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Colleen Marquis

Eastern Michigan University, cmarquis@emich.edu

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A HISTORY OF HISTORY: THE ORIGINS OF WAR RE-ENACTING IN AMERICA

Colleen Marquis

Dr. John McCurdy, Mentor

ABSTRACT

Americans remember history in many different ways. The Historical Re-enactment is the most controversial and bewildering event of public remembrance. Americans re-enact every war in American history from the French and Indian War down to the Vietnam War. My research set out to answer several questions about this custom of public history: why does it exist, what purpose does it serve, and who started it?

My research led me to a shattered post-Civil War America. The true test of the unity of America had passed and people were left to make sense of the war that was experienced on the level of a national tragedy. The re-enactor, a veteran and an amateur historian, would begin to write his story and present it for the public. This form of public memory would be used to facilitate an idealistic and blind reunion of North and South. The history would be changed to make remembering safe.

INTRODUCTION

The power of popular culture, according to historian Jim Cullen, is to offer large numbers of people explanations of why things are the way things are. Re-enacting the Civil War infuses popular culture with explanations of how things came to be the way they are.¹ This is precisely what historical re-enacting is, a potent mixture of popular culture and history that has the possibility to influence the actions and thoughts of a country. That is why it is so important to study the origins and the effects of re-enacting in America; it is what we are saying about ourselves and how we wish to remember our past.

My research focused on that marriage of popular culture and

¹ Jim Cullen, *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995) 13

history, popular history. Re-enacting wars has become a popular American pastime. What I have read and studied has led me to the conclusion that this pastime has origins in the Civil War and grew out of the veterans associations and a strong drive to recognize soldiers' memories as history. In the following pages I will explain how re-enacting was created, the successes and failures of re-enacting, and how re-enacting affects modern historical memory. Living history arises from the veterans' desire to write an accurate history for the nation based on their own experiences and to present this information in a palatable way.

WAR MEMORY IN EARLY AMERICA

Re-enacting did not occur before the Civil War for three reasons: there was no shared national identity, there was very little interest in the individual's history, and there was very little importance placed on the experience of the veteran. With so little history to remember as an independent nation, Americans focused on local history and on the heroes of the revolution who, by the mid-nineteenth century, had reached mythic proportions.

Colonial Americans had shared little in common beyond their opposition to British tyranny.² The wave of patriotism that swept the nation was one born from anti-British sentiment. By the 1820s this single message of patriotism led by a pantheon of republican demagogues was lost in regional differences that were to be the hallmark of the pre-Civil War nineteenth century. As the educator Andrew S. Draper stated, "we have no frequent or great exhibitions of power; no army to stand in awe of, no royalty to worship; no emblems or ribbons to dazzle the eye; and but a few national airs."³

Prior to the Civil War, public memory was a matter of worshipping the symbols of the revolution: Washington, Jefferson, and the other founding fathers. History was thus grounded in a higher authority and the new nation left little cultural space for competing symbols of patriotism such as the dedicated individual citizen.⁴ War memory after the Civil War was very different from war memory after the Revolution. As historian John Bodnar argues, "the war drew thousands of ordinary people into dramatic episodes of tragedy and sacrifice. In a sense it furthered the politicization of ordinary lives."⁵ Common people's memories

² Cecilia E. O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) 14

³ *Ibid.* 49

⁴ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Press, 1992) 25

⁵ *Ibid.* 27

and experiences would become much more important.

After the Civil War, however, Americans were forced to become a more unified nation in name and in identity. The sectionalism that had led to the war had been defeated and shared experience of wartime hardships on both sides led to a common history. The emergence of the importance of the common people's memory would be the most striking difference between the post-Revolutionary war period and the Reconstruction period, especially the memories of veterans. Revolutionary war veterans were not viewed as a source of historic significance like Civil War veterans were. They were not expected to show up in uniforms or to display any of the personal pieces of their history related to the war. Rather they were spectators, just like all of the civilians, to their history. However, after the Civil War in May of 1865, the rank-and-file soldiers assembled before their commanding officers at the War's end and marched in a Grand Review down Pennsylvania Avenue. In contrast, after the Revolution, state regiments had simply returned home after the final battle, "like folks from church."⁶ Thus the Grand Review broke with all past conventions by focusing attention on the fighting forces rather than the military exploits of its leaders.

During the Reconstruction war memory laid dormant. In the 1870s few books and articles were published about the Civil War, in fact fewer than in any period.⁷ As historian Gerald Linderman argues, the 1870s were a period of "hibernation."⁸ The literature that was produced later portrayed vignettes on camp life that were focused on minute detail and glossed over real experiences or used the war for glory. Magazines, such as the *Century's* series "Battles and Leaders of the Civil War," pictured gallant generals, heroic troops, and romanticized images of soldiers advancing into battle beneath the stars and stripes. However, they purposely left out prisoner of war experiences since veterans seemed unable to idealize that past.⁹ Daniel Aaron has written that post-war authors were, "drowned in reams of special pleading and irrelevant minutiae." The war was, "not so much as unfelt as it was unfaced."¹⁰ The war had occurred, but the nation was unable to deal with the trauma.

6 O'leary 31

7 Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 175

8 Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1982) 277

9 David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 183

10 Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1973), 115

The amnesia that had struck the north in the 1870s and 1880s became, in the words of James Moorhead, “a sea of self congratulatory chauvinism.”¹¹ When people began writing in earnest about the war, Victorian authors focused on expectations for disciplined social order and focused solely through attention to issues of military strategy and tactics.¹² In this context Ulysses S. Grant’s biography, *Personal Memoirs*, became the seminal work during the late-nineteenth century. Before the book was available to the public, veterans’ organizations had ordered 300,000 copies.¹³ Veterans would sell these copies door to door and the book would become the most popular book of the nineteenth century.

The generals would have their accounts of battles and troop movements dryly recorded for the public to consume. These accounts would prove insufficient for veterans. According to James Shaw of Rhode Island, everything other than a soldier’s account was “tradition, always unreliable.”¹⁴ The interest in Civil War literature did not wane in the coming decades but rather grew; the common soldier would soon find a voice.

THE G.A.R.

The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) began “to afford assistance to disabled and unemployed soldiers.”¹⁵ In 1866, Dr. B.F. Stephenson of the 14th Illinois and Chaplain Rutledge of the same regiment founded the group.¹⁶ Supposedly, Stephenson founded the G.A.R. to provide assistance and promote brotherly love. However, there is evidence for a more pragmatic interest in organizing a Republican voting machine to further the ambitions of soldier-politicians.¹⁷ Originally the G.A.R. busied itself as a charity organization, collecting funds for veterans as they waited for the big pensions and millions in government aid that would not flow in until the 1870s.¹⁸ As the soldiers were more able to care for themselves, the organization began to work on questions of

11 McConnell 170

12 O’leary 54

13 Cullen 122

14 McConnell 172

15 Jones Thomas, *A Complete History of the 46th regiment, Illinois volunteer infantry, a full account of the participation of the regiment in the battles, sieges, skirmishes and expeditions in which it was engaged. Also a complete roster of the regiment, together with biographical sketches...Sketches of the organization of the Grand army of the republic... Giving a complete record of the reunions of the 46th regiment up to the present time* (Freeport, IL: W.H. Wagner & Sons, 1907) 247

16 McConnell 12

17 O’Leary 58

18 McConnell 176

meaning and memory.

G.A.R. posts began collecting veterans "war sketches." Each veteran was asked to give basic information: muster dates, regiments, wounds, and battles. Each soldier was also given the chance to add personal stories at the end. In Middleton, Massachusetts, the veterans had to sign their war sketches at the bottom stating "I certify that the Sketch of my War Service is true as I verily believe."¹⁹ The war sketches collected at an Iowa G.A.R. post include dates and manor of deaths as well as where the fallen soldier could be located in a graveyard. For example, George Martin Shear was buried in the national cemetery in Chattanooga in section D grave 438.²⁰ This kind of record became a useful tool for comrades to find lost friends.

Sketches had to be collected with "mathematical accuracy."²¹ If every soldier contributed his small part in the war the larger purpose would be recognizable. Everyone had to have their say; every soldier was important. The soldiers' war sketches may seem like tedious reading now, but they were meaningful to those who wrote them. Take for example that of Private John C. Miller of Simon Cameron post 78 Middletown Pennsylvania:

The most important events during his enlistment took place at Petersburg, morning of the 2d. At the recaptures of Fort Greg, two battalions took the open field in front of said fort, while the infantry came in on the left and captured the fort. They were exposed to the fire of all three fronts that day and laid there all night, and on the 3d followed Lee to his capture at Appomattox.²²

Soldiers believed that when they died the history would die with them. Thus attention to small details was an effort to make many stories into a larger story in which the reason of war would become apparent. The morals that were stressed by these sketches were fraternity, valor, and justice, which made their experiences worth remembering.

The soldiers' memories recorded at the G.A.R. post were similar to the unrealistic and trivial tales of Ulysses S. Grant. It seems that many of the recorded histories were an attempt to figure out each soldiers' place in the war. James C. Thom, a man of Scottish decent who fought

¹⁹ Ibid. 58

²⁰ Iowa Adjutant General's Office, *Roster and Record of Iowa Soldiers in the War of Rebellion: Together with Historical Sketches of Volunteer Organizations 1861-1864* (Des Moines, IA: Emery H. English, state printer : E.D. Chassell, state binder, 1908) 127

²¹ McConnell 176

²² Ibid. 174

with the Illinois 46th volunteer infantry, recorded his experiences as: “served in every battle and march in which the regiment was engaged... had some interesting experiences while on duty, some pleasant and some otherwise.”²³ It leaves a historian wondering about the otherwise.

The second type of memory recorded were tales of camp life. A story from the 46th Illinois regiment relates a measles outbreak at Camp Butler in the early fall of 1861. Rather than explain the effect of the outbreak on morale or effectiveness of the troops, another seemingly inconsequential story is related: “At the company roll call orders were given for all who in their past life had had the measles to step three paces to the front.” Those who had stepped forward with gusto were proud of their previous experience with the disease. The next order was, “orderly, take their names and make detail from those to attend the measley sick.” Something of substance had happened, a moment that would try men’s souls and could turn the war one way or the other, but instead they wrote that it “led to many acquaintances of strangers and many pleasant memories afterward.”²⁴ The record shows that many enlisted men died of outbreaks like this one in camps; they could not have all been pleasant memories.

It was not enough to write about the war. The G.A.R. wanted to bring their version of history to America. At first they attempted to accomplish this through a series of war lectures, which were met with mixed success. Posts lost money after tickets for the lectures went unsold and by the late 1880s the lecture series was abandoned.²⁵ The new public history was one experienced and therefore written by the people; an intellectual dictating it to a crowd clearly would not succeed. Most of the general public could hardly have tolerated any more of the dry academic papers on “The Left Attack at Gettysburg” or “On the Right at Antietam.”²⁶ A new form of presenting the war had to be used.

THE ENCAMPMENT

Local G.A.R. posts organized “Camp Fire” events, which were the precursor to encampments. Evenings were spent gathering around outdoor fires, as well as attending elaborate programs featuring music, speeches, a potluck, and taps played by the bugle corps.²⁷ In 1890, a book written by Joseph Morton, *Sparks from the Campfire; Tales of the*

23 Jones 98-99

24 Ibid. 111

25 McConnell 179

26 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 182

27 O’Leary 56

Old Veterans, told readers the “thrilling stories of heroic deeds, brave encounters, desperate battles...and wondrous suffering as retold today around the modern camp fire.”²⁸ These evenings were meant to instruct Americans in their history and to become “a school of patriotism, a school of intelligent Americanism.”²⁹ Immigrants and young children were encouraged to attend these events to learn about the war from the people who fought it.³⁰ These G.A.R. camp fires became so popular that they were soon expanded into nationwide reunions in the form of an encampment. Chaplain Lovering wrote in the *National Tribune*, a news publication of the G.A.R., the following encouraging soldiers to attend encampments: “become the living history of an immortal past... you are the trustees of that living power of patriotism which looks to a great future for our great nation. In your hands to-day history, memory, hope—the past, the present and the future!”³¹ Veterans were the history and their history had to be heard.

A typical encampment was a long weekend lasting from three to five days. The first day or two were usually dedicated to set up.³² The same tents that had housed the veterans during the war would be pitched in large fields. At the 1913 reunion the state and federal government provided for the men as “provisions of camp and garrison” more than 6,000 tents. During the war twelve men would sleep in these tents, however, the rules were relaxed for the aging veterans down to eight.³³ Outside of the tent a camp kitchen fire would be dug and wood would be delivered and split by young helpers: the boy scouts, National Guard volunteers, or even the veterans’ sons.³⁴ Water would also be hauled to the tents for drinking, making coffee, and dousing fires. Veterans had little to do with camp set up and tear down, partly because they had become enfeebled by the years, but also because they were far too respected and important to be expected to do it themselves.

The second day, when everyone was settled, the encampment

28 Joseph W. Morton Jr., ed., *Sparks from the Campfire; or Tales of the Old Veterans* (Philadelphia: Keyston, 1895) 143

29 O’Leary 56

30 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 264

31 O’Leary 54

32 Pennsylvania Gettysburg Battlefield Commission, *Fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg. Report of the Pennsylvania commission, December 31, 1913* (Harrisburg, PA, 1915). See also Grand Army of the Republic, Department of California, *Official souvenir of the twenty-seventh annual encampment, G.A.R., department of California. Held at Oakland, California, April 23-28, 1894. Including views of Oakland and a description of the city* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1894) 4

33 Pennsylvania Gettysburg Commission 22

34 Department of California 4

really began. The program for the Oakland, California encampment in April of 1894 has the fanfare continuing for eight hours that day. The morning opened with a prayer, followed by a male chorus singing “Comrades in Arms.” There was then much oration, an address of welcome, a response address, another song (a vocal solo of Viva l’America), yet another address and a final song by the chorus. This event was usually reserved for the soldiers; the camp would not open to the public until the next day.

The third day of encampment began with the veterans marching in a parade through town before returning to the encampment, followed by spectators. The G.A.R. parade was a tradition that continued well into the twentieth century. These were highly orchestrated military marches that followed carefully plotted routes designed to maximize the veterans’ relation to sites of state power, marching past state capital buildings or in view of the local cemetery.³⁵ Local politicians were sure to be seen marching with the veterans, using the G.A.R.’s clout to validate themselves in public perception. National officials often attended. Former president Rutherford B. Hayes, three cabinet officers, two state governors, as well as numerous ex-governors, joined their regiments at the 1892 encampment in Washington, D.C.³⁶

In camp, visitors wandered from section to section. Each regiment proudly displayed their war torn colors outside the highest ranking soldiers’ tent. The flag worship at these encampments was widespread. Veterans lifted their hats to “tattered strips of silk and the few pendent scraps of what was once bight blue fringe were borne proudly past.”³⁷ These flags were consecrated in the blood spilt to save the nation.³⁸ Women would often reach out and kiss the old flags as they were carried past.³⁹

Veterans dressed in their old uniforms when able, though they may be torn, faded, and threadbare. The veterans would carry the actual weapon they had used in the war, now rusting and poorly kept. In front of the tents, the soldiers displayed their memorabilia to be examined. Items might include letters from home, trinkets acquired from young ladies, and photographs of family members that the soldier had carried with him throughout the war. Some of that memorabilia, captured rebel flags, would be returned to the southern troops they belonged to, though

35 O’Leary 57

36 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 18

37 O’Leary 58

38 Cullen 175

39 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 233

it would take Congress passing a law to do it in 1888.⁴⁰

Dinner would be either one of two choices. When the veterans were younger the meal was the same thing that they had eaten during the war: hard tack, beans, and coffee. Normally this sparse meal was cooked by the veterans in their camps. As the men aged, dinner was provided for them more often. At the Oakland, California, encampment in 1894, a banquet was provided for the men; in Indiana in 1900, there was a massive barbeque pit.⁴¹

Central to the encampment experience was the re-enactment of battles and troop movements. In 1878, 1881, and 1883, a New Jersey encampment of Union veterans engaged in sham battles with the state's National Guard unit.⁴² As Confederate veterans were invited to take the field against the Union again, the public enjoyed what they thought of as accurate battles. However, the agony of war complete with injuries and death could not be staged here. As historian Stewart McConnell has noted of these events: "Orders from headquarters always arrived on time and were followed, sentinels stopped every intruder, soldiers said their prayers and abstained from drink, privates had constitutional rights and their turns being officers, space was orderly and movement controlled, marching was strictly for show, and of course no one was ever killed."⁴³

THE EFFECT OF THE ENCAMPMENTS

The massive public displays of patriotism continued the public dialogue over memory rather than ending it in agreed upon historic fact. Blight indicated that the "Civil War veterans were America's first Civil War buffs."⁴⁴ They collected mementos, stories, and discussed tactics and battles. While remembering their time in battle, they cleaned it up and made it exciting and normal all at once, and made it difficult to face the extended political and social meanings of the war. The G.A.R. encampments were very similar to the "war sketches" that were collected. These were the soldiers' stories to tell and by telling them, and gathering together all the little stories and all the surviving soldiers, then maybe some sense of justice and right would come out of all of it.

The G.A.R. reenactments expressed "a highly sentimentalized view of the war" that increasingly enabled Confederate veterans to par-

40 Ibid. 203

41 Ibid. 24

42 Cullen 175

43 McConnell 105

44 Blight, *Race and Reunion* 183

participate in the spirit of reconciliation and reunion.⁴⁵ Historian Cushman argues that the very idea of reenactment presupposes reconciliation.⁴⁶ At the Gettysburg reunion of 1913, historian David Blight has written that the event was in reality “about forging unifying myths and making remembering safe.”⁴⁷ When he wrote this he might as well have been writing about all subsequent reenactments. “Neither space nor time was allowed at Gettysburg for considering the causes, transformations, and results of the war; no place was reserved for the legacies of emancipation or the conflicted and unresolved history of Reconstruction.”⁴⁸ Therefore Black Americans would have difficulty finding a voice in the national dialogue about the Civil War.

Old soldiers were splendid symbols around which to forge reunion. They were seen as fighting heroically and deserved recognition, regardless of what side they were on. They carried a politics of “soldierly difference that tended toward manly reconciliation.”⁴⁹ The federal government became very interested in this reconciliation that re-enactments of the war represented. On 10 May 1912, the War Department asked Congress for \$358, 662.84, “wherewith to establish a Great Camp, complete in all provisions of camp and garrison equipment.”⁵⁰ The purpose of which was the 1913 Gettysburg encampment. In all they received \$300,000.00 and thousands of camp accoutrements.⁵¹

“Thank God for Gettysburg, hosanna!” proclaimed the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. “God bless us everyone, alike the Blue and the Gray, the Gray and the Blue! The world ne’er witnessed such a sight as this. Beholding, can we say happy is the nation that hath no history.”⁵² Indeed the fight was over. It is estimated that 100,000 people visited the Gettysburg reunion. Gettysburg was similar to previous encampments except that it was federally funded. The spontaneous public history that had been born from the personal drive of veterans to share their stories had become Federal history used for reunification.

For the veterans though, this spirit of understanding and forgiveness for the Confederate cause was not universal. Though many have written that the G.A.R. encampments were a product of reconcili-

45 Cullen 177

46 William Kaufman, *The Civil War in American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 125

47 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 9

48 Ibid. 9

49 Ibid. 189

50 Pennsylvania Gettysburg Battlefield Commission 23

51 Ibid. 27

52 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 9



Figure 1 Confederate and Union veterans shaking hands at the Gettysburg Reunion of 1913. Used with permission from the William L. Clements library. Pennsylvania Gettysburg Battlefield Commission. Fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg Harrisburg, P.A., 1915. 33.

ation, I argue that the evidence points in the other direction. The G.A.R. encampments were exclusive to Union Soldiers until the 1870s. Union veterans fought the forgive and forget policy in several ways: refusing to return rebel flags, fighting for Union biased history books, and trying to keep forgiveness for the Confederate rebellion out of national ceremonies commemorating the war. In Stillwater, Minnesota, in 1879 a veteran named Colonel Thomas F. Barr offered his “utter dissent” from what he considered the “false sentimentality” of reconciliation based on a “blue and gray fraternity.”⁵³ Barr argued that treason should have been “so punished...that it might never come to be eulogized as true loyalty.” This was how the majority of Union veterans felt—they were right, and the Confederate veterans were unforgivably wrong.

Reconciliation was not a theme of the G.A.R. encampment, but it became one in the media and via politicians who saw reconciliation in economic and social terms. President William McKinley said at a G.A.R. encampment in 1899: “What has endeared this vast army to the American People? What has enshrined you in their hearts? What has given you a permanent and imperishable place in that history. The answer comes

⁵³ David Blight, “Decoration Days: The Origins of Memorial Day in North and South” in *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, edited by Alice Fahs (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 121

that you saved the nation.”⁵⁴ This very pro-Union slanted speech would become less and less politically correct. Only a few short years later, President Woodrow Wilson would speak at the 1913 Gettysburg fiftieth reunion and say;

They have meant peace and union and vigor, and the maturity and might of a great nation. How wholesome and healing the peace has been! We have found one another again as brother and comrades, in arms, enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten-except that we shall not forget the splendid valor, the manly devotion of the men then arrayed against on another, now grasping hands and smiling into each other’s eyes. How complete the union has become and how dear to all of us, how unquestioned, how benign and majestic, as state after state has been added to this, our great family of free men!⁵⁵

The Union and the Confederacy were now falling into one another’s arms in history. The unforeseen effect of this quick and dirty forgiveness would be the rise of Jim Crow in the Deep South. With the nation healing wounds, no one wanted to press issues of civil rights in former slave holding states. The great Civil War reconciliation was traded for racial reconciliation. As Blight has shown, celebrations of public memory had been celebrations of white reconciliation and white supremacy. What was lost was the emancipationist vision of the war; without another thought it was assumed that democracy had been greatly advanced. The reality of African-American life was repressed by a sentimental and romantic racism that, in Blight’s words, served as “a mother lode of nostalgia” for the white supremacist ideology that had dominated the national memory ever since.⁵⁶

THE LEGACY OF RE-ENACTING

Historic re-enacting continued and is more popular today than ever before. In this section I will review modern re-enacting, but I will stay focused on Civil War re-enactors. Though I have answered the questions of the hobby’s original purpose and origins, there are still, nonetheless, questions. Why do modern men dress in historic uniforms

⁵⁴ Louis Filler, ed. *The President Speaks: From McKinley to Lyndon B. Johnson* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965) 121

⁵⁵ “Address at the Gettysburg Battlefield,” July 4, 1913 in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume 28* edited by Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966-1982) 24

⁵⁶ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 19

and re-enact wars today?

The first non-veteran re-enactors were the sons and grandsons of veterans. Though veterans continued to attend encampments well into old age, it was common for sons to attend and eventually participate in these encampments. When a father died his son could pick up the fallen soldiers' rusty old gun and head out to remember the war the way they were taught to. The G.A.R. encampment had provided a support system for the veterans, surrounding them with men who understood each other, and the G.A.R. would continue to provide that for the next generation.⁵⁷

The encampments had taught boys that courage in battle and fraternity among soldiers was the highest form of emotion. They had been taught that to fight for their country was both noble and necessary. However in the years after the Civil War there were few chances for this second generation to practice these lessons. There was an age gap between the sons of the Civil War and those who would fight in World War I, with the Spanish War lasting only ten months. Perhaps re-enacting the Civil War gave them a sense of patriotism and manhood. Lacking a great war to validate their manhood, sons and grandsons of veterans would pretend.

Civil War re-enactors are the most numerous today, perhaps because the Civil War was the "crossroads of our being" and defined America not as a loose collection of sovereign states but as a federalist and nationalist country.⁵⁸ The re-enactor today may or may not be related to any Civil War veteran. Today the hobby is supplied new members through word of mouth, internet websites, and public events that draw the curious war buff into the community.

The previous purpose to re-enacting was to provide a support system for veterans and to disseminate personal history as national history. Re-enactors today feel that they carry on that tradition by living other people's memories to better understand history. A female re-enactor who goes by the name Jonathan Clarke wrote about an experience where she saw a "wounded" man at a Gettysburg re-enactment covered in "blood". She wrote that for one quick moment she thought, "My God, I'm in this real situation where people are dying! It was just a quick moment, but I can remember it."⁵⁹ Another re-enactor is quoted as saying, "I wasn't there to experience it, and it's important to me to

57 Kaufman 124

58 Cullen 13

59 Ibid. 193

understand this period in history.”⁶⁰ It is clear that re-enactors feel that history is to be experienced, not passively absorbed.

Though re-enacting is dominated by white men, there are several groups of African-American re-enactors. In Jenny Thompson’s book about twentieth century re-enactors, a World War II re-enactor is quoted saying, “if you talk about black history a lot of people are still stuck on it only consisting of the civil rights movement. That’s all it is to a lot of people. And for me, I think that’s not fair because you’re cutting everyone else out who’s ever done anything.”⁶¹ African-American groups who re-enact the Civil War are the 54th Massachusetts volunteer infantry in Georgia, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Massachusetts. There is also a regiment of Black Confederate re-enactors, the 37th C.S.A Texas Calvary.⁶² The inclusion of African-American re-enactors in Union as well as Confederate troops is indicative of how much re-enacting has changed. The all white male view is no longer acceptable to some.

Others would like the all-white male view to stay the only view. The neo-Confederate League of the South makes the purpose of Confederate re-enactments clear through its founding spokesmen, James and Walter Kennedy:

As an activist, you should make yourself available to the local schools to do living-history discussions and demonstrations for their history classes. We have found that our involvement in the War for Southern Independence re-enacting makes a great opportunity to convey to local Southern school children, black as well as white, the truth about their ancestors and the real reason they fought the War for Southern Independence.⁶³

Though most Confederate re-enactors are not trying to say anything political when they don a Confederate uniform, how can they help not to? Confederate re-enactors “cannot escape the associations of their costume with a history of determined efforts against black freedom,” argues historian Elizabeth Young.⁶⁴

Though re-enactors would like to think that they are free from the revisionism that plagued the nineteenth century, it is important to note that the south tends to win more battles and sometimes the

60 Ibid. 194

61 Ibid. 79

62 Jenny Thompson, *War Games: Inside the World of the 20th Century War Re-enactors* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004) 80

63 Kaufman 125

64 Ibid. 125

entire war when an encampment is held below the Mason-Dixon line. Southern revisionism, such as the neo-Confederates, is an ugly stain on the modern re-enactor that has its origins in the nineteenth century. The palatable war presented by the G.A.R. allowed the south not only to reconstruct complete with Jim Crow laws but also to rewrite their role in history. Scholars such as Jim Cullen argue that re-enacting has continued in response to white men's fears of an America that is becoming increasingly diverse.

CONCLUSION

Re-enacting began as a way to present a personal and individualized history to a public who were accustomed to the mythical and impersonal greatness of their leaders. In an attempt to present the soldiers' stories, the G.A.R. whitewashed the war, making remembering safe and forgetting believable. This would have national ramifications as the job of reconciliation began. People were able to remember the war with nostalgia, since a bloodless war devoid of suffering and torment was what they were asked to remember.

The encampments of the nineteenth century would echo into the twenty-first. People still gather on open fields, fire black powder at each other and pretend to die. What the educational merit is of these encampments is debatable, but the popularity of these encampments is undeniable. There are thousands of re-enactors, and the number appears to be growing.⁶⁵ Their continuation of this tradition in the face of being labeled as revisionist and full of amateur historians speaks to the effectiveness of the presentation. At the very least, encampments are a nice weekend outside with friends, at the most they are windows into our own history and what we think of ourselves.

⁶⁵ Thompson 25

