

U.S. Grant

Learning to love Ulysses S. Grant

Aug 15, 2014



Steve Trimm plays the role of General Grant's son on Friday, August 8, 2014, during a reenactment of the General's funeral at Grant Cottage in Wilton. (Megan Farmer - mfarmer@poststar.com)



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Years ago, Steve Trimm had a grudge against the country's 18th president, Ulysses S. Grant.

Trimm, of Albany, blamed the Civil War general for the death of his ancestor on the first day at the Battle of Shiloh, saying the Confederates launched an attack that Grant should have anticipated.

"I knew he was a falling-down drunk most of the time and one of our worst presidents," Trimm said.

Trimm researched his ancestor and found a woman in Oregon whose ancestor was in the same regiment. The woman was a fan of Grant's and asked Trimm if he would go to Grant Cottage in Wilton to take a couple of photos and pick up brochures to send to her.

Trimm made the trip from Albany to take a tour, "gritting my teeth," then realized he didn't know Grant at all.

"I was blown away," he said.

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The visit spurred Trimm to research Grant's life. One of the most surprising things he learned was that Grant was an advocate of racial equality and established the Justice Department.

Trimm sees a parallel between Grant's advocacy and Martin Luther King's struggle for civil rights. He is concerned as time goes on, people will forget.

"We can't let that happen. Perhaps the best way to grow as a moral human being is Grant's life story," Trimm said.

He is on a mission to educate people about Grant's many sides. He assumes Grant's character in performances at the cottage and regales visitors with tales of Grant's personal and military history.

Trimm also portrays other characters in the president's life: his son; the first caretaker of the cottage; a Confederate general and friend from West Point; a White House guard during the 1860s; even Duncan McGregor, who owned the mountain on which Grant Cottage sits.

"I get to wear kilts for that one," Trimm said wryly.

Trimm, a retired social work assistant for Capital District Psychiatric Center, is humble in talking about his volunteer work doing historical impersonations. He is an avid reader who learns a lot from other re-enactors at the cottage, he said.

Jonathan Duda, the Gr  Sell without limits on Shopify  Join millions of business using Shopify - the global commerce platform.  cultive director, said Trimm is a "gem" among the 15 or 20 re-enactors who participate each season and has "brought a lot of life" to the site's programming.

"In the past three years, our attendance has gone up 1,000 people each season. Last year we broke 5,400. That was the best season we can recall in the past 20, 30 years," Duda said.

Duda recalled Trimm's portrayal of the first Grant Cottage caretaker and union veteran, Oliver P. Clarke. Drawing material from Clarke's journals, Trimm was able to describe in detail what it was like to be a prisoner at Andersonville.

"I got so drawn into it, because he researched a character that is not very well known. I felt as though I knew Oliver Clarke," Duda said.

Trimm's favorite portrayal is of Grant and his wife, Julia, played by Melissa Trombley-Prosch, showing a softer side of Grant that many people may not know about.

He tells the audience about the couple's first duty station at Sackets Harbor, shortly after their marriage. Grant is sent on an errand 15 miles away in Adams and stops to write a note to Julia. He tells her, 'I find I love you as much in Adams as he does in Sackets Harbor.'

"This is a guy that the South has portrayed as a coldhearted butcher who didn't care about human life, but he was madly in love his whole life," Trimm said.

When Hady Finch, Grant Cottage's program coordinator, started the job, she had limited resources and asked Trimm to do porch chats on various topics each Wednesday. The chats complemented the tours, which at that time were worked around remembrance days, such as Grant's death and his funeral a few weeks later.

"He helped us build the scaffolding on which everything could hang, so to speak," Finch said.

She will never forget Trimm's presentation of Grant when he was dying and his portrayal of James Longstreet, Grant's friend from their days as cadets at West Point.

Finch is looking forward to mid-September, when two performances of "Sunset on Mount McGregor" are scheduled. That will deal with the friendship between Grant and Mark Twain, who published the president's memoirs.

Finch is eager to see if Twain's status as a Civil War deserter will be addressed.

"I think it makes great theatrical tension when you think about someone who deserted the war and someone who won it," she said.

Trimm has come a long way from denouncing Grant as a drunk. He hopes that, through his presentations, visitors will be inspired to look beyond the surface of who they think Grant was.

"I hope to be able to make him less of a caricature and more of a real human being," Trimm said. "He still had flaws but I went from being 100 percent against him to being 80 percent for him."



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