

LIVING

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Sons of Confederate Veterans say they're preserving history, not racism

HIGHLIGHTS

National group has gained 5,000 members over the past three months

Controversy over Confederate flag and monuments has boosted its profile

Members are descendants of soldiers who fought for the South during the Civil War





BY SARAH GISH

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On a warm day in August, a couple dozen people gathered for an afternoon picnic at Shawnee Mission Park.

Under the shade of a shelter surrounded by leafy green trees, two men cooked burgers and brats on a charcoal grill next to a row of tables topped with red plastic tablecloths and a summery spread of sliced watermelon, barbecue-flavored potato chips and sopapilla cheesecake. The weather would have been perfect if not for occasional gusts of wind that whipped through the grove and threatened to topple the three flags fixed to portable poles next to the dessert table: an American flag, a Kansas flag and a Confederate battle flag.

The picnic is an annual event for the Major Thomas J. Key Camp No. 1920, a local branch of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. The nonprofit organization for male descendants of soldiers who fought for the South in the Civil War has 98,000 members worldwide, including 1,445 in Missouri and 480 in Kansas. And its ranks are growing.

Over the previous three months, the national group has gained a higher profile and 5,000 members. Executive director Mike Landree attributes the 5 percent increase to the recent controversy over the Confederate flag.

In June, after nine people were killed at a historic black church in Charleston, S.C., photos emerged of the accused gunman flaunting a Confederate battle flag, for many a symbol of slavery and racism. South Carolina removed the red and blue banner from its Capitol grounds on July 10, a decision President Barack Obama called “a signal of goodwill and healing, and a meaningful step toward a better future.”

Two weeks later, a Confederate flag that had decorated a saloon stage at the Platte County Fair for more than 50 years was taken down.

Last month, officials in Missouri’s Boone County moved a Confederate memorial from the courthouse lawn in Columbia. The 11,000-pound granite boulder known as Confederate Rock is now displayed at a historic battle site in Centralia.

THIS IS PART OF OUR HISTORY. YOU CANNOT ELIMINATE HISTORY.

Mike Landree, Sons of Confederate Veterans

Pro-South monuments have also been plucked from public spaces in Texas, Florida and North Carolina, and the mayors of Baltimore and St. Louis are considering what to do with similar statues in their own cities. So far, no one has called for the removal of a Confederate monument in Kansas City's Forest Hill Calvary Cemetery.

Many Americans see such removals as progress. The Sons of Confederate Veterans see them as attacks on their heritage.

"This is part of our history," says Landree, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel based in Columbia, Tenn. "You cannot eliminate history."

The Key Camp

The Sons of Confederate Veterans was founded in Richmond, Va., in 1896 with a mission to protect the legacy of those who fought for the Confederacy. Landree says the group was not created out of hate and is nonpolitical, so it does not endorse politicians or political parties.

The Sons of Confederate Veterans is divided into armies, divisions and camps. Missouri has 14 camps, including ones in Independence and Warrensburg. Kansas has seven, including one in Leavenworth.

The Major Thomas J. Key Camp, founded in Shawnee and covering Johnson County, is one of the largest and most active in the state. Its members march in parades, help maintain local historical sites and erect headstones for fallen Confederate soldiers.

The Key Camp, as members call it, was named after the publisher of a pro-South newspaper in Kansas City, Kan. It was founded in 2000 by James "Spike" Speicher, a retired Army colonel who lives in Shawnee.

Speicher's fascination with the Civil War started at age 10, when he read his first book about Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee. Speicher considers Lee a hero and calls the Southern army "the greatest fighting force ever to march on the face of the Earth."

In his 69 years, the history buff has amassed a collection of Civil War-related objects that includes more than 300 books and a closet capable of outfitting four men with period-appropriate jackets, pants, hats, socks and boots. Speicher also owns an impressive assortment of battlefield relics — saddles, muskets, Bibles and bullets — which he displays at events such as Missouri History Days at the Lone Jack Battlefield historic site.

At Missouri History Days, eighth-graders visit the battlefield to learn about daily life in the 1800s and the Civil War.

“We tell both sides of the story,” says event organizer and battlefield director Alinda Miller. “The good, bad and ugly.”

Speicher says his group attends to teach the students about history. “We don’t try to influence the kids one way or another.”

Adds Miller: “The kids can see these people do not promote hate. They are strictly about history.”

The Key Camp started with 10 members and now has 71. Many are middle-aged, and about a third have military backgrounds. All are white. Landree says the national group does have black members, but he can’t say how many because the organization does not ask its members to disclose their race on applications.

Members of the public, including women, are invited to attend the Key Camp’s meetings, which typically feature an expert guest speaker on topics such as the Border War or Harry S. Truman. Women cannot become official members, but Speicher says they can join the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which shares a similar mission — but apparently not a similar wish for a higher profile. Repeated phone calls and emails to the group’s headquarters in Richmond, Va., were not returned.

Over the summer, five men joined the Key Camp, a 7 percent upturn in membership. But not all local camps have noted growth: Jason Coffman, commander of Independence-based Brigadier General John T. Hughes Camp 614, says membership in his camp hovers at around 75.

98,000

Members of Sons of Confederate Veterans

5,000

New members in past three months

1,925

Members in Missouri and Kansas

Matt Sewell of Bucyrus, Kan., is the Key Camp's newest member. The proud Alabama native found out about the group after seeing it mentioned in a news story about the Confederate flag. When he saw that the family picnic was coming up, he decided to bring his 21-month-old daughter Elsa, who spent most of the afternoon scaling playground equipment in bright orange Auburn University flip-flops.

"I had no idea there would be something like this up here," he says.

Sewell says that the Confederate battle flag is a fairly common sight in Alabama, but not in Kansas and Missouri.

The flag hangs on the wall during the Key Camp's monthly meetings, which begin with prayer and pledges of allegiance to both the United States and the Confederacy. Members often wear matching gray polo shirts with Confederate emblems over their hearts.

They say that to them, the flag symbolizes pride in their Southern heritage, not slavery. But not everyone shares their view.

Right or wrong?

Anita L. Russell, president of the NAACP's Kansas City branch, says members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans have the right to display the flag at private meetings.

"But when you see it on display out in the public, it is offensive," Russell says.

Leonard Zeskind, president of the Kansas City-based Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, says the flag "belongs in a museum."

“Celebrating a Nazi flag in Germany is wrong,” says Zeskind, who monitors extremist groups, “and celebrating the flag that flew over the army that was defending slavery is wrong. Period.”

The Sons of Confederate Veterans distances itself from racist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, that wave the Confederate battle flag.

“Other organizations haven’t used it, they’ve misused it,” Landree says, adding that his group has issued several resolutions calling for the KKK and other hate groups to stop carrying the flag.

Jacob Mirocke’s feelings about the Confederate battle flag can be summed up in two words: It’s complicated.

Mirocke, 26, lives in Shawnee and is the youngest member of the Key Camp. The self-described “military historian nerd” collects World War I-era aircraft radios and participates in Civil War battle re-enactments. He says he tries to be “respectful” with his use of the flag.

“It can be misconstrued,” Mirocke says, adding, “there are plenty of T-shirts out there that even I don’t think are appropriate.”

In July, when fights over the flag flared up on social media, Mirocke was tempted to post his opinion to Facebook. He decided against it.

“I just didn’t want to put myself in the position of confrontation,” Mirocke says.

Donna Brooks, who attends every Key Camp meeting with her husband, Larry, often wears a necklace strung with a bottle cap emblazoned with a sparkling Confederate emblem. The necklace glinted in the sunlight at the Key Camp’s picnic. But Donna tucks the pendant into her shirt when she goes to the grocery store near her home in Kansas City, Kan.

“I don’t want anyone to pick a fight with me,” she says.

Jim Thornton, the Key Camp’s current commander, says that in six years with the Sons of Confederate Veterans, he has never encountered a single person angry about the group. Thornton, a pharmacist who lives in Shawnee, says he believes that’s because Kansas City is on the border between North and South.

“We’re aware of both sides of the conflict, and we’re willing to listen to both sides,” Thornton says. “Plus, the people here are so darn nice.”

Still, some assume that any group with “Confederate” in its name must be racist.

“So many people say, ‘Well what kind of a racist or a nut are you, to be with the Sons of Confederate Veterans?’ ” says Walt McKenzie of Lenexa. The 73-year-old, who loves slow-pitch softball and his 16-year-old Maltese as much as he loves history, says that he tells those people that he’s not a racist and that he hasn’t encountered one since he joined the Key Camp four years ago.

“If I had found they were a racist organization, I wouldn’t have enlisted,” McKenzie says.

North and South

Some members of the Key Camp also count Union soldiers as ancestors.

Speicher, who grew up in Michigan, says his research has turned up two ancestors who fought for the Confederacy and 17 who fought for the Union.

“I just don’t talk about the Union ones,” he says.

The group’s Union counterpart, the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, has far fewer members: roughly 6,380 members worldwide, including 150 in Kansas and 230 in Missouri.

Lane Smith of Overland Park is a member of both groups. His friends in the Key Camp like to call him an “SOB,” which they say stands for “son of both.”

Smith is the Border War personified: The self-described “novice historian” is working on a book about Ulysses S. Grant, who led the Union army to victory before he was elected president of the United States. But Smith is also a convincing impersonator of Robert E. Lee. To prepare for appearances as the Confederate general, Smith allows his neat white beard to grow shaggy.

Smith thinks the Confederate group draws more members because the South has “the romance of the defeat” on its side.

Members of the two groups have differing perspectives on historical events, but they still support one another. In June, the pro-North group repeated a 15-year-old resolution supporting the pro-South group’s display of Confederate battle flags.

“It angers us when people want to divide us,” Smith says.

There’s no point in arguing over something so far in the past, adds Key Camp member John Poynter of Raymore.

“It’s 150 years — get a grip,” Poynter says.

But the battle over the Confederate flag isn't over. Several prominent public figures, including Southern-born John Grisham, Morgan Freeman and Jimmy Buffett, have urged Mississippi to change its state flag, which features a Confederate emblem in the upper left corner. Last month, country rockers Steve Earle & the Dukes released a protest song called "Mississippi, It's Time." Earle sings that he comes from a "long, long line / of a Rebel strain / but the wind has changed." As more Americans join the push to cleanse the country of Confederate symbols, it's likely that more will sign up to defend them. Landree says his group has no plans to abandon its mission. "We're not going to stand for people attacking our ancestors," he says.

Thornton hopes the divisive issue will inspire more people to delve into the history of the Civil War, which remains the bloodiest conflict in American history, and reflect on the sacrifices of both sides.

"This country fought a bloody and ghastly war," Thornton says, adding that "atrocities and horrors were committed on both sides."

More than 620,000 soldiers died from combat, accidents, starvation and disease during the four-year conflict. The bloodiest one-day battle occurred in September 1862. The North calls the Maryland battle Antietam; the South calls it Sharpsburg. No one disputes the fact that more than 22,000 men were killed or wounded or went missing.

"And," Thornton says, "they were all American."

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SONS OF CIVIL WAR VETERANS

Sons of Confederate Veterans

The group has "camps" in Johnson County, Leavenworth, Independence and Warrensburg, Mo.

- The Johnson County-based Major Thomas J. Key Camp meets at 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of every month at Zarda, 11931 W. 87th St. in Lenexa. The group will also be recruiting new members Sunday at the Shawnee Indian Mission Fall Festival, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site, 3403 W. 53rd St. in Fairway. For more info, go to scv.org or majorkey1920ksscvc.org.

- The Independence-based Brigadier General John T. Hughes Camp 614 meets at 7 p.m. on the second Thursday of every month at Kross Lounge & Ernie's Restaurant, 605 N. Sterling Ave. in Sugar Creek. For more info, go to hughescamp.org.

Sons of Union Veterans

The group has camps in Kansas City, Olathe and Lawrence.

- The Kansas City-based Westport Camp No. 64 meets the first Wednesday of every month; for meeting locations and additional info, go to westport.suvcwmo.org.
- The Olathe-based Franklin Camp No. 5 meets the fourth Thursday of every month (except for July, August and December) at Bass Pro Shop, 12051 Bass Pro Drive in Olathe. For more info, go to suvcwks.org.
- The Lawrence-based Sergeant Samuel J. Churchill Camp No. 4 meets at 6:30 p.m. on the third Thursday of every month at the Watkins Museum of History, 1047 Massachusetts St. in Lawrence. For more info, go to suvcwks.org.



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