

Living History and War Reenactment Stories from Weekend Warriors

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The American Civil War occurred from 1861 – 1865 and is the bloodiest conflict the United States has ever engaged in, losing over 600,000 soldiers. The war bitterly pitted the northern and southern parts of the country against one another, sometimes dividing family allegiances down the middle. One hundred and fifty-two years after the conclusion of the conflict, the war still persists in many ways, most notably in the ongoing fights for racial equality and heritage recognition. Gaining popularity in the 1960's, Civil War reenactment groups emerged in both northern and southern states to relive famous battles, living conditions of soldiers, and to honor those who fought. Male and female reenactors number in the thousands, come from a myriad of professional occupations, and have copious reasons for getting involved in the “hobby.” They regularly spend their free time attending reenactment events at federally protected battlefield sites, seek out or make period-correct clothing, and become polished historians in their own right. This project focuses on the stories of Civil War reenactors who live in “the North,” and have a deep passion for the time period and historical events of the nineteenth century, much like their compatriots in “the South.”



Perryville Battlefield in Kentucky. Photo Credit: Hayden McNeil

Joseph Valicenti, 6th New Hampshire Volunteers

My family moved to the town I eventually grew up in and I saw this reenactment group march in our Fourth of July parades every year. In 2001, I was standing there watching the parade go by and when they fired their rifles, the crowd went crazy. I thought “There they go marching away, I’ll see them again next year.” My father was brave enough to approach one of them after the parade was over and he brought him to the car where I was waiting. The gentleman spoke very well about the hobby and long story short, I ended up going to the town municipal building to get the contact information for the group, the 6th New Hampshire Volunteers, who I would eventually join. They were persistent in calling me, saying “When are you coming to an event? We’ll get you suited up and you’ll have everything you need to try it out and see if you like it.” The event came and went, and I wasn’t able to go. They called me back, “Hey why didn’t we see you at that event?” So (laughs) I said “Oh I’m sorry, I’ll definitely come to another one.” Again, through encouragement from my father, who was happy to see me so interested in something like that, we drove all the way down to the southern part of New Jersey where the event was and they dressed me up, gave me equipment, and drilled me in military training called “School of the Solider,” which is how to use your rifle, how to stand, and how to march. I participated in the event and it was so much fun. People were coming up to me asking questions and I had never reenacted before at all. I knew some of the history so I was able to answer a few of their questions. It gave me a sense of purpose to be out there because I was educating people. And this was all at my first event, this was just a few hours in. From there I was hooked.

In a battle, everyone is on the same wavelength to be careful and have a good time, because that's the most exciting thing to participate in. You're moving around, you're following these orders, and you're being led. You're just acting on what's happening around you. Ultimately, you're in a Civil War battle, visually. Nothing else modern around you, nothing to tell you otherwise. I can say personally, there's been a few times when I've loaded my musket, I pointed it at somebody, I aimed higher to be safe, then I fired and that person took a hit¹ the instant I fired. That's the moment when there's nothing else around to tell you otherwise, you get that feeling of, well this is exactly what it would have been like.

¹ Taking a “hit” is acting as if one was just shot during battle.

I'll tell you this much, I never went out there to pretend. Never once. I went out and let things happen as they would. Just let it be. Come what may. And I have so many adventures that I couldn't compare reenacting to anything else: Sitting in the dark at night, with only campfires to give you light, just alone with my thoughts more or less. There are moments where you look around and realize where you are and there's nothing around that will tell you you're in the twenty-first century. So it's not so much that I'm pretending, it's that the circumstances have allowed me to not consider anything in the modern day. There's no power lines, no cars, no street lights, and it's pitch black. There's no outlet to anything and I just sit there to watch the fire, stay warm, and keep an eye on things. I become so immersed in the circumstances to where it could've been exactly what somebody experienced back then.

Peter Matthew, Pennsylvania 48th Regiment

Antietam was the single most-bloodiest day in American history.² Over 27,000 Americans lost their lives. Antietam was a one day fight, was very savage, and had no real outcome to it. I have a family member in the 48th Pennsylvania who fought right in the beginning shots of the battle of Antietam, so I've read many accounts about it and I wanted to go down and stand where he stood one hundred and fifty-five years ago. I've been down two or three times and it's a commemoration of him. Every time I go, it's a very solemn and reverent experience for me. I try to follow their line of battle as best as possible and just observe, stay quiet, and don't talk to anybody else. I don't go hunting for ghosts or anything along those lines. So that is the background to the story I'm going to tell you.

The night prior to the battle of Antietam one hundred and fifty-five years ago, a general order was given to the Federal troops³ to be as quiet as possible because they knew they were going to fight the next day and they didn't want to give away their position. They took their socks and shoved them in their cups so there would be no rattle. Meanwhile, the cavalry and artillery were making enough noise to startle the dead.

The first time I go out to Antietam, I got out there about 4:30 in the morning on a nice, crisp, cool, September day and sat in front of where the 4th U.S. artillery batteries were in place

² The battle of Antietam took place on September 17, 1862 in western Maryland. The battle began at Miller's cornfield.

³ Federal troops fought for the Union army, or the Northern states.

outside of the cornfield. I'm sitting there with my back towards the North Woods⁴ watching the sun come up and I keep seeing deer hopping through the fields. I keep hearing this "clunk," and for someone who has never reenacted, it's going to be really hard for me to describe this. But, all U.S. military accoutrement, it doesn't matter if it's Revolutionary War, Civil War, World War I, or World War II, they all have this very distinctive noise. When you're wearing them and you're walking, you just have a noise to you because your stuff rattles around. I'm sure even the guys who are fighting today have the same issue. So I'm sitting here observing the beauty and glory of the day when I start hearing (imitates noise) "Clunk clunk, clunk clunk" and I knew immediately what that noise was. I'm looking all around me and nobody's around. I'm the only one on the battle field, (imitates noise) "Clunk clunk, clunk clunk." I'm looking around, nothing. And this went on for maybe about an hour and then right around 7:30 a.m., it stops and doesn't come back. The area that I was hearing the noise come from was the North Woods, which is where the 48th Pennsylvania emerged on the field. So whether or not that was a distant family member letting me know "Hey, I'm here," I don't know. But it's definitely one of the times that made me think "Okay, I'm hooked. This is cool." I'm not a ghost hunter or anything like that, but I'm almost positive it was some sort of spirit. I'm not going to confirm that, but it seems spiritual to me. It was definitely a very unique experience for me and one that I hold near and dear.

John Hollinrake, 6th New Hampshire Volunteers, Canney Camp 5, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Company G 15th Alabama, Company F 2nd Mississippi, Company A 12th New Hampshire

I did two reenactments on back-to-back weekends one time. I did one as a Confederate soldier, and I did one as a Union soldier. On the last day of the battle of Gettysburg,⁵ there was an event called "Pickett's Charge" and 17,000 Confederates came out of the woods and marched across an open field for a mile and a quarter to an entrenched Union line of probably 30,000 men with artillery and cannons – 7,000 Confederates were killed and probably another 1/3 were wounded and barely a hundred or so got over what is now known as "The Wall," which was the stone wall or the stone fence that the Union guys were behind. Well the first time I did the

⁴ The North Woods is where the Union army camped out the night before the Battle of Antietam.

⁵ Gettysburg is a town in Pennsylvania. The battle occurred in July of 1863 and is infamous for having the highest number of casualties during the entire war.

Gettysburg battle, I was a Union soldier and I was right behind the wall and here come probably 3-4,000 Confederates. They're marching and I'm thinking "C'mon, c'mon, here we go, this is going to be like shooting ducks in a pond." They came up and got as far as the wall, and a few guys got over the wall, but I was very pleased with myself that I was able to repulse them.

The next weekend when I did it as a Confederate, the event was a little bigger and there were probably 6,000 soldiers on the Confederate side and I was in the second battle line on Pickett's Charge. We're marching across this field towards 4,000 Yanks,⁶ and behind them were the grandstands where thousands of people were watching. The Yanks opened up with the first two volleys⁷ and wiped out our first two lines. When those two lines went down in front of me, I could then see all of these Yanks and what they were doing. They had one guy out front and after he fired his rifle, he passed it to someone on his left who grabbed it, and the person on his right passed him another rifle, and he fired. This guy was firing every five seconds. I'm standing there going "My God, (in disbelief) how did the guys who actually did this, have the balls to do this? How did they just stand in front of that withering fire and get taken out?" It stunned me because that's the first time I saw that many rifles and I was like "Wow, this is nuts." It was a scripted event and because I was a second sergeant in my company, I was able to survive the first two volleys. I took ten more paces, and the next volley got me. I laid there and watched the rest of it for about forty-five minutes – it was pretty cool. It really makes you wonder, what possessed these guys to do this? To walk into certain death? I don't know. That's one of the most interesting things I've ever done.

There's no animosity and there's no politics in reenacting. Generally, at an event, we have two fights, one on Saturday and one on Sunday. Historically, if the Rebels won, the Union troops will lose on Saturday and win on Sunday. It doesn't matter what event you go to, both sides generally get a chance to win. After the fight is over, there's always a place at a reenactment called "Peddler's Row," where people sell the equipment and the accoutrements and there'll be a hundred guys in there, Rebs/Yanks, it don't matter, we're all doing the same thing. I've never seen any animosity between the two sides, in the battle or after the fights. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter to me which side I fight for because I'm doing the same thing either way. All I have to do is change my uniform. The equipment is pretty much the same thing.

⁶ "Yanks" or "Yankees" was the nickname given to Union soldiers.

⁷ A volley is a simultaneous discharge of bullets or artillery weapons.

The quality of the people, it's still the same. Really nothing changes. Some of the drill is a little different, depends on which Confederate unit you're with. Somehow, I've met a lot of people who believe we just sit around the fire at night, discussing whether or not, if the South would've won, this would've happened or that would've happened. That's not the case at all. We talk about sports and "Where did you get those shoes?" and "Jesus Paul, when are you going to buy a tent?" (laughs) There's no politics and that surprised me when I first got into it.

We march in a lot of parades and that's a big deal to me to have people see us and remember that oh yes, by the way, there was a Civil War in our nation and 620,000 guys were killed, which is incredible. So remember those guys and forget the politics of it because ninety-percent of the Confederate soldiers were not slave owners and did not give a damn if they had slaves or if they didn't. The typical Confederate soldier, if you asked him "Why are you fighting?" he would have said "You invaded Virginia." But hopefully we can do little things that keep the history alive and to keep it in people's memories so they don't forget and something like this doesn't happen again.

Steve Schnyer, 6th New Hampshire Volunteers

We were at the 150th anniversary Battle of Gettysburg. There were people from all over the country and all over the world there. One of the guys that fell in with our unit was from England, and then the 98th Pennsylvania, they were from Germany. When you're reenacting at a national event, you see people from all over the globe as well as different reporters from newspapers and TV channels. The English guy was awesome because he got up in the morning and while he was shaving, he said: (imitates English accent) "I don't know about you Yanks, but us in the Queens Army need to shave every morning." One of the best things about doing this hobby is becoming friends with people from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio who are these guys that you only see at these events. We fall in together and end up sharing drinks and smokes, I don't smoke, but I mean, I'll share what I'm drinking with whoever. Even guys from New Hampshire or Connecticut, from different units that you only see at events, you end up finding out about their family or what's going on in their lives. One of the guys from a Pennsylvania unit is a nationally ranked fencer who travels around and does fencing tournaments. But when we go to an event, he's just a guy in a blue uniform. We have doctors,

lawyers, businessmen, carpenters, and plumbers who all get along because we're all wearing blue, trying to honor the guys that went and fought before us.

I'd say all reenactors have a genuine feeling for trying to ensure Civil War soldiers aren't forgotten. Nowadays, they talk about 5,000 guys being killed over in Iraq or something like that. Shit, Grant⁸ lost 6,000 guys in twenty minutes. People don't realize the spectrum of how massive these armies were as they shot back and forth at each other. Also, as far as casualties go, it wasn't like they would have a battle and the armies would go away and everything was fine. No, they had dead bodies, dead horses, and arms and legs of soldiers all around. We don't want people to forget history or all the sacrifices these guys made. Troops going into battle usually just came from marching fifteen miles that day, fifteen miles the day before that, maybe twenty miles the day before that. Some of them dropped dead on the side of the road because of heat exhaustion. People don't have an atom of an idea of what it was like. They say in Shiloh⁹ you could spread bodies and walk any direction and not touch the ground, just walking on bodies.

Gregory Starace, 23rd North Carolina

Knowing my personal history is critical to understand why I reenact. I'm an officer in the Marines, was a history major in college, and went on for a Masters in National Security Affairs, so I have a bunch of different perspectives that sometimes leads me to ask "Is reenacting really history? Is it promoting history?" There are reenactors on both sides of the argument and I think the truth sits in the middle. A lot of reenacting is actually quite bad (laughs).

Academics look at reenactors with scorn, saying things like "They're promoting bad history. These guys are overweight middle age guys who just want to shoot and party on the weekend, and it's not really history." But on the other hand, academics like to just conduct research, which is utterly boring and as correct as it is, the public doesn't care. Yeah, these guys are doing great work because they're studying primary sources and putting their life's work into publications, but nobody reads it. So where do you bridge that? I think reenacting, kept in concert with academics, can offer some really interesting perspectives.

⁸ Ulysses S. Grant was the Commanding General of the Union Army. He later became the 18th President of the United States.

⁹ The Battle of Shiloh was a major battle in Tennessee. The Union Army won and gained access to the Mississippi River.

Talking about progressive reenacting and the role of women, when I was on the set of *Gettysburg*, we started meeting guys from units that we didn't know and there was this couple, not like an affectionate man and woman couple, but more like two people who were reenacting together. One was an older gentleman and the other was his young son and I remember admiring them and thinking "They have a really good kit, a really good impression." But I heard their conversation and I came to realize the boy wasn't a boy at all, the boy was a thirty-year-old woman. Not long before, she had found a hardcore/progressive reenacting group and contacted the head officer telling him she wanted to reenact. He said "Listen, we don't allow women to serve in or ranks" and she asked "Why not?" and he said "Women couldn't serve in the war" and she said "But they did serve from time to time" and he said "That's true, they did serve, but they hid their identity" and she said "Well if you're true to history, if I can hide my identity, will you let me serve?" The guy said "Sure, I'll take you up on this challenge." So this woman, and this is really someone else's story, but I got to watch it, basically went on a quest of learning how to be a man to the point of learning how men sit, talk, and act. She put her whole kit together and showed up at this unit and the head officer goes "If you can pass the whole weekend, you're in," and sure enough, she did it. She changed her voice and looked like a prepubescent seventeen-year-old who was a little late on the puberty game. She nailed it. She wound up maintaining this image and here she was on the set of *Gettysburg* playing a soldier. It answered the question of "How do we accurately represent history?" She did it, and her story was true in regards to the small amount of women who did serve in the Civil War in disguise, doing the exact things she had to do. I think she did a great job showcasing the true goal of reenacting, to create a living history.

The Civil War community is probably ripe for some problems in this political climate. There's a lot of people that take the Civil War reenacting too far. One of the things reenactors talk about is "We try to recreate war," and I've been to war. I was a platoon commander in Iraq a couple of times, and you're not recreating war. You're not recreating what steel does to flesh. You're not recreating the horror and the psychology of war. You are at best, at the front line of a movie having a cinematic moment, but it's not warfare, it's not even close. You smell gun powder, you hear a boom, you have cinematic moments but it's not warfare, and to say so is to be somewhat dishonoring of people who've actually been in war because there's so much you can't create. Also, some people hold on to this culture that was lost, to this mystique about the

American Confederate and who he was and wasn't. However, there's certainly Civil War reenactors who don't follow that and just want to educate and honor the people who marched before them. I appreciate how the Confederate cause is woven into the fabric of who we are as a nation in a sense of "What went wrong?" I told you I'm an active marine and I believe in our Constitution for all the good and bad it brings us. But I have to recognize, it was a traitor nation. Do these leaders of rebellion need to be honored as public heroes? Probably not. Should their story be told? Yes.

Roy Draa, 1st Georgia, Liberty Rifles

We were doing a Civil War event and these guys were making fun of my equipment and uniform. It was rough, but at the same time, it motivated me to do more research to learn better skills to put together better uniforms and I ended up reenacting with these guys for a couple years. One of the things it led to was being hired by several different film companies such as the History Channel and Discovery Channel and I think we also did one for National Geographic. It was a way for all of us that were college guys to make a little extra money during the summers working on these films. It was a great experience and a good opportunity to get exposed to that. One of the guys actually ended up moving out to Hollywood and he's a director out there and he does a lot of Indie films, historical based films, things of that nature.

One of the events that sticks out in my mind is, during a filming on a farm outside of Gettysburg, we built roads, snake rails, split-rail fences, mock-up buildings, and stone walls to recreate portions of the battles we were filming. We filmed one portion and it took about three minutes. During the filming, I was with a Confederate unit that was retreating across these rail fences to the other side of the road and they had the special effects going, simulating artillery fire and blowing up shells on the ground at the same time that we were moving across the road, trying to fire back at these units. True to the actual battle, about half of the regiment got destroyed in the middle of the road and then the remainder of the regiment ended up shooting at two Union regiments as they retreated. I remember looking at this and seeing the amount of men in blue and grey lying on the ground after these three really short minutes of filming this battle and the unspeakable waste and sadness of Americans fighting Americans during this war. That was certainly an interesting experience to get to see that.

During another filming, we did a scene from the Battle of Antietam where Jackson's¹⁰ brigade ends up marching from Harper's Ferry and ends up crossing past the Dunker Church and flanking a Union brigade. We ended up filming that piece, and as the Confederate brigade came around the side of the farmhouse and opened up fire, I remember seeing the entire blue line going down. Again, it gives you that perspective of how terrible that war was, to see hundreds of men wounded and killed in a matter of five minutes.

Digitization of historical records in the last decade has really taken off. However, when I was doing films, I got the opportunity to wander through stacks at libraries and visit historical societies to go through original documents. In fact, most of the equipment and uniforms I made, I had done from looking at photographs. Once I was getting commissioned for the films, I got down to brass tacks because I felt like my reputation was on the line and I wanted to make sure that what I was doing was beyond reproach. I called up the curator at the National Historical site at Gettysburg and told him what types of equipment and uniforms I wanted to look at. The gentleman said "Sure, come on up," so I brought my white gloves and my thirty-five millimeter camera and took a lot of photos and got to handle a lot of equipment. That was really a turning point because I thought to myself "Holy smokes, I can actually call up somebody in a museum and say I'd like to get back in vaults and look at stuff because this is what I'm working on." Historical societies and the government tend to be pretty privy with allowing people to come in and take a look at artifacts, equipment, uniforms, clothing, or historical documents. Again, digitization has certainly made things a lot easier today, which is a huge improvement for the living history community in getting away from the type of reenacting that's just people blazing away at each other on Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Instead, it's becoming more research-based with more of an academic aspect to it. I taught American History at Clark University and also at the College of Southern Maryland and it's great to see how education and courses are changing. There is now a better opportunity to expose young people to things they had not considered in the past.

¹⁰ General "Stonewall" Jackson was a famous Confederate general, known for his idiosyncrasies.