

Why I Re-enact: the Lessons of History for a Vast Future

Irving D. Moy

*Gettysburg: Three Days of Destiny! Anniversary of the Civil War Battle,
including the following battles, the opening phase,
Little Round Top, Custer vs. Stuart and Pickett's Charge*

The first thoughts that come to the public's mind when re-enacting is mentioned are the battle reenactments regardless of the period of military history portrayed. For the serious re-enactor, our "hobby" is more than the "black powder burners" as described in the above advertisement for a recent event in Gettysburg. The serious re-enactor has an interest in a particular period of history and becomes a "living historian" with as much or even more general knowledge than a professional historian who specializes in a particular aspect of that period. The individual has a passion for the period that is conveyed to the public audience whether it is through a military or civilian impression.

My own interest for the Civil War period comes from a life-long fascination with the life of Abraham Lincoln. My passion was awakened by my reading of James McPherson's "Battle Cry of Freedom," a single volume narrative that vividly captures the essence of the issues, events, battles and individuals, who shaped the course of events during that epic struggle. The Civil War was the most defining event in our Nation's history. The North's victory set this nation on its course of being what it has come to symbolize to the rest of the world. The concepts of freedom, democracy and opportunity that our Nation stands for and for which the "greatest generation" fought and died to uphold during WWII, were the direct result of this victory over issues of state rights to break up the Union and that of slavery.

With an appreciation and deep respect for the sacrifices of the countless unknown individuals who contributed to the history of this Nation, I believe it is important for anyone living in this country to know its history and to have a better understanding of how we have come to be who we are today as a Nation and to be able to fully appreciate the privileges we enjoy as Americans. History can also teach us valuable lessons in order for us not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The following quote by Patrick Henry made in 1775 is found on a mural at the State of Virginia Historical Society in Richmond,

*"I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided
and that is the lamp of experience. I know of
no way of judging of the future but by the past."*

For these reasons I portray a Union soldier of the Civil War period with Co. F, Fourteenth Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, as Joseph Pierce, a Chinese soldier who fought with the original

company and regiment. Our mission is to “accurately interpret the regiment’s history to the public during re-enactments, living-history programs or in classroom settings. The interpretation will also consider the regiment and civilian population’s broader contributions toward the preservation of the Union and address other major issues associated with the Civil War.”

Unfortunately, the knowledge and interest of the public in its own history is at a low point. High schools do not teach history as a stand-alone subject unless the student takes an advanced placement history course. Schools now offer “social studies” in place of what were once required subjects for graduation. Gary Horton, a retired history teacher in Co. F, said that his school district only allowed 3-4 days to cover the Civil War Era. Time is only allowed to touch upon the highlights and not enough time to enough to teach beyond a review of the dates and events of a period of our Nation’s history. It is no wonder that there is little interest in or the knowledge of this Nation’s history amongst the public of all ages.

At a living history event I was asked by an adult to summarize the Civil War in 10 minutes because she had to leave within that time. Beyond the fact that “the North won,” it was impossible to do. A youngster asked me if he could touch my wool uniform because he thought that all soldiers wore armor. Through living history events and classroom presentations, where our audience can see and touch the uniforms and equipment, to be able to ask questions about the people and events that shaped that conflict, we hope to spark an interest where they will want to learn more about the Civil War and ultimately our Nation’s history. As an example, a sixth grade student of Gary’s gained such an interest that he later became a member of the regiment as an adult.

Another passion the serious re-enactor has is to preserve history for generations to come. Much of the land that forms the original battlefields is in private ownership subject to the pressures of commercial development. Once this land is developed, it is forever lost. We as individuals and as a company have donated through our event honorarium funds to the Civil War Trust to buy battlefield land whenever it becomes available to preserve it as sacred ground in honor of all who sacrificed their lives in determining the course of this Nation’s history. This battle is never-ending and not easily won due to the money interest that Trust needs to complete against for the land.

Members of Co. F have also actively taken up responsibilities that our state and federal governments have abdicated due to cutbacks in funding and personnel. Many monuments that you see on the battlefields and local town greens were originally paid for by the states to honor their own, but there is no interest now on their part in maintaining or preserving them. Our members have participated in the Adopt-a-Position program on the Gettysburg National Military Battlefield Park. This program allows us to assist the National Park Service in

maintaining our regiment's monument sites and assisting on other battlefield projects designated by the Park Service. Co. F has added "Park Day" sponsored by the Civil War Trust to its programs to offer to its members and friends another opportunity to help Civil War battlefields and historic sites, take on large and small maintenance projects.

For the serious re-enactor, Abraham Lincoln's words from his Gettysburg Address still ring true, *"It is for the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain..."*