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Film highlights Civil War letters

Narrative shares the story of Mount Pleasant couple.

By WILLIAM SMITH

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MOUNT PLEASANT --

One of the great untold American stories will be revealed in the new documentary "Love & Valor -- The Intimate Civil War Letters," which will play at 7 p.m. Friday night the Iowa Wesleyan College Chapel.

The narrative documentary tells the story of Union Army Capt. Jacob Ritner, who regularly corresponded with his wife, Emeline, during his service in the Civil War. Ritner was a Mount Pleasant teacher, farmer and abolitionist before the war and had to leave his wife with four small children and the family farm while he served his country.

"The movie took about seven years to make, which is much longer than I thought it would take. I thought I could do it in two years, but it became much more complicated," said Charles Larimer, who wrote and produced the film.

Larimer, who happens to be the Union captain's great-great-grandson, first stumbled onto his ancestor's history when he read Ritner's letters at the tender age of 8. His grandmother's sister typed the handwritten letters during the 1920s and '30s, and he first re-read them as an adult while helping his older son with a junior high history project.

"I re-read the letters and fell in love with them," Larimer said.

The letters inspired Larimer to write a book about his grandfather's life, so it seemed only natural he produce a movie carrying the same name. Much of the movie was filmed at Civil War re-enactments across the Midwest, and the Ushers Ferry historic village near Cedar Rapids doubles as Mount Pleasant.

The film, narrated by veteran actor Brian Dennehy, also is based on letters Emeline sent to her husband. According to Larimer, who obtained the letters from Civil War collectors, letters from Civil War wives are quite rare.

"There aren't very many women's letters that survived the Civil War," Larimer said. "She provides detailed stories about women's life. Women were taking care of farms and running the stores while their husbands were away."

Larimer was born and raised in Sioux City and said the film tells a story that is very much about Iowa. Much of the action takes place in Mount Pleasant, and Larimer was able to discover the grave of Jacob's father and Jacob and Emeline's first child in the Jagger Cemetery near Danville. The child died two weeks short of his first birthday.

"I felt a real connection," Larimer said. "I could imagine them standing there in grief."

The movie begins at 7 p.m. Friday, and there will a reception with light refreshments hosted by Larimer starting at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$5 and available at the door.

Proceeds from the showing will help support the preservation and development of the Harlan-Lincoln House at Iowa Wesleyan College.

For more information, call Lynn Ellsworth at (319) 385-6320.

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Photo submitted
"Love & Valor -- The Intimate Civil War Letters" will be shown Friday night at the Iowa Wesleyan College Chapel in Mount Pleasant.

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