

WW1 Centennial News for September 07, 2018 - Episode #88

Theo Mayer:

Moving on to our 100 Cities/100 Memorials segment about the \$200,000 matching grant challenge to rescue and focus on local World War One Memorials. This week, we're headed to Caswell Beach, North Carolina. Here to tell us about the project are Ron and Dr. Norma Eckard speaking for the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range. Welcome to the podcast.

Ron Eckard:

Well, thank you very much and we are very, very honored to be selected along with the NC State Bell Tower and we thank you Theo and Katherine for this occasion.

Theo Mayer:

Kind words. Thank you very much. I remember first seeing your grant application when it came through and your project was really different because you weren't a memorial per se, you were a preservation project for a firing range in the middle of what today, I think is an urban development. Can you tell us a bit about the project?

Ron Eckard:

Oak Island is a 13-mile barrier island along the Atlantic Ocean and Caswell Beach is on the eastern three miles of the barrier island right at the mouth of Cape Fear River. The permanent population is 398. In the summer, the tourists come and we have 2,000 people. The new rifle range that we wanna talk about was built during the build-up for World War One. The existing rifle range within Fort Caswell had become too dangerous to continue as new troop facilities crowded the range. The project was quickly funded and finished by May 1918. After World War One, the land that contained the fort was sold and the remaining land was abandoned until the 1980s when a golf course in Caswell Dunes residential community was begun. We're very fortunate that the developers saved the rifle range from the bulldozer.

Theo Mayer:

I was gonna ask you, how did that happen?

Ron Eckard:

Well, according to an early resident of Caswell Dunes, he said, they looked at the structure and said, "Wait a minute. I can't bulldoze this. I need to talk to somebody." They talked to the authorities, whoever they might be. We don't have that history and the authorities said, "No, you can't bulldoze that." They saved it for us and we're so excited. It's 100 years old and it needs a lot of TLC.

Theo Mayer:

It's amazing looking. You created something called the Friends of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range. Who are you and what are your goals?

Norma Eckard:

Well, the Friends of the Fort Caswell, it was recommended that we develop a nonprofit organization and so when we first looked at this structure, we were a volunteer landscaping committee working on the common places within our development and it was a mess. You can imagine after 100 years and so we decided to look into it and find out exactly what it was. We called on local historians from Brunswick Town, Fort Anderson and they came and looked at it as well as the State Historic Preservation Office up in Raleigh, North Carolina. They advised us on what to do to get started and then we began to look at getting this site on the Register of Historic Places. The whole community jumped in and helped and that's how we began back in 2011.

Theo Mayer:

What stage is the project at or what have you done and what are you still gonna do?

Norma Eckard:

We have temporary stabilization going on. We did the engineering study, we were told what to do and we had 17 trees removed and they're trying to use hydraulic jacks to move the middle wall that the troops walked through to get to the target range and you think about it. A hundred years of having nothing done, it was needy but it still was in one of the best conditions in the nation but we thought that this structure needs to be the memorial itself. We can get it to where we can educate to see what was done 100 years ago.

Theo Mayer:

Now, at one point your organization did a whole bunch of research on the local folks that served. Tell us a bit about that?

Ron Eckard:

That is evolving because all of a sudden we decided maybe we ought to do a little bit for the people that trained here and our daughter has a master's degree in computer science et cetera, et cetera. She put together a website for us and she found all the residents of Brunswick County that had served during WW1 and she's doing profiles and we're going to put a lot of those names on the fallen list that we're getting ready to install in November.

Norma Eckard:

This research produced so far 724 men and women that served in World War One and France. 40 profiles so far posted on our website. We're hoping to publish a book in 2019 with all these profiles that have been produced.

Theo Mayer:

World War One is a story about people and I just think you folks are brilliant. Thank you so much for doing the project.

Ron Eckard:

Thank you very much. Your recognition makes it all worthwhile.

Norma Eckard:

Thank you.

Theo Mayer:

Ron and Dr. Norma Eckard are from the Friends of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range in Caswell, North Carolina. Learn more about the 100 Cities/100 Memorials program and the rifle range by following the links in the podcast notes.