



Fort Mackinac Rifle Firing Demonstration Auxiliary Aid for the Hearing Impaired

Program Content Overview:

This interpretative program focuses on the 23rd Infantry Regiment's assignment at Fort Mackinac during the 1880s, uniforms worn by them (both dress and undress), an explanation of their individually assigned weapon, the Springfield .45-70 and the loading and firing of the weapon. The program will inform visitors why the 23rd Infantry was stationed at Fort Mackinac, an overview of both the Army dress and undress uniforms as well as their distinct uses in conjunction with evolving practicality based on the needs and expectations of the United States Army at the time. Visitors should also understand the significance of the Springfield .45-70 as the U.S.'s first standard issue breech loading rifle, how the weapon was loaded and fired, and how Army reforms and evolving training practices were shaped by post-Civil War budget cuts, which in turn shaped the continued development of the U.S. Army.

The 23rd U.S. Infantry Regiment:

The 23rd U.S. Infantry Regiment served at Fort Mackinac from 1884-1890, serving principally in a "reserve capacity," with no frontline combat taking place within the region nor largely within the nation as a whole, but working to maintain battle-readiness in case war were to break out by regularly conducting marching "drill" formations and taking target practice. Another principal duty was to maintain and oversee Mackinac Island National Park between 1875-1895, serving as "impromptu park rangers" which included enforcing rules and regulations, forging trail heads and watching for fires.

Uniforms worn by the 23rd Infantry included the undress or "fatigue" uniform and dress uniform. The fatigue uniform served as more of a day to day wear, still very similar to a Civil War style uniform and was considered an all-around good uniform (durable, comfortable and cheap). The fatigue uniform was worn primarily when conducting National Park duty, rifle practice, or "down time" around the fort while still on duty. Soldiers had little choice but to wear these uniforms as the only clothing they were allowed to own were uniforms in an attempt by the Army to cut down on desertion.

The dress uniform was saved for much more formal occasions such as dress parades, funerals, weddings, and troop inspections but was never intended for battlefield use. It was meant to inspire an impressive or imposing impression by the viewer. These uniforms were heavily Prussian-inspired with a long frock coat and spiked helmet, as the Prussians were considered the pre-eminent army in the world thanks to their recent defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian War.

Springfield .45-70

The Springfield .45-70 was a major technological advantage for the U.S. Army as it was the first standard issue breech loading rifle. No longer a muzzle loader as seen in previous conflicts, it loaded from the back or breech end of the gun. The weapon loaded by pulling back the hammer, flipping open the trapdoor-style breech, inserting a fairly modern brass cartridge, closing the breech, and pulling back the hammer which allowed the weapon to be ready to fire. This process only took about 5 to 6 seconds in the hands of a well-trained soldier, compared to the 20 seconds a muzzle loader would take. The rifle was far more accurate than previous smoothbore muskets due to the rifling and tighter-fitting bullet to match which made it accurate upwards of 1,000 yards in distance (from the porch of the barracks to the white lighthouse in the harbor). However, it would take a while for the U.S. military to take full advantage of the .45-70 as the concept of marksmanship wasn't of widespread concern to the U.S. Army prior to the 1880s. The reason for this was because target practice was largely seen as a waste of time, money, and ammunition with the men often only receiving about ten rounds of ammunition to practice with a month. Officers still widely accepted volley fire at close range over placing an emphasis on individual marksmanship. The disadvantage to this concept was demonstrated during the Plains Indian Wars in the West in defeats such as the infamous battle known as "Custer's Last Stand."

By mid-1880s the Army instituted the "Blunt System," which required soldiers to go out to a rifle range at least twice a week and be given enough ammunition to hone their skills. Competition shooting also became popular to encourage better marksmanship, with a "marksman" being recognized as being able to hit targets at 600 yards, and "sharpshooters" able to hit targets a full 1,000 yards away. The Blunt System was largely successful in creating more proficient and competent marksmen, which in turn created more effective and lethal soldiers in the Army.

