

## Briceville students have a blast during field trip

Bob Fowler  
5:00 PM, May 15, 2015

ROCKY TOP — With the cannon aimed toward Rocky Top's municipal building, 1,000 yards away and a couple of hundred feet below, the crew touched off the charge.

The boom sent out a shock wave, and smoke belched from the cannon, called a field howitzer, after the blank was discharged.

Young onlookers were delighted.

"Is this the best field trip ever?" asked Barry Thacker, president of the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation.



PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL The Burroughs Battery of Blaine, Tenn., fires a blank round from a 12-pound howitzer for students from Briceville Elementary School at Fort Anderson on Militia Hill on Friday May 15, 2015, near Rocky Top. The students are helping the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation dedicate a cannon that will be permanently displayed at the historic location (the permanent cannon is not yet ready). Fort Anderson was built in 1892 as a base for the National Guard during the Coal Creek War.

The response from Briceville School's fourth- and fifth-graders was immediate, loud and in unison: "Yes!"

Friday morning's cannon fire occurred at the site of the former Fort Anderson on Militia Hill, on the flank of Vowell Mountain.

The occasion was a history lesson about one of the most dramatic and turbulent labor conflicts in American history that occurred in the students' backyard.

The Coal Creek War was an armed labor uprising that erupted after coal mine owners replaced their employees with convicts leased out by the state. Starting in 1891 and for just over a year, the free miners skirmished with state militiamen, and Fort Anderson was ground zero for the battles.

The war ended with the arrests of hundreds of miners, but it ultimately led to the end of the state's convict-leasing system and the building of Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary.

Friday's event was the 15th annual field trip sponsored by the nonprofit foundation for students in Briceville, an isolated and impoverished community tucked deep in the Cumberland Mountains.

"It's cool," said fifth-grader Paul Sommerfeldt after the first cannon blast roared. "I think the cannon is pretty cool and loud."

Students wore red bandannas tied around their heads — recalling the impromptu uniforms worn by free miners during the conflict — while six members of Burrough's Battery, a living history group from Blaine, went through the intricate steps of loading and firing the cannon.



Briceville Elementary School fifth-grader Paul Sommerfeldt looks through the sights of a 12-pound howitzer during a field trip at Fort Anderson on Militia Hill on Friday May 15, 2015, near Rocky Top. Fellow students Madison Braden, left, and Corey Haynes wait their turn to check out the cannon. The kids are wearing red bandannas that were the emblems of the striking miners during the Coal Creek War. (PAUL EFIRD/NEWS SENTINEL)

Serendipity played a role in the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation's creation. Thacker, president of Geo/Environmental, a Knoxville firm that does engineering for coal mining companies, visited Briceville on a water quality project in 2000.

Locals were wary of the flatlander and told him there were more important needs, Thacker recalled. So he formed the foundation to benefit the area and its residents.

The previously flood-prone Coal Creek was cleared of debris by Thacker and numerous other volunteers, and it hasn't flooded since. Renewed attention was paid to the area's colorful past, and historical markers now dot Militia Hill and other sites, including the locations of a pair of coal mine explosions where hundreds died.

Now, Thacker said, the foundation's emphasis is on providing scholarships to Briceville's youth so they can go to college.

He said about \$350,000 has been committed to those scholarships.

Other projects on the drawing board, he said, include the permanent placement of a cannon on Militia Hill and improved access to the nearby Fraterville Mine entrance, while the mine itself will remain off-limits.

The mine exploded on May 19, 1902, killing 216 men and boys. It was the worst mining disaster in the state's history.

Copyright 2015 Journal Media Group. All rights reserved.