



A Photographic Time Travel Back To The American Civil War

The Civil War Siege of Yorktown took place from April 5 to May 4, 1862. 2nd U.S. Cavalry, Co. A members demonstrate a saber attack. This was a Union Civil War Living History Camp at Historical Yorktown, Virginia.

By Nancy J. Olds

The turbulent history and growing pains, which evolved into the American Civil War, have fascinated me ever since I was a young girl. I was tremendously impressed with the movie *Gone With the Wind*, which I had the good fortune of

seeing in the movie theater in cinemascope with my late mother in the early 1960s. Living in northern New Jersey at that time, the movie raised more questions for me than answers since I knew little about nineteenth century southern culture.

Later on when I moved to Fairfax County, Virginia, I began to explore this distinct southern environment where the Civil War, or as many folks in that region called the War Between the States, was still heavily evident. Highly interested in Civil War history, I joined a Civil War roundtable and became a member of a Civil War re-enactment group. Furthermore, I became a photojournalist for a national publication, the *Civil War News*. That is when my exploration of Civil War history through various Civil War re-enactments, Civil War living history events, museum related events, Civil War tours of important battlefields and many other great opportunities took off.

The American Civil War was intended to last about thirty to sixty days. However, this war, fought on American soil, lasted from April 1861 to April 1865, except for extended battles at sea with the Confederate raider, the CSS Shenandoah and those pockets of Confederate resistance that extended conflict for a few more months. This terrible



Union infantry rally at the 140th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg on August 9-10, 2003.

conflict, involving Americans against Americans incurred tremendous casualties, approximately 620,000 soldiers and sailors perished from wounds, disease and accidents. This is more American deaths than all wars that Americans have fought in since the Civil War.

The American Civil War changed the very fabric of 19th century American life. Slavery was abolished; a mainly agrarian society became a more industrial society. Improvements in medical treatments begun on the battlefield led to modern medicine. The invention of trench warfare has been credited to Confederate Lieutenant General James Longstreet. Both Union and Confederate navies developed armored ships and submarines, and advanced long-range weapons underwent critical changes.

The Women's Suffrage Movement made major gains when women on both sides of the conflict qualified as nurses and administrators. Women ran commissions to support the Confederate and Union soldiers in their encampments by offering much needed clothing, food and supplies. Among many women leaders, Clarissa "Clara" Barton, made sure that wounded and sick soldiers received the best of care by providing food, materials and medical supplies to the military surgeons. Barton later rose to prominence as the founder and first president of the American Red Cross.

Photographing Civil War Re-enactments and Similar Events by Immersion

Since the most active Civil War reenactment events involve visiting Confederate and Union encampments, including participating in battle scenes and field demonstrations, I and several other Civil War historical photojournalists prepared for these programs by wearing Civil War era attire, allowing us to blend in. In some cases, I wore an artillery shell jacket enabling me to participate with the artillery units. I made every attempt to be discreet with my modern photographic equipment so that the spectators in a roped off area were unaware that I was photographing the battle scenes incognito. I carried with me two reproduction haversacks, period authentic appearing, medium sized bags with straps to hold my camera gear, strobes and accessories. This situation provided ample opportunities to capture dramatic artillery volleys images of the gun crew and record battle scenes from the best vantage point. I listened to the commanders' advice in remaining safe at all times when cannons were being fired. You had to be on guard when there were sudden changes. Cannons were moved, cavalry and infantry would come onto the scene and "invaders" were suddenly launching an attack! I regularly included with my photographic arsenal several zoom telephoto lenses



Al Stone formerly from Zephyrhills, Florida, portrays a venerable General Robert E. Lee in his officer's tent at Historic Sully in Chantilly, Virginia.

so that I wouldn't become too dangerously close to the gun crew operating the cannons. Basically, the media photographer must expect the unexpected and be ready to move quickly at any moment. For example, the cavalry can come galloping through an artillery unit. A photographer must think fast on his/her feet!



Wet plate period photographer Todd Harrington's wife Vivien Harrington shows a finished plate with her image on what is called ruby glass. It is a collodion process with gun cotton in ether or alcohol. The event was the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Ball's Bluff on October 22, 2011.



Nancy J. Olds



Confederate soldiers with the 17th and 18th Mississippi Infantry fire their muskets during the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Balls Bluff on the historic battlefield in Loudoun County, Virginia.

Know your Civil War History

It's all in the details. It is particularly important when choosing subjects to photograph to be certain that the total image is period correct. Popular expressions at Civil War reenactment or living history events are *farb* and *farby*. A person displaying something inaccurately is called a *farb*, whereas something that is deemed inaccurate is called *farby*. Unintentionally, a Civil War re-enactor in a soldier's attire might still be wearing a wristwatch or be wearing modern glasses. Everything that is modern must be concealed or the photograph loses its historical significance. Sometimes a fine image is impossible to photograph as a period image when a truck or car is parked in the background during the height of a battle or a

person in shorts and a T-shirt is meeting with General Robert E. Lee! There are valid exceptions such as an audience reacting while watching an artillery demonstration, visiting children learning military drills at a living history event, and whatever might make a good story involving public participation. The Civil War re-enactors take great pains to assume the persona of a 19th century officer, soldier, surgeon, steward (surgeon's assistant), nurse, military chaplain, seaman and so on.

A photojournalist's background knowledge about the Civil War is essential while photographing his/her subjects when members of Civil War re-enactment or living history associations are taking great pains to portray Civil War era characters in period dress performing their duties. Some of the Civil War re-enactors and living historians assume important historical

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Located at historic Fort Washington in Prince George County, Maryland for the event "For Cause & Country, Serving The Soldier" at Fort Washington Park.



Historic Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. on July 10, 2004. Professional actors and Civil War living historians convened at the famous Ford's Theatre to reenact and film the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The National Park Service maintains Ford's Theatre. This was a private event not opened to the public.

personas such as Union President Abraham Lincoln, Union General Ulysses S. Grant, Union Major General George “Old Snapping Turtle” Gordon Meade, Major General George B. McClellan, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Confederate Lieutenant General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, Confederate Lieutenant General James “Old Pete” Longstreet General Longstreet, or a notable surgeon, congressman, balloonist extraordinaire for the Union army such as Professor Thaddeus Lowe, orator, publisher, author and abolitionist Frederick Douglass and many more influential leaders of their day. Historical context is essential when documenting Civil War period events, large and small. Lesser known eyewitnesses to the Civil War were the chaplains who gave spiritual sustenance to the soldiers and delivered the last rites to the dying, laundresses who followed the regiments earning a living by handling soiled clothes, drummer boys, just children providing military music and risking their lives on the battlefields, the men and women members of supportive commissions North and South who provided many supplies, books, and spiritual support for the soldiers and the sutlers, traveling through the country selling sought after goods that soldiers craved.

Travel as light and as comfortably as possible, but



Vivandiere Linda Estupivar Snook, 3rd Pennsylvania Artillery, Battery B, carries an ice bucket. A vivandiere was usually a daughter of an officer or spouse of a non-commissioned officer who stayed with their regiment to provide immediate medical care to the wounded soldiers and give them water if they were suffering from the heat. These brave women were armed and were allowed to wear trousers under their short skirts. They were highly respected for their services. Some of them faced being captured or shot at by the enemy.

bring enough photographic equipment. More often than not most of these events require some physical endurance. Civil War reenactment programs line up many activities happening almost simultaneously. I have been working with Nikon cameras ever since I was covering Civil War related historical events in 1989 when film was the sole option. I currently have worked with the Nikon D7100, Nikon D750 and the Nikon D610. I normally pack two digital camera bodies and three lenses, extra lithium camera batteries, one to two Speedlight flashes, extra batteries for the strobes, lens cleaning cloths, a small flashlight, a reproduction canteen of water (essential!), a good sunscreen, and my cell phone for any emergencies. The weather can be unpredictable. There may not be an opportunity to switch lenses in the wind or when a storm approaches. I also carried a small notebook to jot down information about my photographic subjects whenever possible. I kept my business cards handy in case we needed to maintain contact and I carried a press pass to verify my credentials and allow more access to events. Some programs are held under tents or inside an historic building. It absolutely makes sense to plan ahead of time where the historical event will be held in order to determine what lenses are compatible.

Having covered Civil War related events for over twenty-nine years, and being an active member of a Civil War round table, most recently the BRCWRT (Bull Run Civil War Round Table), and involved with historical societies, gave me incredible access to historical landmarks, hallowed battlefields and amazing people who recall their Civil War ancestry with great pride. Photographing these historic places and the people who continue to express their involvement with understanding the diverse elements that brought our nation to Civil War has been a fascinating narrative for me as a photojournalist. ■



Daniel Wilson portrayed a Confederate drummer boy at the unveiling of the drummer boy monument, Unity Park, in Gettysburg, PA. This project was started by 15 year-old Andrew Adam, a Civil War reenactor and Eagle Scout candidate.



Historic Blenheim in Fairfax, VA during the 16th Annual Fairfax Civil War Day, April 4, 2016. Regiments, including infantry, cavalry, engineers, light artillery, and heavy artillery units, were recruited from all states of the Union and became known as the United States Colored Troops.