

Left, Josephine West discusses her family's history at her Goldendale home, with old photographs of her grandfather, John Wheeler Koonce, top, and grandmother, Josephine Ivy Koonce, above. John Koonce was a Civil War veteran who fought in many historic battles.

Soldier of the Republic

Goldendale resident researches grandfather's participation in the Civil War

By Jeanie Senior

Most people's Civil War ancestors are little-known relations from the distant past, but Josephine West of Goldendale has a closer family connection to the War Between the States.

Josephine's grandfather, John Wheeler Koonce, enlisted with the Union army at 17 and ended the war as a captain after

fighting in several critical battles.

His life reads like an epic novel. Josephine, 84, never met her grandfather; she was 9 when he died in Kansas at age 91. But she has come to know his story well, through a narrative he wrote in the family Bible, family members' recollections and her own genealogical research.

Josephine is a longtime volunteer at the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints family history centers in The Dalles and Goldendale. She is an enthusiastic historian who knows the thrill of finding key bits of information through diligent digging.

Koonce ran away to join the Union Army shortly after the Civil War began, but his father went after him and brought him home to Illinois. When he ran away a second time, his parents consented, and he entered an Illinois infantry unit as a private.

An elderly cousin told Josephine that Koonce's mother, faced with his determination to join the war effort, told her son she would rather he come home a dead hero than a live coward.

"She told him to serve with honor," Josephine says.

He did indeed serve with honor, initially under Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in 1862, taking part in the Battle of Island No. 10; in 1863 in the battles of Missionary Ridge, Stones River and Chickamauga; and in 1864 in the battles of Kennesaw Mountain and Peachtree Creek.

Koonce served under Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman on his march through the South.

"He was a sharpshooter on Peachtree Ridge above Atlanta, and he went with Sherman clear to the sea," Josephine says.

Koonce was wounded twice, first spending 20 days in one field hospital and later spending 30 days in another.

After the Civil War ended in April 1865, Koonce re-enlisted and was detailed to go to Mexico during the Franco-Mexican War. On his way to join his regiment, he fell ill in Texas with yellow fever. He married his nurse, Josephine Ivy, and was honorably discharged on December 17, 1865. The couple moved back to Illinois, then homesteaded in Kansas.

Josephine doesn't know how her grandfather was injured in the war. His young wife died just a few years after they were married, leaving him with three sons.

"I understand from somebody that knew him, a cousin, that he was so devastated by the death of his wife that he kind of retreated," she says.

Koonce eventually remarried and had three more sons. In Kansas, he farmed, owned a butcher shop and also had a real estate business.

"He was a very Christian man," Josephine says. "Very Christian. In fact, on his 50th wedding anniversary with his second wife, every church in town gave them a reception."

Josephine has photos of her grandfather as a young captain after the war ended, and as a fine-looking older gentleman with a dashing mustache.

"He was proud to the end of his service to his country," she

says. "When he wore his 'good clothes' he always made sure his GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) pin was in plain sight."

Josephine has never been to his grave in Kansas, but she has seen photos. It is decorated with a large GAR plaque.

Josephine still has the narrative of his Civil War experiences that her grandfather wrote in the family Bible. Other memorabilia, however, was destroyed in a long-ago fire in Oklahoma.

"He had a regimental flag," she says. "He thought so much of that. He gave it to a grandson and everything like that was lost in a fire, much to my regret."

Koonce had older brothers who also served in the Civil War. Another brother, "a fascinating man," Josephine says, was a U.S. marshal who was present at the Oklahoma land rush and served as a scout for Gen. George Armstrong Custer.

Josephine, who has lived in Goldendale for 75 years, was born in Idaho.

"Up in the mountains," she says. "Ola, Idaho, just a tiny little place that's still a tiny little place in Gem County, where my parents had a ranch. I lived in Montana when I was a child, briefly in California, then to Washington, and then to Goldendale. And here I am."

She has four sons. The nearest one is David, who lives on the Centerville ranch where Josephine lived for many years. She says she and her husband ranched, then amends that to "he ranched, and I spent the money."

For the past 18 years, Josephine has lived in a house just outside Goldendale.

She gardens, "but I'm slowing down considerable," she says.

Among her many interests, she jokes, is "keeping track of my kids, seeing what they're up to and if I approve of it."

Genealogy remains an enduring interest. Even after years of family history research, "I'm still learning," she says.

Josephine urges others to spend time looking for their family roots, noting the LDS family history centers are open to the public.

It still gives her a great thrill when she suddenly discovers a valid piece of information about an ancestor.

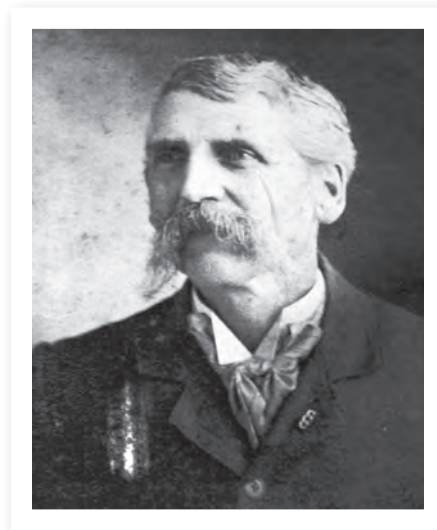
"I found the pedigree of my father's family," she says. "I never in this world felt I would find."

Her discovery turned up her third great-grandfather, Christian Kouns, who was a Revolutionary War veteran born in Virginia.

"All of my family are Virginians on both sides," she says.

Searching out the life histories of her ancestors is important to Josephine. Their tales—whether mild or fantastic—give her pause to consider herself.

"I get a lot of fun out of life," she says. ■



A photo from Josephine's collection of John Koonce as an elderly gentleman.