

Civil War cannon found in snow drift



The modern-day users of a cannon found in a snow drift,” The Rebels” resemble authentic Civil War soldiers.
By George Wetzel

In front of the American Legion Post 116, on Westminster Road, Reisterstown stands an old cannon on a wrought iron carriage. It bears no resemblance to the lumbrous cannon found on memorial battlefields of the Civil War, although it is of that period.

The late Clifford E Sullivan of Hanover Road, Reisterstown was working for the Maryland State Roads Commission during the winter of 1938. He was clearing snow, said his widow, Mrs. Lillian Sullivan, from part of an entrance to a private home on Valley Road near Falls Road – family of Bromo-Seltzer fame.

In the drifted snow in Mrs. Emerson’s yard Sullivan glimpsed an old cannon. Its wheels and gun carriage were rotted away. Atop the barrel was a legend; a large circle within which was the great seal of Maryland, identifying its former owner. More provocatively, below it appeared “State Oyster Police Force, 1868”. On the muzzle rim was inscribed “Tredegar Co. 1868.”

To all the Sullivan’s inquires about the cannon, Mrs. Emerson shook her head. She knew nothing of it of how her family obtained it. But, she added, since you’ve been so nice about the snow, you can have the cannon if you want it.

Sullivan carted it off and left it at the Esso station, at the corner of Chatsworth Avenue and Main Street, which was then run by Arthur Heinzman, a relative. Here it lay for many years.

When the American Legion Post 116 acquired a home on Westminster Road in the early 1950’s, Sullivan made them a gift of it. Once they had it, Said Bill Coale, a legionnaire, they scoured it free of its film of verdigris, rebuilt the gun sight and re-tooled the inside of the barrel. But fashioning new wheels was a craft beyond their knowledge at the time.

An Amish wheelwright agreed at first to do the job, until he learned the wheels were to support a

weapon of war. Even though it was a museum piece, he changed his mind. His religious scruples got in the way. Eventually the legionnaires did the job themselves.

Once reconditioned it was ready to fire on April 4, 1959, and afterwards entered into national competitions against other old artillery pieces, on an average of at least twice per year by the Second Maryland Light Artillery, North-South Skirmish Association. During these events it won for Post 116, several trophies for accuracy.

According to Carl Soine, the cannon has been fired at: Ft Shenandoah; Gainesboro, Virginia; Aberdeen Proving Ground (1960); Manassas Re-enactment (1961); Reisterstown Memorial Day Service (1962); Gettysburg Re-enactment (1963); Fort Meade, Md.; Fort Dix New Jersey; the Towson Centennial.

Soine discovered that the 12-pound, naval Dahlgren howitzer, was cast at the Tredegar gun factory in Richmond, Virginia in 1863 – a factory well-known for its Civil War ordnance. The “1868” date on the muzzle rim suggests the piece was obtained by the State of Maryland later and may possibly have been used in the Civil War.

The Maryland Oyster Police Force was organized in 1868 to enforce the state laws of the oyster fishing industry. The force was additionally hampered by a lack of strong firepower caused by the stationing of a single sloop in each river, the crew being armed with rifles or hand guns. To offset this effort, the state sent a steamer, armed with cannon, which cruised all over the Bay, giving the individual sloops an edge in firepower and cowing the pirates when they saw her.

“Leila”, the first such vessel, was inaugurated in 1868. She was armed with two cannons and described as “looking like a pirate” herself. In 1884 a second steamer, the “Governor Hamilton”, was similarly armed, and in time, several more. But it is the cannon from “Leila”

that now stands on Westminster Road.

Between 1868 and 1888 the “Leila” used her cannon but once, a rarity considering the bellicose, if sporadic, outbreaks of the oyster wars. Cruising with a party of visitors one afternoon, Captain Hunter Davidson, of the “Leila” spied two vessels illegally dredging just off Sandy Point.

One shot was fired across the bows of the dredgers, and they surrendered.

The modern-day users of this old cannon are sometimes colloquially referred to as “The Rebels”. Appropriately, Capt, Davidson was also a confederate officer on the southern “Merrimac”.

The “Leila” was withdrawn from the force in 1885 after two more steamers had been added. What happened to her two cannons in the intervening years has remained a mystery.

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