

Why Reenact?



The temperature is 15 degrees above, and the wind is blowing out of the northwest. You suddenly awake with toes that feel like two blocks of ice; it is dark outside. You don't know what time it is, but you hope it is almost time for the sun to rise. You slowly work your watch out of your pocket and try to position it just right to see the time. In the glow of the moon, you see it is only 3 a.m.

Slowly you throw back your covers and move toward the dying fire. You throw a couple of logs on it to bring it back to life. In the glare of the flame you feel the warmth on your face and hands, but yet your back feels the bitter cold. You take your shoes off to try and warm your frozen toes. Slowly you begin to feel the blood flow through them again. You wrap your blanket around your shoulders and sit by the fire. Slowly you doze off, hoping the remainder of the night will quickly pass.

Your numb mind goes back four months to the middle of August at another place, but you are wondering the same thing. It is 93 degrees, and you have just come back to camp. You are drenched in sweat, your eyes are stinging from the salt which has been running into them, and you can't wait to get your blouse off so you can feel the coolness from the wind blowing on your damp shirt.

The one common thought that forms in your mind in both of those extreme circumstances is – “why am I doing this, I must be nuts?” Welcome to the world of Civil War reenacting.

Well, I'm not the only one who thinks we reenactors are nuts. Family, friends and even complete strangers shake their heads with a slight smile on their lips as they listen to our stories. But behind all this complaining and signs of craziness lies what motivates us.

The Civil War period is just one of many military time periods that are reenacted. Why does an individual pick one period over another? It boils down to personal inter-

ests. In some cases, individuals may reenact multiple war periods. But once we pick a time period, we discover over time that we find ourselves becoming more immersed in it. The more authentic we want to become, the more research we do. The more research we do, the more involved in it we become.

Last December at Prairie Grove, Arkansas, several of us were sitting around the camp fire. Yes, even in Arkansas, fire is our friend in December. We were reflecting on why we do what we do. As the conversation circled around the fire, we settled on four reasons that motivate reenactors: love of history, remembrance of those flesh and blood individuals who participated in it, love of acting, and interacting with people.

First is the love of history. It is amazing as you spend the weekend sitting around the campfire, standing in the ranks, or just lounging around killing time; the knowledge you find in those around you. Whether your interest is in the military battles, military leaders, politics, medicine, civilians, or music, you will find someone who is more than willing to share their knowledge with you.

Secondly, we frequently say that we will never walk in the shoes of those who fought in the Civil War. We will never feel the pain and suffering from hunger, fatigue, or disease. We will never hear the sound of minie balls as they fly past us or as they unfortunately strike the human flesh. We will never know the terror they felt or the camaraderie they experienced. For you see, on Sunday afternoon we pack up and head home to our normal lives - whereas they were there for the duration of the war or until they were sent home wounded or in a casket.

How close you will come to experiencing what they did depends on your level of commitment. There are generally three categories of reenactors – farby, mainstream, and hardcore. For the most part, the two major categories are mainstream and hardcore. The mainstreamer, who has the largest number of participants, attempts to be as realistic and authentic as possible. We work hard at presenting a period living history presentation to the public, but in the end – it is a hobby; and as such we are willing to “bend the rules” a little. The hardcore, or also known as stitch-counters, predominantly aim for authenticity and stay out of the public view. They are there for themselves to “test” their ability to experience the trials and tribulations the typical soldier would have had to endure. Both groups have a purpose and are needed in the hobby.

Thirdly, we are all “hams” at heart. We love to put on a show – whether on the battlefield or in camp presenting a persona to the public. Battles are typically scripted with the aim of “entertaining the public”. But even though we put on a show for the public, we are serious about doing it in a safe manner both for them and for ourselves. At the end of the battle you can find the sur-

(continued on other side)

The Turner Brigade

Why Reenact? *(continued from other side)*

geons doing their work under their fly. Glamour can be found in the flying cavalry, booming artillery, and maneuvering infantry, but in the end the surgeons are left with the human debris of battle. This, the gorier and more numbing aspects of the war.

Finally there is the interaction with people. There are two predominant perspectives here - fellowship and meeting new people. Again the level of involvement is dependent on the individual. You can be extremely interactive or you can find solitude from people if you so desire.

The reenacting community is, as far as I am concerned, a second family. And what is unique about this is that it doesn't matter what color uniform you wear. When you experience the good times or challenging environments, you all come away with a memory that binds us all together. Just like the real Civil War soldiers when they came home, we who participate speak an abbreviated form of communication. All we have to do is say Sacramento, KY, 2003, and, if you were there, your mind conjures up an image of mud above your shoes, the challenges of getting your gear in/out of the camp site, and the camaraderie we experience getting through the weekend, not only with other reenactors, but with the local community as well.

As the winter snows melt into spring and the thoughts turn to getting the canvas out and getting ready for the coming season, we find ourselves looking eagerly forward to seeing those we have not seen all winter. It will be soon be time to come together and "catch up" with our friends, see what happened over the winter, see how much the kids have grown, and what new "toys" we may have gotten or what new knowledge we discovered in our research.

Lastly, we look forward to meeting new spectators as they walk through our camps - telling them about the Civil War, listening to their stories of their ancestors

who fought, and recruiting. We are always recruiting. We see many individuals who enjoy walking through the camps and watching the battles. But when asked if they would be interested in doing it themselves, we either get a resounding "no" or a hesitant "yes". They have thought about it, but have never committed the time or resources. Then the fun begins for us as we try to "sell" the hobby, as we try to convince them to come on out and give it a try.

Reenacting is just not for guys. Ladies, whether portraying civilians or soldiers in disguise, participate and contribute to the hobby. Reenacting is just not the battles, it is the experience of camp life, of fellowship, of meeting new individuals, of educating the public about the most dramatic and traumatic time in our country's history. It's about testing our endurance - whether in the heat or cold, whether in the long march, or our reaction to "seeing the elephant". We will never be able to experience what those young men underwent, families left holding down the home front, or the women who spent so much time, energy, and emotion in caring for the sick and wounded. But what we can do is put on a "show" for the spectators, to share our knowledge to young and old, and to support our second family.

There is so much more to share, but time and space limit me. Reenacting is not cheap - neither in purchasing your clothing and gear or in the cost of going to events, but it will leave you with a life of memories. If you are interested or know someone who is interested in reenacting please contact me.

God save the Union.

Your Obedient Servant,
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The Turner Brigade, Missouri Volunteers, U.S.

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