

History Comes Alive

Six flags mean more than roller coasters and summer fun to Bert Schultz. To the Westlake history devotee, they represent the men and women of the Texas area from 1519 through the 1800s.

Before a small-but-rapt Westlake Academy audience, Schultz explained the origins of the six flags that have flown over Texas - representing Spain, France, Mexico, Texas, Confederate States and United States. But the October 26 presentation explained much more. From Fort Worth to Bird's Fort, Schultz demystified history and discussed the reasons and rationale behind the forts built during the Indian Wars. It was one of three living history presentations the retired civil engineer has shared with area schools.

"Everything that is on this table is authentic," said Schultz, 67, a board member of the Westlake Historical Preservation Society. He pointed to revolvers, knives, ammunition and other items displayed under glass. The artifacts represented the 1865-1890 Indian War period and comprised part of a collection Schultz began acquiring in 1980.

Since then, he has amassed knives, saddlebags, military uniforms and other pieces from a long-ago time.

"I really like this collection," said Marshall Oakley, 10, a fourth-grader at the school.

Marshall discovered Native American culture as part of a recent class project. "Learning how they were extinct yet managed to repopulate was really interesting," Marshall said of the Tonkawa tribe, which inhabited Oklahoma before crossing into Texas in 1700.

But Schultz focused more on the Apache and Comanche tribes of Texas and the Southwest as forts were built along rivers.

"Towns grew up around these forts," said Schultz, pointing to Fort Worth, established by William Jenkins Worth in 1849, as an example. Meanwhile, Maj. Jonathan Bird oversaw the construction of Bird's fort along the Trinity River in 1841. As with other forts in that time, they provided towns protection from Indians.

While European settlers quickly snapped up property and staked their claim, Schultz said the concept of land ownership puzzled the natives.

But those watching Schultz' presentation seemed anything but puzzled. Wearing an authentic cavalry uniform and adding frontier drama to his PowerPoint presentation, Schultz made history come alive.

"How did they carry all this stuff," asked Harrison Oakley, 12, Marshall's seventh-grade brother, before the presentation. Like others gathered before the display tables, Harrison sought more information from the wool-suited historian.

"They used this," said Schultz, pointing to a carbine sling and black leather pouch. Harrison's eyes widened. "It's so well-preserved but still so old."

That's a common reaction, Schultz said. Living history exhibits do just that: make the past anew, or attempt to.

In addition to donning frontier garb for his Texas Frontier Army Forts presentations, Schultz also leads presentations titled the "Cowboys and the Texas Cattle Drive Trails" and the "North American Indian and the Buffalo."

Years before making living-history presentations that began three years ago at his sister's classroom at Prairie Trail Elementary School in Flower Mound, Schultz discovered a passion for the Old West as a young boy. Subsequent excursions to the Bozeman, Mont.; Santa Fe, N.M.; and Chisholm Trail historical sites, among others, deepened the Nebraska native's thirst for knowledge. He served in the U.S. Army from 1969 to 1971 and retired from a 30-year civil engineering career in 2005.

After he and his wife Karen moved from Flower Mound to Westlake in 2008, Schultz focused on bringing history alive at school campuses.

"He's an amazing, amazing individual," said Sharon Sanden, president of the Westlake Historical Preservation Society. "We're privileged to have enjoyed this presentation."

Story by A. Lee Graham / The Times-Register