

REPORTING FOR DUTY: Thirty-five Standardbreds comprise the equine component of the California Historical Artillery Society, the largest mounted artillery west of the Mississippi.



WAR HORSES

by BECCA MARRIE



Standardbreds recreate history at the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg

It looks like a scene from 1861. ★ On a large, barren field, teams of mounted units face off amidst blasts of cannon fire. Large Confederate and Union flags wave proudly through the organized chaos. ★ As the battle ensues, with shots ringing from all ends of the smoke-covered battlefield, the Standardbreds remain unfazed. ★ These horses are part of an American tradition almost as old as harness racing: Civil War reenactments. Annually, in towns throughout America, teams of horses and riders sport traditional Civil War gear and re-create their own unique versions of the historic war. ★ “History is mankind’s memory,” said Dennis Winfrey, owner of Camp Warhorse in Selinas, Calif. “And if you can’t remember, you’re gonna keep burning yourself. And the Civil War is one of those things we’ve got to remember not to do again.”

Camp Warhorse is home to the 35 four-legged members of the largest mounted artillery west of the Mississippi, the California Historical Artillery Society (CHAS).

Twenty-two years ago, Winfrey decided to pursue his longtime passion for Civil War re-enactments when his floral business failed. Using recycled materials from the business, he built the stomping grounds for the future horses of CHAS, “a non-profit, educational organization dedicated to preserving the life and times of historic artillery,” as stated on its website.

Once the ranch was complete, Winfrey just needed one more crucial element: the horses. And acquiring these was not a difficult task.

“At that time, the killer operators were still in,” said Winfrey. “It was before they outlawed slaughtering horses. At auctions, Standardbreds were going for dog-food prices.”

Knowing the patient, stable nature of the breed and that, as ex-racehorses, they were used to large, noisy crowds, Winfrey believed CHAS could do “dangerous things very safely with them.”

“Horses are supposed to be flighty,” said Winfrey. “Yet the Standardbreds are almost lulled to sleep on the battlefield.”

Fortunately for CHAS, when it came time for the owners to choose a buyer, the butchers often lost out.

“And now that we’ve been in business for 22 years, they [the owners] just give them to us,” added Winfrey.

This is greatly appreciated by the non-profit group, which is run solely on donations, volunteers, and the profit from their annual re-enactment in Duncans Mills, Calif.

Dee Murphy, a volunteer and spokeswoman for CHAS for more than a year, explained that CHAS attracts a broad array of volunteers, ranging from ages 14



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BOMBPROOF: Retired Standardbred racehorses such as those in the CHAS make perfect participants for Civil War re-enactments. They transition to saddle easily, and don't mind the chaos of crowds and cannons.



TO BE FLIGHTY. YET THE STANDARDBREDS SLEEP ON THE BATTLEFIELD.” DENNIS WINFREY

to 76, with the majority being 50 or older.

“We have some people join to save horses because they like them,” said Murphy. “And some join because they really enjoy Civil War re-enactments.”

Also, because CHAS is a non-profit group, it is eligible to receive help from Salinas’ work alternative program, explained Winfrey. These would-be inmates instead work on the ranch: loading the horses’ hay, cleaning harnesses, and doing general fixing-up around the property.

And with 35 acres to contain the horses, and only himself to regularly watch over them, Winfrey had to implement a creative design to the ranch to ensure that the horses receive adequate

exercise. Therefore, the ranch has now taken the form of a maze.

“They are fed similarly to cattle each morning,” said Winfrey. “The hay and feed is put out on one end, and the water on the other so they have to travel 8-10 miles a day. It knocks out the need to manually exercise them.”

In July, these horses will make history as they embark on a cross-country journey to partake in the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Katie Rejaian, who is a member of CHAS and has participated in re-enactments since 1984, said that this trip is special for CHAS in particular because this is the first time the group will be able

to take horses to the event.

“They are going to have so many mounted teams (at Gettysburg),” said Rejaian. “I don’t think that they’ve ever had as many before. As part of that living history visual, the crowd is going to be in for quite the treat.”

Winfrey, despite his age, hopes to join the volunteers in this once-in-a-lifetime journey.

“I paid my money, but I am 75 [years old], so I don’t make long-ranged plans,” he said with a laugh.

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