

Learning history as they live it

*Fort White High
drama students take
their acting off-stage*

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Prairie dresses may not be fashionable for high school students, but Fort White drama students don them regularly.

The students are training to be historical re-enactors during February's Olustee Festival, and docents for the Lake City-Columbia County Historical Museum.

Last year the Thespians' Guild at Fort White High School opened the festival with a production of "Our American Cousin," the play President Abraham Lincoln was

attending when he was assassinated. They also performed a Civil War version of "Romeo and Juliet" at the school.

Without money for costumes and props, the students borrowed materials from the museum and local re-enactment groups, said Jeanie Wilks, drama and English teacher at Fort White High School.

This year instead of a production, Wilks said, about 100 students will donate their time to the community as docents and re-enactors. Wilks said the idea occurred to her last summer when she had a hard time returning items borrowed from the museum. Run by volunteers, the museum is open limited hours. The students' volunteer hours will help more of the community experience

the museum, located at 157 SE Hernando Ave in Lake City.

Playing the role of historical reenactor requires a different kind of learning, said Wilks, who has performed as a re-enactor with the Blue-Grey Army for 11 years during the Olustee Festival and Battle.

"They have to know their history deeper," she said. The stage is a protected area, with a rehearsed and predetermined script. Re-enactors and docents have to know their character and the time period very well as museum or festival guests ask questions.

Each student was able to choose a historical character, either real or fictional, to portray. Students then researched their character, developing a portfolio on the time period's customs and events.

After winter break, students will have about a month to rehearse before the festival.

Some students will portray other generations speaking about their fathers and grandfathers who fought in the Civil War while others will portray people from the Civil War.

Some students are making outfits for their character, while others are borrowing them from re-enactment groups and the museum.

"They really have built quite a community," said Harry Joiner, drama and English teacher at Fort White High School.

The school has three drama classes and other students who perform as an extracurricular.

Acting builds confidence, he said.

"Confidence and the ability to handle yourself in public are to me critical skills,"

he said. "Their individual gifts and talents become known."

"It's really street performance instead of stage performance," said Joiner, who will perform as a fictional chaplain.

"The kids just adore her. They flock to her," he said of Wilks. The students will perform Feb. 17 and 18 from noon until 4 p.m. in Wilson Park.