of the story before officials consider

enacting this ordinance, at their Jan. 10 meeting.

"This seems to be a one-way thing," he said of the top-sided public comment. "I would like to know what their motives are."

Officials wondered whether the omission of a certain type of waterfowl in the ordinance's first public viewing would cause a problem. Donohue assured them that correcting the problem in the second publication would meet requirements.

"So I think you're saying we could ... duck ... that issue," Council member Jim Ellis joked.

While the word plays flew, officials clearly recognized the issue of cleaning up potential pollution in the Rouge River watershed is no laughing matter.

"I would hope the people who are doing this will recognize the seriousness of their actions, and the seriousness with which the council is taking this," Mayor Nancy Bates said.

Violation of the proposed ordinance would be considered a misdemeanor, Donohue said. Maximum punishment, as established by city statutes, would be 93 days in jail, a \$600 fine or both.

Another public hearing on this ordinance will take place at the council's Jan. 10 meeting, held at Farmington Hills City Hall.

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