

Birmingham News (AL)

August 7, 1995

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JAMES JACKSON BETHUNE

DIRECT LINE TO THE BLUE AND GRAY VESTAVIA HILLS MAN'S DAD FOUGHT IN THE CIVIL WAR

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Article Text:

When most people discuss the Civil War, they're talking about a remote historical event separated from their own experiences by several generations.

When the subject is mentioned to **James Jackson Bethune** of Vestavia Hills, whose middle name was given in honor of Confederate Gen. Thomas "'Stonewall" **Jackson**, it means something else. It's the war his daddy fought.

Not that **Bethune**, who celebrated his 91st birthday last week, spends much time thinking about the Civil War. He's more likely to be traveling, playing bingo with other senior citizens or watching the Atlanta Braves on television.

Because David Shaw **Bethune** died 87 years ago, when his youngest son was four, **Bethune** didn't have a chance to hear his father's war stories.

Relatives passed along an anecdote to him; one day during the war, "'He (**Bethune's** father) and my grandfather were out scouting the Union Army and they were discovered. My grandfather was captured and spent four years in prison, but my father got away," **Bethune** said.

Among **Bethune's** few memories of his father, the strongest is "'of my father in his sickbed, having cancer cut off his face," he said. "'I was playing in a trunk full of Confederate money. Somebody reprimanded me for messing with it and he said, 'Leave my baby alone.' "

Bethune has never joined any Civil War-affiliated group and, despite his parentage, is no Confederate flagwaver. "'I was in favor of them taking it down off the Capitol and putting it in a museum or something, because it was causing dissension," he said.

His status as one of a shrinking number of surviving children of Civil War veterans is just a small aspect of his life, but he's recently discovered it grabs people's interest.

Most of his friends in Vestavia Hills didn't know about **Bethune's** father until he happened to mention him on a group trip to a Mississippi casino last month.

"'I was surprised that people were so impressed," he said.

Gayden Latture, past commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans' Alabama division, said he's sufficiently impressed that he plans to present **Bethune** with a medal. "Direct link' Children of Civil War veterans are "'our direct link to that generation that fought the war," said Latture, who is retired from the history department at Jefferson State Community College. "'We want, of course, to hold on to that link as long as we can. We like to honor them and we cherish them."

The organization has record of 225 surviving sons of Confederate veterans nationwide, including 29 in Alabama; last year's United Daughters of the Confederacy membership roster included 350 surviving daughters nationally, 36 in Alabama.

Bethune's lone keepsake of his father is a photograph displayed in his apartment. He knows few details of his father's wartime activities, but records and old books in the Birmingham Public Library shed some light on the subject.

According to military records, D.S. **Bethune** of Pike County enlisted in the infantry in February 1861, spending most of that year stationed in Pensacola, Fla. In 1862, he moved to Company B of the 51st Alabama mounted infantry, remaining with that regiment until the Confederate Army surrendered in 1865. The young soldier rose to the rank of lieutenant and later served as adjutant of the regiment.

During that time, the regiment took part in several battles. The 51st was "'part of the force that made the Sequatchee raid, in which 1,000 wagons laden with stores were destroyed and 4,000 mules were butchered," historian Willis Brewer wrote.

The regiment spent much of the war in Tennessee, where, in the winter of 1863-64, it "'fought nearly every day for three months" with heavy casualties, Brewer wrote; later, it "'harassed Sherman's march into the Carolinas with much effect."

After the war, D.S. **Bethune** practiced law in Union Springs. He was elected to the Alabama Senate in 1896 and was a signer of the Alabama Constitution in 1901.

James Bethune was the youngest child of his father's second marriage and the only one who survives.

Bethune's mother died when he was 14 and he moved to Birmingham to live with three siblings. The widower with two children retired from Alpha Cement Co. in 1969.

"'Somebody really did a nice job with him when they raised him," said his friend Julie Harper, who gave **Bethune** a birthday party last week with his bingo buddies. "'He's a perfect gentleman."
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Record Number: 9503020860