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4-4-2012

Guest Post: Fear and Loathing at Shiloh

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Smiley, Vanessa, "Guest Post: Fear and Loathing at Shiloh" (2012). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 144.

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Guest Post: Fear and Loathing at Shiloh

Abstract

Everyone is and has been talking about the Shiloh 150th commemoration, whether it be the NPS event starting this week or the battle reenactment that took place this past weekend. It has been called the 'Antietam of the West.' All the events surrounding its 150th anniversary have been heralded as being one of 'the big ones' this year. Over 23,000 casualties of both sides in two days - a pretty significant and bloody battle. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Civil War Reenactments

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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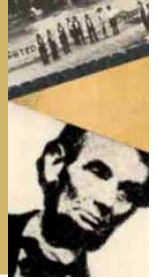
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Interpreting the Civil War

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Guest Post: Fear and Loathing at Shiloh

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 4, 2012

In a special guest post today, we offer up some thoughts from friend of the blog Vanessa Smiley. Vanessa is a good and stalwart interpreter and Civil War-geek. When she shared with me her experiences at the Shiloh reenactment this past weekend, I asked her to share them with all of you. - John

Everyone is and has been talking about the Shiloh 150th commemoration, whether it be the NPS event starting this week or the battle reenactment that took place this past weekend. It has been called the 'Antietam of the West.' All the events surrounding its 150th anniversary have been heralded as being one of 'the big ones' this year. Over 23,000 casualties of both sides in two days - a pretty significant and bloody battle.

I made the 14 hour road trip to the Shiloh battlefield this past weekend. I'm attending as many Civil War 150th events as I can and so I've been looking forward to this "big one" for months. My boyfriend Clayton and I decided to attend the reenactment this past weekend instead of the NPS events next weekend. Clayton had the unique opportunity to join nearly 600 reenactors/living historians to portray the 15th and 16th Iowa Infantry. Clayton would have the chance to arrive near the Shiloh visitor center via paddle boat on Friday night and the opportunity for some living history interaction with visitors to the park on Saturday morning before marching 5 miles to the reenactment site and straight into battle. In other words, this was Clayton's chance for his civil war "squee" moment.

I came along for the ride.

I *am* a living historian and while I enjoy the chance to don my corset and rugged work dress (I usually portray a working/lower class woman), this time I decided to go strictly as a spectator in modern clothes. Mind you, I've never done this - usually if I attend reenactments of Civil War battles, I'm dressed in my Civil War clothes and doing some sort of living history demonstration (cooking, laundry, etc.). I rarely get a chance to watch the battle itself. I wasn't sure what I expected but it sure wasn't what I ended up experiencing.

First, let's quickly crunch some numbers. Historically, over 44,000 Confederate soldiers and over 66,000 Federal soldiers fought in this two day battle. There were over 6300 registered reenactors for the Blue and Gray Alliance 150th Shiloh Battle Reenactment. That number also includes women and



A portion of Shiloh's bloody harvest

children, so probably 300-500 of that number were not actually soldiers. There were approx. 60 artillery pieces and too many cavalry to count. Clayton, who was in the thick of it all, told me that the Confederate reenactors outnumbered the Federals about 3 to 1. I was told that there were an estimated 35,000 spectators that attended the reenactment.

Historically, during the first day of battle, the Confederates had the upper hand. They made a surprise attack early on April 6, 1862 and battle raged all day, leaving many dead, wounded, and dying on the field by night fall. By the following morning, April 7, however, the Union army had received reinforcements and rallied to victory, albeit a costly one with 23,000 casualties. The Confederates eventually retreated from the field.

I ended up not attending Saturday's battle reenactment of the first day, but I did manage to make it to Sunday's fight, which was a reenactment of (what else?) the second day. I sat in the heat and sun with hundreds of other people behind yellow caution tape stretching from one end of the field to the other, all directly behind the Confederate artillery. From my vantage point, I was able to see most of the battle, including the final moments when those boys in blue advanced from the tree line, large United States flags waving at intervals along the immense column, and watched as they overtook the Confederate army and ended the battle.

As I sit here trying to gather my thoughts on all of this, I feel the tears well up and I'm overcome with emotion. The experience that I had was, cheesy as it sounds, life changing and powerful. It's hard to relive it.



The rumble of cannon: something to cheer or contemplate? / CC Roger Smith

As I sat there feeling the vibrations of the artillery rattling my teeth, I was finally able to grasp just how terrifying this war was for these soldiers. The ground literally shook from the constant artillery bombardment, the smoke from the artillery pieces often obscured the view of the field, the pounding of hooves from the cavalry as they rode by in haste, the explosions of various sized gunfire. If I closed my eyes and aimed my ears at the field, I could get a fraction of a sense of a battlefield 150 years ago.

But that's not what makes me cry as I think about my experience. What was really most powerful were the reactions of the spectators around me - and not in a good way.

Whereas I came to this reenactment looking for a sense of meaning and a sense of understanding about this horrific war, most of the people around me came here for entertainment, for the sport. It puts a sour taste in my mouth now just thinking about it. The people around me only wanted a good show. Whenever the three artillery pieces directly in front of me either all fired at once or in quick succession, the crowd would clap and cheer.

Did you read what I just wrote? *They clapped and cheered!* I was more horrified at *their reactions* to this event than I was about *my new understanding* of war. I was more emotionally affected by their reactions than I was by the meaning I had gone there looking for.

These people were laughing, cheering, talking, clapping, and taking pictures like this was some high school football game. I honestly felt disgust. I was disgusted at them. I was disgusted at myself for being a part of it all.

I had this naive notion that everyone was there for the same reasons I was there. And when that naive bubble was popped, I was so incredibly hurt. I began to question *everything*.

When John called me and asked how my trip was, knowing I had looked forward to it for some time, I told him that, while it was overall a great trip, I was coming out the other side a changed person.

He listened quietly as I described what I've typed up above. He listened as I also described the women who, towards the end of the battle as the Federals finally broke the Confederate lines, shouted flippantly, "Where's Forrest when you need him?!" I told him about the horror I felt at it all, how I just couldn't believe what I experienced, and how I was still trying to understand it.

I went there to try to find meaning in that place and what happened there. I ended up gaining a better understanding about the way the people who attend these events think.

And it terrifies me.