



# Guardian *of* History

By Tricia Sizemore . Photographs by Steve Shaluta

Surrounded by artifacts in the rustic, three-room museum at Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park, Mike Smith (above) exudes a passion for history that is contagious. As the park's superintendent for the last 25 years, Smith has researched the stories behind these relics and shared his extensive knowledge of Civil War history with countless park visitors.

Droop Mountain was the site of one of the largest Civil War battles in West Virginia. Occurring on November 6, 1863, it was the last significant battle to take place in the state. "Confederate efforts to regain the former western counties of Virginia were abandoned after the battle at Droop Mountain," says Smith.



When Smith first started managing the park, historical files were scarce, so he began gathering information. A native Ohioan who has spent most of his life in rural West Virginia, Smith read numerous publications to learn more about Civil War history, and particularly about the Droop Mountain battle.

“I’m addicted to books,” says Smith, who is the father of two grown children and twin grandsons. “I can start a book at four in the afternoon and finish it at four in the morning.”

Smith also worked closely with Terry Lowry while he was writing *Last Sleep*, a book Smith says is “undoubtedly the authoritative resource for historical information regarding the Droop Mountain battle.”

Many visitors to Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park have ancestors who fought in the battle. Through some of these contacts, Smith has compiled a number of personal documents related to the war.

“I’ve discovered many wonderful and tragic stories in various letters, diaries, and reports from park guests, as well as in public archives,” he says. “New information still occasionally comes in here. You never know.”

Among the documents are letters exchanged during the war between two sisters: one lived in Hillsboro in Pocahontas County and the other lived in Union in Monroe County. Their brother, a Confederate soldier, was wounded and in the care of his sister in Union. For a time, the Hillsboro sister didn’t know whether her brother was dead or alive. Later she wrote to him, “It is with unspeakable joy that I have learned that you have lived.” Other letters tell of women going house to house, gathering material to make socks, jackets, and equipment for their men.

Smith also received a pre-Civil War copy of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* from a man in Missouri who had bought it at an estate auction about eight years ago. The front cover of the book is autographed by a 19-year-old Confederate soldier. The back cover includes an inscription written by the Union soldier who took it from the Confederate soldier during the battle at Droop Mountain.

Some people come to walk the ground where their ancestors fought. “One man came all the way from Washington State

just to see the battlefields at Droop Mountain and Carnifex,” Smith says. “His great-great-grandfather fought in both battles. We got out early in the morning and spent the whole day walking over the Droop Mountain Battlefield. Experiences like that are pretty meaningful for people.”

The Droop Mountain Museum houses more than 500 artifacts from the November 1863 battle. Constructed in 1936 by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the building was a vacation cabin for many years. It now holds displays of bullets and shell fragments, as well as weapons, horse equipment, a Confederate drum, canteens, buckles and buttons, period newspaper articles, and photos. Many of the artifacts were found on the battlefield area and the private lands around it. Others were donated, mostly by local people who found them or received them from ancestors who had fought in the battle.

Smith enjoys unfolding the story of the Confederate drum (pictured on the preceding page). “Drums were an important part of an army’s equipment back then,” he explains. “That’s how they communicated in battle.

Drums told people what to do. They kept soldiers in step while marching. The bugles, fifes, and drums could be heard above the roar of battle.”

Unlike the Union army’s drums, which had painted exteriors that sometimes featured an eagle and stars and stripes, the Confederate drum at

the museum has a natural finish. It weighs just two or three pounds, and its calfskin head is stretched tight with ropes.

“It was found the morning after the battle by local boys who were tending to a wounded soldier,” Smith says. “A grandson of those boys, Johnnie Hill, had kept the drum since 1930 and donated it to the park in 1997.”

Also in the museum’s collection is a brass wedding ring lined with gold. “It’s a very common type of wedding band,” says Smith. “It likely came from a wounded Confederate trying to escape down the side of the mountain. He probably died in the ravine where we found the ring.”

A Mississippi rifle is also among the artifacts. It is believed to have been found in 1948 by Allen Holbrook, the son of former Droop Mountain Superintendent Napoleon Holbrook, while he was playing in the creek.



**(Above) Bullets and shell fragments from the battle at Droop Mountain at Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park**



“He saw the tip of the trigger guard sticking out of the sand at the bottom of the creek and thought it was a spoon,” says Smith. “He dug a little more and saw that it was a gun. With his mother’s help, he recovered it from the creek. About 12 to 15 years ago, Napoleon returned and donated it to the park. It’s pretty fragile.”

Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park is a memorial to the men who fought and died there. Roughly 78 men, 45 from the Union army and about 33 from the Confederate army, were killed in battle. In addition, approximately 214 soldiers were wounded: 93 from the Union side and about 121 from the Confederate side. Men fought hand to hand there, sometimes with neighbors and relatives.

“It was hard for people to decide what they wanted to do,”

Smith says. “Most would have preferred not to fight at all, but if an army came by and you were of age, you had to make a quick decision whether you were one of them or their enemy.”

Two brothers, John and Andrew Short from Braxton County, fought for opposing sides. John fought with the Confederates in the 22nd Virginia Infantry and his brother Andrew fought with the 10th West Virginia Infantry in the Union army. After the battle at Droop Mountain, the Union army pursued the Confederates south toward Lewisburg. A small group of Union soldiers was left behind to bury the dead and care for the wounded. Andrew was among the men who found the bodies, dragged them back, and lined them up to be buried. Sadly, he discovered amid the dead his brother, who had been killed in the battle that day.



**The park's museum (pictured preceding page) houses more than 500 artifacts that tell the story of the Civil War's Battle of Droop Mountain. History buffs can also get an excellent view of the park from its 1930s-era lookout tower (above).**

John Short was among the men buried, one on top of the other, in shallow graves covered by only a thin layer of dirt. Within three weeks of the battle, scavengers such as wild hogs had dug into the graves to consume the bodies. Local citizens reburied many of the Confederates in area cemeteries. In 1867, a group funded by the federal government removed all the Union remains and reburied them, mostly as unknowns, in the national cemetery in Grafton.

The sunken graves in the cemetery at Droop Mountain serve as reminders of the violent deaths of many men. "It's no wonder that the battlefield has a long history of ghostly sightings, unexplained sounds, and scary stories," says Smith.

One of more than 300 sites on the Civil War Discovery Trail and part of the multistate Civil War Trails program, Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park draws approximately 50,000 guests annually. Many are family reunion attendees, casual tourists, history buffs, students in school groups, motorcyclists, and motor coach tourists, according to Smith.

Smith, who also oversees Beartown State Park, shares his knowledge both inside and outside the park. He visits local schools to give presentations on the Civil War and on Native Americans. He may show students how to make arrowheads or

tan hides, or tell them about the Native American diet. He also brings along handmade examples.

"I like primitive things and will tan deer hide and make bows," he said. Smith also takes part in Civil War roundtable discussions in West Virginia and surrounding states.

So that visitors can experience history firsthand, reenactments are staged at Droop Mountain on the second weekend in October, usually on alternate, even-numbered years. The next one is scheduled for October 9 and 10, 2010.

The park museum is open from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM daily, except during winter months, when it is opened by request only. The park also offers hiking and picnicking, as well as a lookout tower and other buildings built by the CCC during the 1930s.

For more information about Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park, visit [www.droopmountainbattlefield.com](http://www.droopmountainbattlefield.com) or call 304.653.4254 or 1.800.CALL.WVA. 🍄

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