

A PIECE OF HISTORY

Funds needed to keep historic Civil War pistol

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Sunday, Jun 07, 2009

Janey Dudney, great-great granddaughter of 8th Tennessee Calvary Gen. George Dibrell, holds for the first time a pistol used by Dibrell during the Civil War. The gun was confiscated and has been lost until now. It's on loan to the White County Heritage Museum as the museum tries to raise funds to purchase it from a private collector. Herald-Citizen Photo/Liz Engel



Janey Dudney grew up hearing stories about the Civil War -- especially her great-great grandfather's role in the 8th Tennessee Confederate Calvary.

She did her master's thesis on the war in White County, where that man, Gen. George Dibrell, is now buried.

Parts of the Civil War story, she said, still make her cry.

That's why Thursday was so special -- for the first time she got to hold and touch the pistol her great-great grandfather used

in the war. She didn't even know it existed until recently.

An effort to bring the rare pistol back to White County is currently underway, and the gun is on display locally for just a short period of time.

"I just couldn't believe this was out there," Dudney said. "I think it belongs back here with his people. The heritage here -- there's lots and lots of descendants of the 8th Calvary. People know their story and people love it."

The pistol has been underground for 144 years in the hands of private collectors. It's a rare item that could be worth tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars.

It's temporarily in the custody of the White County Heritage Museum and the group is trying to raise the needed \$22,500 in order to buy it.

The man who currently owns the pistol, Tom Lopiano, is a private collector in Connecticut. When he purchased the gun -- for \$22,500 -- he didn't even know its significance until searching Dibrell's name, which is etched on the handle of the pistol, on the Internet.

Bill Hurteau, director of the White County Heritage Museum, said the group has only about a third of the needed money in pledges -- and there's a deadline looming. Come the end of the month, if not enough is raised, the pistol will make its way back to Connecticut where it's set to go to auction. Other museums are already showing strong interest.

"If we don't get it now, more than likely we won't see it again," Hurteau said.

The journey of the gun is pretty amazing in and of itself.

When Dibrell formed the 8th Tennessee Calvary on Sept. 4, 1862 -- the only regimen raised entirely in the Upper Cumberland, including men from White, Jackson, Smith, Van Buren, Overton and Putnam counties - he was presented the pistol by friends and citizens of Sparta.

The unit marched from Sparta to Murfreesboro to become part of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest's brigade, and the Calvary was involved in a remarkable number of battles and skirmishes during the Civil War.

At one point, Dibrell and his men were hand chosen by Jefferson Davis to march the Confederate president to Mississippi, Hurteau said. But Washington, Ga., was as close as they got.

Hurteau said two spies infiltrated the units and tracked Dibrell and his men down. In the terms of the surrender, on May 5, 1865, Dibrell and his men were allowed to keep their personal sidearms -- but when the men got back to Chattanooga May 24, the provost marshal of the 44th Indiana unit stripped them of all their weapons, horses and boots.

An appeal by Dibrell to retrieve his sidearm later was unsuccessful. The gun was as good as gone.

"That type of pistol, the Colts, were the premium weapon that people were looking for during the war," Hurteau said. "If you had one of those, you had the best pistol available."

Which can explain why the gun has been in the hands of private collectors ever since.

"The story is that there was an understanding not to tell anybody they had this pistol, because Dibrell's name was on it," Hurteau said. "When it was bought (later) there continued to be an understanding that it wouldn't be shown."

Efforts to find the name of the provost on duty that day in Chattanooga have so far proved to be unsuccessful, but research shows the gun did end up in Wabash, Ind., where it stayed until the 1950s, when a door-to-door insurance salesman saw the pistol and worked out a deal with the unknown family to purchase it.

When that man died, his widow sold the pistol to the private collector in Connecticut. He is offering to sell it to the White County Heritage Museum for the same price he had purchased it for, even though Hurteau said its value is much higher.

"If you look at the price of some of these guns, half a million dollars is not out of the ballpark," he said.

That's why raising funds now is so important.

"The Yankees have had it since the end of the war, and guess what, if you want to look at it as ransom, so be it, but they will take it back," Hurteau said. "It's up to the people of this region if they want to keep it or not."

The pistol will be on display at the White County Heritage Museum, located at 144 S. Main St. in downtown Sparta, until the end of the month. The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursdays and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Monetary contributions can be made at any branch of US Bank or Community Bank of the Cumberlands. Contributions are also accepted at the White County Courthouse and Heritage Museum.

For more information about the pistol, call Hurteau at (931) 837-3900.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>