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Civil War stories told, Midland exhibit praised

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Stuart Frohm for the Daily News

In 1863, Sgt. Dexter D. Keller of Saginaw told his father in a letter “All of my personal belongings were destroyed in battle, and the Rebs have failed to starve us out.” The 23rd Michigan Infantry regiment soldier assured his father that he was in good health in Tennessee.

Approximately 40 people heard that story and others at the Herbert D. Doan Midland County History Center Thursday night. About 15 raised a hand when asked if they had a relative in the war.

Al Eicher of Bloomfield Hills and son Dave Eicher of Clarkston presented a 90-minute Michigan in The Civil War program with stories about men, women, and children — soldiers, nurses, Ladies Aid Society members, drummer boys, and others.

“History is always about people. I like the way you brought up so many people’s stories,” Gary Skory told the Eichers after the presentation, which included photos and videos. Skory is director of the Midland County Historical Society, which sponsored the Heritage Series program Thursday night.

“You really have something great here,” Al Eicher said of the local exhibit “Our Civil War Legacy — Midland’s Past Marches On.” Some Midland County veterans’ stories are part of the exhibit, which was planned by Skory and local volunteers. The exhibit will be in the History Center until the end of May, Skory said.

The visit Thursday was a return to Midland for the Eichers. They presented a program on Michigan in the Civil War to 104 people at Grace A. Dow Memorial Library in 2011.

More than 14,000 of the approximately 90,000 Michigan troops died in the war — most due to disease. Many other Michigan troops were wounded.

Nine Michigan monuments are at Gettysburg, Al Eicher said. Gettysburg, the war’s bloodiest multi-day battle, was one of many Civil War battles in which Michigan units fought.

More than 400 Civil War monuments are in Michigan.

A Michigan infantry regiment was an early responder to President Abraham Lincoln’s call for Civil War volunteers. Other Michigan infantry, artillery, cavalry, sharpshooter and engineer units and sailors from Michigan joined the fight. Enlistees were organized in Bay City and elsewhere. Some joined because of patriotism and re-enlisted, some others wanted bonus money from local governments and land grants, and at least one young Michigan soldier died after becoming the substitute for his drafted father.

Twin drummer boys were sent home to Traverse City after their soldier father died.

The audience also heard that as early as the 1830s, Michigan was a haven for runaway slaves. Volunteers in Michigan helped some reach Canada.

And Michigan soldiers escorted Lincoln’s funeral procession in Springfield, Ill.

The Michigan Humanities Council, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, helped pay for Civil War sesquicentennial activities here.

Hours of the local Civil War exhibit are 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m.-noon on Saturdays. The Herbert D. Doan Midland County History Center is at 3419 W. Main St.

A blog by Jack Dempsey, author of a book on Michigan in the Civil War, is at <http://www.micwc.typepad.com/>.

Stuart Frohm, freelance writer and Midland Daily News retiree, wrote Civil War sesquicentennial articles about local and area veterans of the war and people whose ancestors were involved in the war. Also, he was a volunteer on the planning committee of the local exhibit “Our Civil War Legacy — Midland’s Past Marches On.”

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Gary Skory Σ Top Commenter Σ Works at Director, Midland County Historical Society

Thanks for the great coverage, Stu! It was, indeed, a very enjoyable program....in spite of the arctic temps, a good crowd still showed up and enjoyed the program---and the warmth of the Doan History Center!!

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Max Terman Σ Michigan State University

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