OLD TIMES THERE ARE NOT FORGOTTEN: CIVIL WAR RE-ENACTORS AND THE CREATION OF HERITAGE

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication, Culture, & Technology

By

Ashley Elizabeth Bowen, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 23, 2009
OLD TIMES THERE ARE NOT FORGOTTEN:
CIVIL WAR RE-ENACTING AND THE CREATION OF HERITAGE

Ashley Elizabeth Bowen, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Michael Coventry, PhD.

ABSTRACT

Civil War re-enactors, men and women who dress in 1860s-era clothing and learn military and domestic skills from the war period, seek to make the past physically present in their own lives and, at least temporarily, in the lives of their audiences. The re-enactor’s impression, the historical personality or role they inhabit during an event, turns abstract historical concepts into lived experience. To understand the hobby’s relationship to American culture requires examining reenacting through three related fields of inquiry. History provides the context for today’s re-enactments and illuminates the connection between these commemorations and those of the post-war generation. Cultural memory underscores the importance of shared narratives of the past in contemporary life. Heritage studies, which includes museum studies as well as anthropological studies, helps to clarify how history becomes cultural memory by emphasizing the active construction of these memories from the raw material of history.

By combining the results of in-depth interviews, a survey, and participant observation this study argues that scholars have underestimated the participants and the hobby’s role in American culture. A surface-level reading of the hobby, that its
participants are little more than “rednecks” and “hillbillies,” is incorrect and ignores the value the hobby creates by enacting American heritage for an audience. By making social memory a physical experience, re-enactors keep the past alive and ensure that a specific narrative of the past, one that favors military history over the era’s social history, continues to circulate among the many narratives of the past in American life.

Keywords: re-enacting, Civil War, social memory, national identity, heritage
This project would not have happened without the support, enthusiasm, and constructive criticism of many people. First and foremost I need to thank my advisor, Dr. Michael Coventry, who took a chance on a student he had not worked with in the past, made time for me over the summer, and let me wander through Virginia fields (on a deadline).

The re-enacting community as a whole helped enormously with this project. Skip Koontz, Robert Lee Hodge, Jim Campi, the staff of the Camp Chase Gazette, everyone at the CMF/14th TN’s winter encampment, the Civilians of Gettysburg, and representatives of the National Park Service generously shared their time, knowledge, and good humor with me. There are literally hundreds of people who took my survey, offered commentary on Internet forums, and generally cheered me on who I cannot name here but who nevertheless made invaluable contributions to this study.

Mom and Dad: thanks for everything. Next one is on me, I promise.

Finally, Jonathan Murphy. The best parts of this thesis were written in our kitchen over IPA and homemade curry. Thank you for keeping me fed, knowing when I needed to be distracted, and following me into Pennsylvania farmland (with only a few raised eyebrows and just a couple of sighs).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction and Review of Literature ................................................................................. 1
  A Pocket History of Re-enacting ....................................................................................... 3
  Re-enactments Today: A Brief Overview ........................................................................ 9
Heritage: Between History and Memory ............................................................................. 12
  History: A Foundation .................................................................................................. 13
  Heritage: The Enactment of History ............................................................................. 15
  Collective Memory: The Uses of History ...................................................................... 21
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 24
Reflections on Participant Observation .............................................................................. 24
Study Overview ................................................................................................................... 26

Chapter 1. Leaping Through the Medium: Reading the Re-Enactment Space ................. 30
  Transformation and Simulation on the Field ................................................................. 32
  Getting To The Past: Where Does History Begin? ....................................................... 41
    Logistics: Crowd Control and Impression Management .......................................... 43
  Mingling with the Past: Sutlers’ Row .......................................................................... 47
  Participation: Learning and Teaching .......................................................................... 51
    Living History Areas: Welcoming the Public into the Past .................................... 52
    Camps: Entering History, Hiding From Today ......................................................... 56
Battles: The Main Event, An Imaginative Moment .......................................................... 57
  No Battle, Just Drill: The Private Re-enactment’s Central Event ............................. 62
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 64

Chapter 2. Re-Enactors: Demographics and Motivation ..................................................... 65
  Surveying Re-enactors: A Community Snapshot .......................................................... 66
    Subject Recruitment and Survey Administration ...................................................... 67
    Suspicion in the Re-enacting Community ................................................................. 69
    Terminology ............................................................................................................... 70
Who Are Re-enactors? ....................................................................................................... 71
What Do Re-enactors Think About their Hobby? ............................................................... 80
    Emphasizing Detail .................................................................................................. 81
    Searching for the Truth ............................................................................................. 85
Slavery’s Presence in the Re-enacting Community .................. 92
Brothers in Arms .................................................................. 95
Dissension in the Community ............................................. 100
Conclusion ............................................................................. 102

Chapter 3. Playing the Clown: Re-Enactors in the Media ............ 104

Common Themes in Coverage ................................................. 107
Re-enactors Are (Not) Hillbillies ............................................ 108
Re-enactors Are (Not) Racists ............................................... 117
Re-enactors Can (Not) Explain 21st Century Life ....................... 125

Media By and For Re-Enactors ............................................. 128
Conclusion ............................................................................. 132

Conclusion ............................................................................. 135
Figures .................................................................................. 138
References ............................................................................ 147
List of Interviews .................................................................... 152
Introduction and Review of Literature

Debates about how Americans relate to history, indeed if Americans even possess a “sense of history,” regularly emerge in academic studies and pop cultural critiques. These arguments emphasize an agenda, whether it is educational or political, and focus on improving official organizations like schools, museums, or national parks. Scholars rarely examine groups of amateur historians working to preserve history or a particular interpretation of historical events. These “history buffs” are not considered historians despite the work they do to preserve the past. Civil War re-enactors, men and women who dress in 1860s-era clothing and learn military and domestic skills from the war period, seek to make the past physically present in their own lives and, at least temporarily, in the lives of their audiences. The accumulation of objects, mostly simulated artifacts, is central to how re-enactors internalize history. Their impression, the historical personality or role they inhabit during an event, is the manifestation of this internalization. By obsessing over objects, manners, and historical detail re-enactors turn abstract historical concepts into lived experience. Re-enactors and the more “hard-core” living historians, often referred to as “campaigners,” live without any 21st century comforts in order to more fully commune with the past, disseminate a popular interpretation of the Civil War, and create new historical events. The re-enactor as a character occupies a place in the American imagination as a reactionary or “a hillbilly.” While academics may not celebrate
the hobby and popular culture ridicules it, Civil War re-enacting plays a crucial role in the perpetuation of the Civil War’s legacy and the experience of American heritage.

Many participants are aware of critical histories of the war, which they pejoratively describe as “revisionist,” but simply do not care. These critical histories are not useful for the practice of re-enacting. Their interpretation of the past tends to fall into the more conservative and antiquarian mode of historical scholarship. These men and women do not think that they can change the past or that history’s meaning changes over time. Re-enactors believe that their pastime will help change how Americans think about history and specifically the Civil War’s role in society today. Hobbyists feel motivated to tell the public about this moment in the American past because they feel that the dominant narrative of Civil War history, one that emphasizes slavery, does not tell the war’s “correct” or “true” history. The tension between re-enactors’ interpretation of the war and the mainstream narrative of the Civil War allows hobbyists to negotiate historical meaning. It is this negotiation between interpretations that motivates many re-enactors.

Although the war ended nearly 150 years ago, the Civil War and its issues linger in American life. The specter of slavery, debates about battlefield preservation, and emotional arguments about the relative heroism of Robert E. Lee indicate that the war’s legacy remains unresolved. As one Civil War enthusiast observed, the Civil War is distant enough that the danger of personally offending someone or doing a disservice to their real
memories is perceived to be significantly lower.¹ This distance helps individuals find personal meaning in the history and activity without becoming beholden to the actual, authentic memory of someone who was there. Noting that the Civil War is a uniquely American war, historian Frank Vandiver told U.S. News & World Report that, “[Americans] are a warlike people. Americans have fought in something like 200 wars, counting the Indian wars. The Civil War is a war we can dwell on and nobody gets hurt.”² Feelings remain strong, especially in the South and for many African Americans, but as an internal conflict the war provides an excellent lens through which to define America and one’s own sense of an American identity. Re-enacting this war allows individuals to interrogate the dominant narratives of American identity (including the relatively taboo topics of gender and race), patriotism, and what qualifies as history without upsetting uninvolved observers.

A Pocket History of Re-enacting

Commemoration of the Civil War began almost immediately following Lee’s surrender in 1865. Re-enacting’s origins are intimately bound to the history of veterans’ organizations and the commemorative tradition established just after the war. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) emerged as the central group organizing Union veterans

¹ Brett Keen, telephone interview by author, January 10, 2009.
politically and socially. Southern veterans formed their own local and regional organizations. Eventually The United Confederate Veterans (UCV) emerged as the largest blanket organization in the South though it never reached the same degree of political clout as the GAR. Both the UCV and GAR represented their members’ political interests and hosted annual encampments that functioned as reunions and public festivals.3 In the 1890s these large-scale encampments attracted upwards of 15,000 veterans and their families and brought together anyone who shared the GAR or UCV’s memory of the war.4 At early UCV gatherings civilians and family members often outnumbered veterans. Even in the period just after the war visitors formed a critical component of the event’s success. One veteran explained that, “the kindly intercourse between the people, neighbors and strangers alike… lends to these annual gatherings their greatest charms.”5 Though the purpose of the events was to commemorate the war and its effect on American society, many of the events possessed a festive atmosphere.

Today’s re-enactments share some of the tone and form of these early commemorative festivals. The interpretation of the war has changed little since the 1913 event, re-enactors still emphasize military valor over social shifts and race. The fifty-year reunion at Gettysburg in 1913 brought together 44,000 Northern veterans and 8,000

4 Gaines M. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy, 133.
5 Quoted in Ibid., 133.
former-Confederates to shake hands across the battlefield’s infamous stone wall, re-enact Pickett’s charge, and “generally [enjoy] each other’s company.” One ex-Confederate who participated in the reunion observed that, “each [side] conceded to the other the well-earned right to boast his prowess, each honored the loyalty and zeal and skill of the other, each acknowledged that the other had been a ‘foeman worthy of his steel.’” The fifty-year anniversary established the basic template for later re-enactments at which there is little discussion of the causes or morality of the war, just mutual acknowledgement of the brutality of the fight. At the 1913 reunion Virginia’s governor, William Hodges Mann, told the crowd: “We are not here to discuss the genesis of the war, but men who have tried each other in the storm and smoke of battle are here to discuss this great fight.” The “great fight” remembered in 1913 did not include the contributions of African American soldiers. In American Crucible historian Gary Gerstle explained that early 20th century American nationalism required the exclusion of African Americans and the unification of European American identities. Responding to the interpretation of the war presented at Gettysburg in 1913, civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois described the event as “lies agreed upon.” Similarly, today’s re-enactments encourage consideration of military tactics

---

6 Quoted in Ibid., 194.
7 Quoted in David W. Blight, Race and Reunion, 9.
and personal sacrifice over contemplation of race relations or regional identity. Historian David Blight emphasizes that, “for most observers [at the 1913 reunion], the veterans were men out of another time, icons that stimulated a sense of pride, history, and amusement all at once.”\textsuperscript{10} This combination of positive feelings occurs because the reunion, and today’s re-enactments, present an edited and sanitized version of the past.

The 1913 reunion established a tradition of Civil War commemoration that favors the experiences of white men over former slaves and African Americans. Although the Emancipation Proclamation shares the same anniversary year as Gettysburg, in 1913 President Wilson did not mention slavery or African Americans. In fact, only “a handful” of black veterans attended the celebration.\textsuperscript{11} Today’s re-enactments, like their historical counterparts, remain overwhelmingly white affairs. While re-enactors frequently justify this racial homogeneity by suggesting that blacks do not express interest in the hobby, this lack of interest may stem from an historical tradition that pushed the African American experience of the war out of official and semi-official memory. Expanding on the work of literature scholar Homi Bhabha, historian Cecilia O’Leary suggested that in order for the Gettysburg anniversary to represent national unity the organizers needed to “forget” the role of African Americans in the war.\textsuperscript{12} In his seminal work \textit{Imagined Communities}, Benedict Anderson argued that forgetting certain aspects of history is a critical part of the reshaping

\textsuperscript{10} David W. Blight, \textit{Race and Reunion}, 8.
\textsuperscript{11} Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, \textit{To Die For}, 203-4.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 195.
a culture’s imagined past.\textsuperscript{13} Although Anderson emphasizes the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century construction of black and white men as Americans, the dominant narrative of the Civil War concerned the actions of white men. Today, African Americans participate in the hobby but they make up a small minority and underscore the hobby’s racial uniformity. Contemporary re-enactments, like the 1913 reunion at Gettysburg, display white national unity and suggest that the legacy of the Civil War belongs to white Americans.

The origin of the first Civil War re-enactment without the direct involvement of Civil War veterans remains unclear. Around 1910, as veterans began to die or relinquish their role in planning events, the UCV turned to the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy to take control of commemoration activities. Likewise, the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) inherited the legacy of the GAR in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{14} Neither group, according to historian Gaines M. Foster, managed to achieve the same success at perpetuating the UCV’s or GAR’s interpretation of the war as had the veterans.\textsuperscript{15} By the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg the war’s legacy had become the property of professional historians and the federal government. At the same time a number of antique firearms groups formed to preserve the weapons of an earlier era.

Folklorist Jay Anderson identifies the origins of the first re-enacting community as a 1949  

\textsuperscript{15} Gaines M. Foster, \textit{Ghosts of the Confederacy}, 7.
meeting of the Berwyn Rod Gun Club in eastern Maryland. The club met to celebrate antique weapons and military history. Some members of the group wanted to emphasize military history while the others wanted to keep the group focused solely on weaponry. As a result, the group split and in 1950 the North-South Skirmish Association (N-SSA) was founded in order to, “commemorate the heroism of the men, of both sides, who fought in the American Civil War, 1861-1865.” These early antique-weapon enthusiasts did not necessarily wear period attire and over the course of several years the groups self-organized, not always amicably, by motivation and interest. In the decade between the founding of the N-SSA and the Civil War centennial the hobby gained enough of a following to be included in official plans for the 100th anniversary celebrations.

The hobby’s origins in gun club culture continue to influence the activity. Several re-enactors interviewed for this study complained about participants who come to events just to “blow off [black] powder.” In the 1960s several observers, including the National Park Service and Civil War Centennial Commission, felt that the emphasis on guns and fun negated the events’ educational benefits. It took the community a number of years to recover from the negative impression established by its involvement in the Civil War

18 Harry "Skip" Eugene Koontz, interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28, 2009 and Robert Lee Hodge, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2009.
centennial. Although the groups who participated in these “sham” battles, what re-enactments were termed in the 1960s, took the history seriously, the Civil War Centennial Commission’s general impression of the events was that they were both insufficiently solemn and historically inaccurate. As a result of their less than enthusiastic reception in the 1960s many re-enactment groups increasingly emphasized accuracy. Folklorist John Cash believes that the re-enacting community that exists today is a direct result of the perceived failure of the Centennial’s re-enactments.19 Today’s Civil War enthusiasts now place an incredibly high value on the authentic, appropriate, and accurate representation of the past.

Re-enactments Today: A Brief Overview

Unlike the “sham” battles of the 1960s, today’s re-enactments place a high value on entertainment, historical authenticity, and the respectful commemoration of the Civil War dead.20 Although these events are sometimes called “farb fests”—the term “farb” has unclear origins but is used as shorthand for “far be it from authentic” and is considered an insult—these events are often the general public’s only interaction with the hobby. The re-enacted battles occur on a large, open field that may or may not resemble the terrain of the actual, historic battlefields. Spectators typically sit in lawn chairs or

19 John Cash, “Borrowed Time: Reenacting the American Civil War in Indiana” (doctoral diss., Indiana University, 2003), 48.
20 See chapter one for a detailed reading of contemporary re-enactment spaces.
stand. At Cedar Creek, a smaller re-enactment outside Winchester, Virginia, spectators could stand quite close to the action whereas at Gettysburg the audience remained at a substantial distance from infantry and cavalry positions. This distance can be a good thing; on the second day of the 2008 Gettysburg re-enactment a horse, spooked during battle, ran at full speed towards the audience but was intercepted by two mounted safety officers just before it reached the crowd. In order to help the crowd understand what they are seeing, a narrator, typically battlefield guides certified by the National Park Service, describes the action and attempts to map it onto the action on the field. The presence of a narrator emphasizes the re-enactment as a space for learning not just entertainment.

Though many re-enactments attract crowds in the thousands not all events welcome the public. The 14th Tennessee’s members agreed to open their winter encampment to assist with this study. Their winter encampment at Fort Snyder, outside Greencastle, Pennsylvania, serves as an example of these closed events where male re-enactors meet privately to drill, socialize, and talk history. Private events are distinctly less structured than public events and sometimes demonstrate a more fluid relationship with the past. Some groups host encampments where they stay in their “impression,” the historical personality and traits taken on by a re-enactor, all weekend. At other events, participants practice drill and live in period-correct shelters but hold distinctly 21st century conversations and do not make an attempt to enter the mindset of a Civil War soldier.
This type of event serves as a critical space for the emergence of a vernacular historical narrative. Without the pressure of spectator expectations these closed events encourage members of a re-enacting group to form personal bonds and try out new interpretations of history.

In addition to battles the community organizes a variety of living history events that do not emphasize the military aspects of the hobby. Balls or dances, which may occur as part of a re-enactment’s official schedule or as independent events, are a popular way to raise money for historic preservation or scholarship funds. Some groups work closely with museums and schools to sponsor living history days. Parades, either at Civil War festivals or for contemporary celebrations also form a prominent part of re-enacting culture. During Remembrance Day at Gettysburg, which commemorates Lincoln’s visit and the Gettysburg Address, many individuals come dressed in period clothing to participate in the parade. Some groups also participate in private commemoration ceremonies, leaving wreaths at the monuments to their historical counterparts. Despite these alternative activities the community’s emphasis remains on the war’s military history.

Re-enactors’ near total focus on military history establishes clear boundaries about what kind of historical knowledge will be included in a given event. By extension, the event presents a specific interpretation of the war that draws on a set of sources that ignore aspects of the war. Nonetheless, the re-enactment achieves authenticity by
emphasizing only those elements of the past related to the military in a detail-oriented way.

**Heritage: Between History and Memory**

Re-enacting requires extensive knowledge of the war’s history and material culture. Participants’ motivation varies but often includes a desire to keep American history relevant today. To understand the hobby’s relationship to American culture requires examining re-enacting through three related fields of inquiry. History provides the context for re-enactments and, more importantly, the raw material for the creation of heritage and cultural memory. Heritage studies, which include museum studies as well as anthropological studies, clarify how the debris of history turns into cultural memory. Cultural memory studies, a subset of national identity studies, underscore the importance of shared narratives of the past in contemporary life. The relationship between history, heritage, and social memory is not linear (fig. 1). Although history, as re-enactors conceive of it, does not change, social memories and heritage practices mutually influence each other.

Though separate subjects in the academy, history, social memory, and heritage as phenomena are intimately bound in practice. Institutions like schools and museums separate these three elements of historical experience for the sake of clarity. Neither history, heritage, nor social memory alone can produce a rich narrative of the Civil War.
Today’s re-enactors are responding to what they perceive to be a poor social memory of the war in American culture. By recovering the material objects and practices of the 19th century hobbyists reconnect abstract notions of the war with tangible referents. In order to make this connection personal, re-enactors tell each other stories about the past. When these stories become embodied in behavior, whether it is sewing clothing or rolling ammunition, the social memory of the war becomes part of heritage.

**History: A Foundation**

History forms the foundation for social memory and in turn heritage (fig. 1). In order to understand the social memories enacted by Civil War enthusiasts, it is critical to understand how history as a discipline informs re-enactors’ practice. For many years Civil War history focused intensely on military tactics to the exclusion of studies of memory, race, or nationalism. Social history in the 1960s and 70s, and cultural histories in the 1980s, turned toward an exploration of how past generations made sense of the war. Historian Ian Tyrrell argued that the impact of postmodernism and cultural studies in the 1980s blurred the boundaries between history and literary studies. This shift encouraged thinking about history not just as a collection of facts but as the foundation for a variety of social meanings in the present. Drawing on historical and communications theories, American Studies scholar Marita Sturken emphasized that history cannot be considered a

---

monolithic discipline. “History can be thought of as a narrative that has in some way been sanctioned or valorized by institutional frameworks of publishing enterprises,” she argued. Although histories are constantly in flux and change with each generation of scholars, Sturken maintained that some events are said to have a single history which may be composed of “conflicting narratives, but there are particular elements within those stories that remain uncontested.” Those steady elements, the details of the past, form the central use of history by the re-enacting community. Re-enactors believe that the experience of the past, and a deeper understanding of history, requires a personal engagement with the objects, military tactics, and life style of the Civil War era.

The ceremonies and events re-enactors participate in make history accessible to a wide audience. However, given their dual role as education and entertainment, re-enactments tend to be thought of as neither a serious presentation of history nor a legitimate commemoration. This refusal to view re-enactments as a valid method of engaging with the past reflects the historian’s tendency to favor those who “make history” as opposed to those who simply “talk about history.” The Spanish philosopher and historian Jose Carlos Bermejo Barrera argued that, “Making history can mean to ‘star’ (individually or collectively) in historical events… making history is also a synonym for

---

23 Ibid., 5.
writing and publishing works of historiography.” While many Civil War re-enactors are deeply informed on the details of a battle, clothing, or historical customs, they do not produce anything that resembles typical historical work. Barrera emphasized that, “talking about history would therefore be to converse about such written works without making them (either because of a lack of intention or capacity).” Academic and lay observers often assume that re-enactors are incapable of contributing new historical knowledge bound as they are to the quotidian details of the past. For the re-enactor history emerges from the accumulation of details and objects, not by producing an alternative interpretation of those objects. This emphasis on the details at the expense of a critical interpretation of the war often leads the professional historian to view the re-enactor only as a collector.

Heritage: The Enactment of History

The re-enactor’s connection to history in daily life ought to be considered as the expression of heritage. Performance scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defined heritage as, “the transvaluation of the obsolete… [and] the dead... Heritage is created through a process of exhibition (as knowledge, as performance, as museum display).” The ability to recoup the practices of ancestors and use them in contemporary life

25 Ibid.
provides individuals, and particularly Americans, with a sense of stability and continuity in increasingly uncertain times. Historian J.R. Poole described Europeans as profoundly aware of the “total, crumbled, irrecoverability [sic] of the past, of its differentness [sic], of that fact that it is dead.” Americans, in contrast, feel as though their history and ancestors remain “to a peculiar degree the property of their heirs and successors.”

Mastering antiquated military practices, cooking over open fires, or hand rolling ammunition has no apparent value today. However, it is through the skill’s maintenance and the public display of the outmoded that the past becomes a part of American heritage. Central to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s conception of heritage is its ability to produce value in the present while drawing from the past. She wrote that successful attempts at creating heritage “ensure that places and practices in danger of disappearing because they are no longer… valued will survive. It does this by adding the value of pastness [sic], exhibition, difference, and where possible indigeneity [sic].”

Realism, obtained by fidelity to these Civil War practices, blends attention to the minutiae of 19th century life with a profound respect for American values. Re-enactors do not rewrite history, but they do add value to history and ensure that it remains in social memory as a positive, useful anecdote to 20th and 21st century culture.

---

27 J.R. Poole, Paths to the American Past (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 251.
28 Ibid., 263.
A felt connection to history, experienced through tangible objects, sights, and smells, binds contemporary re-enactors to a particular vision of the past. Scholars who take Civil War re-enactors seriously typically work in the fields of museum studies and/or heritage studies. Drawing on folklorist Jay Anderson’s work, museum specialist and living history interpreter Stacy Roth argued that role-play and interpersonal relationships can be an effective way to teach history to students and adults alike.\textsuperscript{30} Storytelling humanizes distant events and encourages the audience or visitor to engage with the material on a more personal, emotional level. Implicit in accounts of first-person interpretation is the notion that “living history,” a professional practice in a museum setting, is more respectable than the amateur re-enactor.\textsuperscript{31} However, re-enacting is distinct from the “living history” created by paid performers in a museum. The re-enactor’s status as amateur teacher, performer, and archivist/historian positions him between institutionalized history (i.e. museums) and the cultural memories that exist in the zeitgeist. These memories or interpretations typically emerge from representations of the Civil War in films or novels rather than from active engagement with the past. A re-enactment’s participants, not the institution hosting the event, control the presentation of history.


\textsuperscript{31} Colonial Williamsburg is the most frequently referenced living history site. See Stacy Roth, \textit{Past Into Present}.  

17
Despite the academic distinction between re-enacting and working as a living historian, in practice these terms are quite fluid. Some re-enactors self-identify as living historians and take offense to the term re-enactor. These groups often reach out to local communities, schools, or visitors at re-enactments and participate in programs at national parks. A still smaller group of hobbyists never actually go onto the battlefield but prefer to stay in camp talking to spectators. This group feels that re-enacting camp life is a more authentic experience than the battle, which depends on blank ammunition and theatrics. Some hobbyists have little interest in speaking to a public they perceive to be uninformed. These re-enactors form a small but vocal portion of the community and identify themselves as “campaigners,” a synonym for living historians. Despite adopting the term “living historian” these men and women do not practice the kind of interpretation that Roth and Anderson define as living history. These men shun events like Gettysburg in favor of smaller gatherings that do not include the public. For these hobbyists, interaction with the public is only tolerated at larger events like the annual Gettysburg re-enactment. Even comparatively casual re-enacting groups hold weekend trips or host encampments without inviting the public. Living historians and re-enactors, though they participate in different kinds of activities, share the desire to commune with history.

32 For the sake of simplicity this thesis will use the term re-enactor as a blanket term that includes amateurs who self-identify as living historians as well as those individuals who use the term re-enactor. When it is critical to make a distinction between “hard-core”/campaigners and re-enactors that will be done in text. Otherwise the term re-enactor will be used to incorporate the spectrum of practices.
Battlefields, a place away from the daily life of most re-encactors, constitute a heritage space in which the past regains value simply by its continued existence in the present. Land offers the visitor an easy way to feel connected to the past and provides the re-enactor’s activities with a high degree of accuracy. Perhaps the most well known work on re-encactors’ relationship to American memory is journalist and former travel writer Tony Horwitz’s *Confederates in the Attic*. Central to Horwitz’s book are his accounts of weekends spent with hard-core re-actor Robert Lee Hodge, now owner of a production company and active in battlefield preservation. Using Hodge as a reference point, Horwitz interpreted his impressions of the former-Confederacy and places steeped in Civil War history (and often places that seem to lack a present). The book frequently touches on the idea that the Civil War helps individuals feel connected to America; Horwitz mentions his own immigrant grandfather’s interest in the period as a way of entering debates about Americanization and the war’s continued appeal. As America’s war it lends itself to the creation of heritage because it provides an “indigenous” American past that forms the foundation for American’s contemporary sense of self.

Visiting a Civil War re-enactment sometimes feels surreal. Seeing a Civil War general take a cell phone out of his pocket signals that the event is a representation of an imagined past reconstructed in the 21st century. The sense that a re-enactment is strange, however, may help the spectator and the re-enactor focus on the relationship between the 19th and 21st centuries. Communications scholar Michael Bowman emphasized that,
“tourism presents us with innumerable opportunities to estrange ourselves from our habitual perceptions, interactions, and understandings of the world.”³³ A re-enactment on an actual battlefield relies on the continuity between past and present to make up for its false representation of war. At re-enactments, when participants display their weapons or give talks about what Union soldiers carried in their packs and the audience touches the objects, academic history learned in classrooms is augmented by the history of felt experience.

Heritage events like re-enactments transform the dry and abstract facts of history into part of the spectator and participant’s sensory experience. It is through these displays and performances of heritage that individuals make history relevant in their daily life. Critics charge that this emphasis on the emotional encounter actually “dehistoricizes” events and creates “heritage spaces” that lie in opposition to both history and real life.³⁴ Furthermore, the creation of heritage depends on emphasizing the appearance of history, not the mental life of previous generations. A visitor can imagine herself in the tableau presented at a living history museum and believe that she understands 19th century life even though the social interactions that governed daily life are completely absent from these spaces. These shortcomings do not detract from the powerful effect that first-

---

person storytelling can have on a visitor. Instead of remembering objects in isolation, spectators at Civil War re-enactments remember how and why those objects were used.

**Collective Memory: The Uses of History**

Collective memories emerge from the complex interaction between the past as it is articulated by institutions (schools, museums, etc.) and the past as it is experienced in daily life, what I term heritage. Collective memory, defined by American Studies scholar Marita Sturken as, “memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning,” involves negotiating the meaning of historical facts and how those facts have been used by a culture in the present.\(^35\) The phenomenon differs from history in that history may be composed of a variety of conflicting narratives built on the same, relatively unchanging, factual evidence. To bridge the gap between history and memory historian Edward Baptist suggested the term “vernacular history,” which he defines as “a narrative about the past constructed by laypeople in their everyday tongue.”\(^36\) Unlike history, tied to verifiable truths or specific locations, vernacular history accounts for a community’s narratives about the past that meet a communal need.

\(^35\) Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 3.

Social memories require the narratives produced by historians but often turn them into a specific narrative infused with the cultural and personal values of a generation or region. According to Sturken, cultural memories are produced through “objects, images and representations… through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.” Quoting Andreas Huyssen she emphasized that the space between history as experience and history as representation should not be criticized for its inability to create a verifiable experience of the past. Rather, this tension provides the raw materials for a critical engagement with the past. Civil War re-enactors are deeply motivated by desire for authenticity in clothing, weapons, and kit or camp ware. Accuracy means that they are not simply presenting a version of the past but can ensure that the objects are as similar as possible to a 19th century item. Re-enacting ties the representation of the past to the historical record, preventing it from venturing into the realm of pure fantasy.

The shifting and reshaping of the Civil War’s events began almost immediately after the war. To cope with defeat the South turned the remnants of Southern life into an imagined tradition that felt much older than the South itself. Historian David Goldfield observed that the “reinterpretation of the Old South and the fabrication of the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction… served as the building blocks of a new ‘national’ heritage.” Faith in this narrative of the past became all-consuming; dissent threatened

---

38 The Society for Creative Anachronism is an example of history serving as a context for an essentially fictional recreation of the middle ages.
more than just the memory of the past, it threatened to disrupt the social order. Goldfield summed up the experience of post-war Southern coping with the command to “commemorate, celebrate, orate, but do not think.” 39 Traditional and etiquette created a false memory of the antebellum South in which civility and harmony appeared to characterize society. This narrative of the past proved useful as a coping mechanism but simmering below the surface racism, sexism, and regional tensions threatened to burst through. 40 Events like reunions, and now re-enactments, provide a controlled space for the re-imagining of the past into a time before reconstruction and the politics of Jim Crow, a time when the war “hadn’t even begun yet.” 41 Civil War re-enactments celebrate the moments before defeat and abstract death to a mere idea. In this way they isolate memory from the war’s complex, often uncomfortable history, choosing instead to celebrate loyalty, honor, and military duty.

The American Civil War continues to provide fertile ground for the growth of cultural memories. Well into the 20th century the war served as a backdrop for novels, as a point of reference in political debates, and as a lens through which Americans could understand themselves and their nation. These references combined to create an image of the war that provided Americans with a sense of meaning.

39 David Goldfield, Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 34.
40 Ibid.
41 For a literary exploration of the Southern experience see William Faulkner’s Intruder in the Dust.
Conclusion

The re-enacting community is substantially more complex than previous scholars have accounted for. By mastering 19th century skills these individuals add value to the past and keep American heritage in circulation. Their community encourages the creation of vernacular history by mingling academic history with the emotional and personal needs of the individual participant. In so doing the hobby favors some narratives over others and creates a history that is not complete even though it is thorough in detail. A careful consideration of the Civil War re-enacting community will illuminate the symbiotic relationship between history, cultural memory, and heritage.

Reflections on Participant Observation

My gender, liberal political stance, and comparatively urban background socially separated me from the majority of the re-enacting community. Like anthropologist Wendy Erisman, I believe that “objectivity does not necessarily come with social distance. On the other hand, social closeness, the role of the insider, has its own problems.”42 Anthropologists and psychologists have, for a number of years, debated the relationship between subject and researcher. Drawing heavily on the work of anthropologists writing in the 1980s and 1990s, Erisman emphasized that a researcher’s gender, class, race, sexual

orientation, and even the concept of the “field” as a place of research will influence a researcher’s conclusions.\textsuperscript{43} I approached the re-enacting community as an outsider essentially unaware of the community’s inner-workings. As a young, white, woman, who can “turn on” her Texas accent, most re-enactors I spoke to did not treat me with the same suspicion they reported feeling about interviews with documentarians or journalists. Gender did, however, play a role in my quick acceptance into the community.

A common aspect of the re-enacting philosophy, emphasized in interviews with men and women, is the desire to treat women with respect, though “respect” may not conform to liberal 21\textsuperscript{st} century standards. Even re-enactors who commented on my appearance tended to look me in the eye, offer complimentary assessments, and did not push too far beyond the initial comment. Cultural Anthropologist Cathy Stanton emphasized in her work on the 54\textsuperscript{th} Massachusetts, an African American regiment, that the re-enacting community is deeply committed to preserving the re-enactment as a masculine space. She quotes a columnist for the \textit{Camp Chase Gazette}, a monthly re-enacting magazine, who wrote that, “when women are present the differences are subtle but there nonetheless… It puts a finger smear onto our window into the past.”\textsuperscript{44} During my visit to Fort Snyder with the 14\textsuperscript{th} Tennessee only one man openly remarked negatively

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{43} For a longer discussion of the relationship between researcher and subject see Wendy Elizabeth Erisman, “Forward Into the Past,” 26-31.  
\textsuperscript{44} Quoted in Cathy Stanton, and Stephen Belyea, "Their Time Will Yet Come," 269.
\end{flushright}
about my presence in camp. However, a number of jokes just after my arrival signaled that allowing a woman to join their weekend was not normal.

After a morning in camp the group encouraged me to dress in 19th century clothing and join them for drill. Despite my shift from observer to participant, I remained an outsider unassimilated into the unit’s culture. The men near me in the line, however, expressed nothing but support while I attempted to learn the military drill and more than once physically turned me in the right direction or offered encouragement. My role as a visiting researcher, as opposed to a woman trying to join the group, allowed me to gain entry quicker than had I simply expressed a willingness to join their unit. Entrance into the group also depended on the social cache that came with the title “researcher.” However, like Erisman, I never joined the community that these groups work so hard to create for themselves.45 The majority of the re-enactors in my peer group, mid-20s, did not invite me to join conversations or into their living quarters.

Study Overview

In order to understand the re-enacting community this project includes an extended ethnographic study as well as an examination of the process by which re-enactors turn history turns into social memory and heritage. Two large, public re-enactments, Gettysburg and Cedar Creek, and a private encampment hosted by a

45 Wendy Elizabeth Erisman, "Forward Into the Past," 34.
Confederate group form the core observational data. Each of these events occurred in the mid-Atlantic region, the private event and Gettysburg in Pennsylvania and Cedar Creek in Virginia. In order to correct for regional bias survey results were used to obtain information from individuals based throughout the United States. Participant observation, surveys, and a media content analysis each provide a distinct way to understand what makes a re-enactment successful or motivates a re-enactor. The survey, which included several free-response questions, allowed the re-enacting community to speak for itself. My observations of the community at a variety of different events in the mid-Atlantic region compliment the survey results to produce insights that account for the insider/outsider problem inherent to participant observation. Finally, a media content analysis identified the re-enactor’s position in American culture. These methods combined to form a study of the re-enacting community that responds to its self-image as well as its behavior.

Chapter one provides a critical reading of two public re-enactments, the 145th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in July 2008 and the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek in October 2008. These public re-enactments are contrasted to the private encampment sponsored by the 14th Tennessee for members of the Confederate Military Forces (CMF) in February 2009. The spatial organization of contemporary re-enactments, which progress from a 21st century boundary inward to the battlefield’s authentic core,
structures spectators’ and re-enactor’s encounters with the past by clearly demarcating spaces for the past and the present.

Chapter two reports the findings of a survey of re-enactors. These findings correct common misperceptions of the re-enacting community. Little demographic data has been systematically collected about the re-enacting community; most popular authors and scholars tend to default to estimates based on their observation of a few units. When re-enactors speak for themselves they explain motivations that defy stereotypes of the hobby. Acknowledging that re-enactors are more complex than their popular stereotype as hillbillies or rednecks is the first step in understanding the hobby’s relationship to American culture.

Chapter three turns to a discussion of the media. The mainstream media often use re-enactors as clowns and comic relief by exaggerating traits that play on American cultural anxieties. Three common themes unify the coverage produced by popular and mainstream media: that re-enactors are hillbillies, racists, and that the hobby (or war) can illuminate 21st century problems. Hobbyists consistently reference two television productions, South Park’s “The Red Badge of Gayness,” and a History Channel documentary, The Unfinished Civil War, as example’s of how Americans think of the activity. These programs trade on common stereotypes and assumptions without addressing the hobby’s role in creating and protecting cultural memories. In contrast to
popular media, niche media produced by and for the re-enacting community tend to ignore the war’s position in today’s culture.

Finally, the conclusion addresses re-enacting's propensity to affirm an already dominant culture and the changes that may accompany a shift in the hobby’s demographics. This portion of the project summarizes the value that re-enacting adds to American history and argues for its inclusion as a legitimate producer of heritage.

American heritage exists in a state of constant flux. Although re-enactors wish to stabilize the interpretation of the 19th century as a time of honor, military experience, and personal sacrifice, the past is never this clear. The American fascination with the war and the difficulty with its aftermath adds an emotional charge to re-enactments. Racial, gender, and class tensions play out in the community as well as between spectators and re-enactors. As an outsider, my work may not be uniformly popular in the re-enacting community. My goal in this project was neither to expose the re-enacting community nor to unwaveringly celebrate it but rather to bring attention to a complex and distinctly American method of commemoration.
Chapter 1. Leaping Through the Medium: Reading the Re-Enactment Space

Each year thousands of individuals and families travel to a small farm outside of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for a Fourth of July celebration. During the event, re-enactors and spectators work together to perpetuate a version of the American past steeped in heroism, honor, and duty. Participants take great care to represent the historical battle in a manner that pays honor to the dead while still allowing the spectators to celebrate in an informal setting. Unlike commemorative events sponsored by official organizations—such as wreath-laying ceremonies at cemeteries—the atmosphere at a re-enactment is jovial and communal. Though positioned as an educational activity, the event’s focus on entertainment blunts any critical engagement with history or the processes that tie the past to contemporary life. Re-enactments depend on the active suspension of disbelief on the part of the spectator and participant. However, this mutual imagining of the space as a portal to the 19th century also makes any critical thought about the past more difficult. Although re-enactors hope that spectators consider the lasting impact of the war, in general re-enactments avoid negative aspects of history and structure the public’s interaction with the past to emphasize pleasure, education, and self-recognition.

Re-enactments consist of three distinct spheres: the didactic space of living history areas, a sidewalk or park on “Sutler’s row” and near the concession stands, and the battlefield. Bounded temporally, by a schedule of events, and spatially by entry gates and
off-limits portions of the camp, re-enactments construct the kind of space Jay Anderson calls a “time machine;” a place that promises to transcend the contemporary for fun and education. However, these events encourage a structured interaction with a specific interpretation of the past. The design of re-enactment events underscores the separation between spaces for re-enactor performance, typically the battlefield, and those spaces that encourage one-to-one dialogue between spectators and re-enactors. Public re-enactments, in which a battle serves as the centerpiece around which an entire historical setting emerges, function as a space for individuals to create their own narrative of American history. Archeologist Kevin Walsh believes that events such as re-enactments can serve as a remedy to the increased rationalization and institutionalization of history in post-industrial societies.\footnote{Kevin Walsh, \textit{The Representation of the Past}, 2.} Instead of hermetically sealing history in a glass display case, re-enactments encourage people to situate themselves within the past.

Within the boundaries of the event the past and present mix only in select locations. Living history areas, the period shops along “sutlers’ row,” and the modern food, beverage, and souvenir areas encourage those practicing an ‘impression’, wearing period dress and informed on their equipment, to mingle with spectators in particular and limited ways. The division between these spaces is visually clear to any re-enactor or spectator and keeps camp life and its more fluid relationship with the past from interfering with the spectators’ historical experience.
Unlike the professional and choreographed interactions that take place in living history museums, here the visitor is free to interact with whomever she chooses so long as she stays within the designated area. This involvement with history allows a re-enactment to feel like a natural encounter. Visitors leave with memories of live events that, ideally, inform their future thinking about the Civil War.

**Transformation and Simulation on the Field**

The desire to transcend book learning motivates many re-enactors who feel that they only way to fully understand the past is to try and re-live it. Land, as one of the few continuous links to the Civil War, connects the re-enactor and his historical counterpart in ways books, maps, journals, and lithographs never will. Participants sometimes describe their relationship to the land in spiritual terms. In his self-published account of re-enacting at Gettysburg, Tom Yori notes that, “for the moment I forget about the wrong size of the fields and anything else amiss; once again I feel freed of the limitations of paintings and lithographs… once again I leap through the medium. *This* is what men saw then: this dirt was like their dirt, this heat was their heat, this sun was their sun.”\(^2\) The period rush that Yori describes, sometimes called a “wargasm,” occurs when the re-enactors’ quest for accuracy allows him to believe, if only for a moment, that he knows the 1860s physically and intellectually.

---

\(^2\) Tom Yori, *Impressions of the Recent Re-Enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg as Related By a Participant and Member of the 11th Company of Unattached Others* (Brooks, ME: Self Published, 1988), 31.
Unlike material objects encased in a museum display or family heirlooms that remain private, land provides space for anyone to commune with the past. Jim Campi, the Policy and Communications Director at Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT), explained that battlefields provide the last, tangible, link to the past open to everyone. In order to preserve this link to history many re-enactors become deeply involved in preservation activities. After his brush with fame in *Confederates in the Attic*, Rob Hodge moved away from re-enacting to work in preservation. After encountering development and construction at the Wilderness Battlefield Park Hodge explained that, “I was in shock and too numb initially to be sad or upset at what I believed was a great wrong being done. Someone at sometime had somehow destroyed something I held so close to my heart; and it troubled my mind… It was on that day that I became a preservationist.” Campi emphasized that Hodge’s involvement continues to bring the preservation and re-enacting community closer together. Most famously, re-enactors, together with preservationists, the NPS, and other groups successfully stopped the Walt Disney Company from building near the Manassas battlefield. In the past official groups hesitated to include re-enactors in their preservation activities but increasingly understand the value that a re-enactor’s presence can add to a fundraising campaign. A re-enactor’s ability to make history more than an idea by embodying the past helps convince potential donors of the site’s value.

---

The need to be on the actual land and to walk where soldiers walked is central to the re-enacting community’s ethos. In best-selling *Confederates in the Attic* Rob Hodge and Tony Horwitz sneak into the Antietam National Battlefield Park, operated by the National Park Service, in order to sleep in the “Bloody Lane” ditch where several thousand Confederate soldiers died.\(^5\) Initially Horwitz expresses trepidation at breaking into a national park and sleeping where many men died tragic deaths. His companion, the hard-core re-enactor Hodge, explained that the re-enacting community is a better steward of the parks than the NPS, “we’re actually protecting the park. If I ever catch a vandal touching a monument or cannon, they’ll wish for a ranger to come save their ass from me.”\(^6\) When the two men arrive at the ditch they end up reading aloud from the memoir of a general who fought where they plan to sleep. Although Horwitz does not explicitly talk about the “on this spot” obsession of Hodge and his fellow re-enactors, the sense that being there will be enough to reach a complete understanding of the past echoes throughout the book. For many re-enactors physical presence at an historic place trumps traditional education because the experience is both personal and real.

Although re-enactors and living historians can set up an encampment anywhere, most re-enactors prefer to camp as close to the actual battle location as possible. However, camping on battlefield land is increasingly uncommon. As a result, for re-


\(^6\) Ibid.
enactors like the 14th Tennessee, being there can also take the form of feeling the 19th century, whether that means sleeping in the rain or “spooning,” cuddling, with fellow participants to stay warm on a cold night. Like Yori, who wishes to escape the limitations of books and photographs, many re-enactors emphasize that being there is often a state of mind.

The use of Civil War battlefields is subject to a variety of rules governing the park and vary from state to state and by location. Not all Civil War battlefields fall under the NPS’ stewardship, some battlefields are state parks, and some remain in private hands or in the care of non-profit organizations. The relationship between the National Park Service and the re-enacting community has not always been amicable. Until the 1980s the NPS discouraged collaboration between park rangers and the re-enacting or living history community. Although the NPS respects the goals of the re-enacting community, in general they do not encourage re-enactments. Echoing the criticisms leveled against re-enactments in the 1960s, Scott Hartwig, the supervisory historian at the Gettysburg National Military Park, explains that, “few people in the NPS think that re-enactments themselves are a good use of [the national park’s] land. The events do not fit with our mission to preserve the land and can become a little hokey.” Successfully honoring history is not viewed as compatible with entertainment.

7 Scott Hartwig, telephone interview by author, January 9, 2009.
8 Ibid.
The Civil War centennial celebrations in the 1960s established the roots of the NPS’ skepticism of the re-enacting community. These events were popular, the Commission’s report to congress estimated, perhaps optimistically, that over 100,000 spectators attended the July event.\(^9\) Despite their popularity, the Centennial Commission and political observers in the Department of the Interior considered these events “shams.” These early re-enactments tended to favor entertainment and excitement over a solemn commemoration of the nation’s bloodiest war. By the spring of 1962, citing complaints that they created a “carnival” atmosphere and did little to help the public understand the war, the Commission decided not to stage any more re-enactments.\(^10\) When told by Dr. Allan Nevins, an historian and member of the commission, that there would be no more “sham” battles, President Kennedy replied, “that’s a pity. I like sham battles.”\(^11\) The \textit{New York Times} reported that shortly after this conversation the Commission “quietly reversed” its position and allowed sham battles to continue for the duration of the Centennial.\(^12\)

In part because of the failure of the centennial’s “sham” battles, hobbyists began to emphasize accuracy and appropriateness in their impressions. Throughout the 1980s

---

\(^11\) Quoted in "Random Notes in Washington: President Wins a Sham Battle."
\(^12\) Ibid.
and mid 1990s the relationship between the Park Service and the living history community grew; by the mid-1990s the groups were allowed to begin firing black powder rifles.\textsuperscript{13}

Today the NPS includes select living history groups in their public programs. These groups, however, are carefully screened to ensure that they present a “larger message” about the war and historical era. Inclusion by the “official,” governmental stewards of Civil War battlefields remains a priority for the majority of re-enactment groups. Scott Hartwig explained that the NPS understands that a carefully screened group can connect with the public in ways that a park ranger or tour guide cannot.\textsuperscript{14} The Gettysburg National Military Park currently hosts approximately thirty living history events between April and October. Hartwig believes that re-enactors and living historians can provide as a sense of what clothing looked and felt like, what people ate, and other physical realities. However, Hartwig is reluctant to embrace the idea that re-enactors can produce something “authentic” because any representation of battle will be incomplete.\textsuperscript{15} Re-enactors simply cannot demonstrate what Civil War combat was like and thus have no place in many park programs.

Due to the uneasy relationship between the NPS and re-enactors many re-enactments do not occur on the actual battlefield. The annual re-enactment of the battle of Gettysburg, sponsored by a private organization, occurs just a few miles away from the

\textsuperscript{13} Scott Hartwig, telephone interview by author, January 9, 2009.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
historic battlefield. Because re-enactors do not have access to the land and historic
buildings in Gettysburg, like the seminary that gives its name to “Seminary Ridge” where
fierce fighting occurred on the first day of battle, they construct an agreed upon
geography that will faithfully, if not accurately, represent the battlefield. Included in this
imagined geography are built variations on the buildings, similar to stage sets, that are
moved on and off the field as needed throughout the day (fig. 2). These simulated
landmarks ensure that re-enactors participating in the battle know where they should be at
various times and also help the spectators imagine the layout of a distinctly different piece
of land. Over the course of an event the field fills several roles, becoming someplace else
in the time between battles. At several points in his self-published account of the 1988
Gettysburg re-enactment Yori emphasizes that the inexactness of the setting does not
matter, “the effect is stunning.”16 If the land can be made to look like the historical
battlefield nearby the re-enacting community tends to assume that connecting to the past
is still possible. The majority of re-enactors accept this artifice as part of the hobby.

For some re-enactors the inexactness of events like Gettysburg pushes the hobby
too far into the realm of theatre. In response to the “farby” atmosphere at the larger
Gettysburg re-enactment, some groups participate in a different event, “High Tide,”
sponsored by the Western Maryland Heritage Foundation (WMHF), the weekend before

16 Tom Yori, Impressions of the Recent Re-Enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg, 25.
the anniversary. Neither event takes place on the Gettysburg National Battlefield Park but several re-enactors who consider themselves living historians feel that the WMHF event is more appropriate and authentic. In 2008 the group planning “High Tide” and the Gettysburg Anniversary Committee, who plan the July 4th events, worked together to ensure that those re-enactors attending both events could do so easily and with less expense. However, in his article for *The Civil War News* Julio C. Zangroniz reported that only 200 or so individuals, a very small proportion of the nearly 15,000 who participated in the larger event, were expected to move from one event to the other. That two events exist to commemorate Gettysburg demonstrates that the community itself splits along lines of accuracy and appropriateness.

Unlike Gettysburg the battle re-enactment at Cedar Creek occurs on the same land as the historic battle. Even groups like the 14th Tennessee, who tend to avoid large “farb fests” enjoy the weekend at Cedar Creek. For them, the main draw is re-enacting on an actual Civil War battlefield. Throughout the weekend Cedar Creek’s organizers emphasized this aspect of the re-enactment to spectators and participants alike. During

---

18 Ibid.
19 Cedar Creek was designated a National Park in 2002 but the Cedar Creek Foundation’s website emphasizes that the Foundation will continue to exist and sponsor re-enactments on the “original fields.” See: Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation, “Welcome,” http://www.cedarcreekbattlefield.org/
the battle, the narrator used this information to heighten excitement and make the commemorative portions of the event more moving. At Cedar Creek re-enactors have access to several hundred acres on which the Civil War was fought and are therefore closer to the historical place with which they wish to commune. For re-enactors this land, unlike the private land used for the Gettysburg re-enactment, was sanctified with the blood of Civil War soldiers.

An event’s location on an historic piece of land, though valued, is not required for a successful re-enactment. Critical to the spread of re-enacting as a hobby is its loose tie to specific historical events. Although re-enactments frequently correlate to an historical battle or event, this is not a requirement. To justify these events, which may take the form of private encampments or a local parade, as historically appropriate, re-enactors often mention that the average soldier actually spent little time in battle and much more time marching or in camp waiting for orders. A number of international organizations also participate in re-enactments of the American Civil War. These groups are generally most active in western European countries and Australia.\textsuperscript{21} Although these re-enactments occur on European soil, international events are nonetheless about experiencing the daily life of an American Civil War soldier. When a re-enactment does not occur on historic land the enactment of the era’s material culture connects the event to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{21}For documentation of the international re-enacting community see \textit{Skirmish} magazine published by Dragoon Publishing since 2004 and based in the United Kingdom. The media coverage of re-enactors and media produced for the community will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.
Getting To The Past: Where Does History Begin?

Although public re-enactments tend to cluster between mid-spring and early autumn, smaller private events occur year round. At Fort Snyder, the winter encampment outside Greencastle, Pennsylvania, a group made up of members of the 1st Tennessee, 14th Tennessee, and 3rd Arkansas, all members of the Confederate Military Forces (CMF) battalion, meet each winter to practice drill and socialize.^{22} Although the group frequently participates in living history days at National Parks, the winter encampment is an important part of the group’s yearly schedule. Although there is no central battle to re-enact, the event allows the group’s members to enjoy camaraderie, catch up after a winter hiatus, and teach new members Civil War military skills. These smaller events do not constitute re-enactments per se as they are not tied to specific historical events, but are closer to a recreation of the era based on using the knowledge of today’s re-enactor to achieve a simulation of the 19th century camp.

Re-enactments occur across the United States but tend to cluster east of the Mississippi river. The annual re-enactment of Gettysburg remains by far the largest event, especially during anniversary years that end in a five or a zero. Estimates vary, but the July 2008 re-enactment of Gettysburg attracted roughly 15-20,000 re-enactors and nearly

^{22} For the sake of clarity, I will refer to this group as “Fort Snyder” or the 14th TN as my contact with the group, Skip Koontz, represented the 14th TN. That weekend the Companies represented included the 1st Tennessee, 14th Tennessee, and 3rd Arkansas. The Confederate Military Force (CMF) is the Battalion which is the parent unit for all these companies.
40,000 spectators. Gettysburg figures prominently in the American imagination, its outsize role in fictional and pop culture accounts of the war adds to the size of the crowd. The re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek in mid-October is significantly smaller both in terms of participation and in terms of popular knowledge of the battle.

Positioned in promotional materials as educational activities, re-enactments cannot escape their role as entertainment and are designed to include traditional aspects of a summer vacation: musical performances, dances, ice cream, shopping, and other pastimes. The spatial organization of Civil War re-enactments encourages visitors to think of themselves as tourists at leisure as well as in a “time-out-of-time,” or a space in which behavior gains additional meanings that it would not ordinarily have in daily life. The re-enactment space, bound spatially and temporally, allows visitors to confront the unusual, in this case antiquated methods of living or the imagined threat of war, without emotional discomfort. The spatial constraints that organize tourists’ experience into neat segments also allow re-enactors to navigate layers of the past and selectively interact with the public at large.

---

23 A newspaper article published just before the re-enactment suggested that at least 15,000 re-enactors would attend the event: see Erin James, “Battle of Gettysburg Re-Enactment May be Biggest Ever,” Arts and Entertainment (2008). Civil War blogs speculated it may have been even higher: see Samuel P. Wheeler, "Gettysburg: The Superbowl for Civil War Re-Enactors." However, during the event an announcer claimed that over 20,000 re-enactors had registered to participate. As of this writing the committee has not released an official count.
24 John Cash, “Borrowed Time.”
Logistics: Crowd Control and Impression Management

During a re-enactment participants live simply. However, the events themselves are large public festivals that require a tremendous amount of coordination and planning. Not only do the sponsoring organizations have to control crowds in the thousands, they need to accommodate their cars, the trailers of re-enactors, and the heavy equipment required to successfully run a large event (portable toilets, medical tents, police or other law enforcement presence, and other necessities). These crowd control and security measures take place at the boundary between the outside, 21st century place, and the place inside the re-enactment which is at once the 21st century and the 19th century. Inside the gates is a place of “non-time” when the past and present mingle freely to construct the illusion of “time travel.” Unlike public events, private encampments do not have such distinct boundaries but are nevertheless understood as distinct spaces. Participants park their cars beyond a tree line and the practices of camp life are consciously different than life back home. This sense that the re-enactment space is distinct pervades the language used by re-enactors to describe their attraction to the hobby and by scholars who discuss the role that tourism plays in the creation of historical knowledge.

Re-enacting itself is an expensive hobby, entry fees and tickets make up only a small portion of the overall cost. The 2009 fees to register as a re-enactor or “military dependent” (i.e. someone who will stay in camp but not fight in the re-enactments, usually
wives and children) range from $8-25. Cedar Creek’s fees are roughly the same: $15-25. Despite these nominal fees, the costs associated with participating in a re-enactment can be steep. After the major one-time expenses, like a uniform or weapon, there are ongoing costs associated with transporting heavy equipment, especially for members of artillery and cavalry groups. However, without these elements, which add to the entertainment value of a re-enactment, the event will not be as commercially successful. In response to the increasing cost of gas and travel, some re-enactments have begun to subsidize the cost for these groups. The organizers of the Cedar Creek re-enactment solicit local businesses and foundation members to sponsor the artillery units by emphasizing that the weapons themselves can cost as much as $30,000 and the powder for one re-enactment more than $200. 2008 artillery sponsors included area hotels, restaurants, and a funeral home. These sponsorships, advertised in the program, help connect the efforts of the preservation society to the economic life of the surrounding community. Given the large number of individuals who travel to participate in or observe a re-enactment, a sponsorship helps ties the re-enactment into the tourism culture of the region.

26 The Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation, “144th Anniversary: Reenactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek” program (October 2008).
Spectators pay slightly more than re-enactors do to participate in these events. At Gettysburg a three-day ticket that guaranteed grandstand seating cost $80.27 Living history events without a battle typically do not charge an admission or parking fee since the goal is to encourage a high rate of public attendance. Some re-enactments, like Cedar Creek, offer student discounts or let children in for a significantly reduced rate. A group of civilian re-enactors at Cedar Creek, part of the group Civilians of Gettysburg, emphasized that they want to reach the children so that they can encourage a love of history in them when they are young. Some children, they noted, clearly love it and they hope to encourage them to pursue more historical study. Public involvement is prized, especially if it creates new Civil War buffs who will participate in the hobby.

For spectators, entering the re-enactment is not the same as entering the past. Unlike the areas dedicated to re-enactor camps, the visitor does not experience a clear delineation between the 21st century world and the 19th century past. Although they passed through an entry gate and are “inside” the re-enactment, it is very likely that a visitor will continue to see fields full of cars, portable toilets, and other tourists not in period dress. The transition into a different place, central to what sociologist Dean MacCannell described as the tourist’s quest for “something perceived as more authentic that what he or she finds in everyday life,” is not complete until the spectator moves

27 The Gettysburg Anniversary Committee, "Annual Gettysburg Reenactment Reenactor Registration."
further into the re-enactment site.\textsuperscript{28} Re-enactments are organized as a progression back in time and into more and more authentic spaces. A re-enactment's periphery contains the least period-appropriate items, here a visitor will find portable toilets and concession stands. The center of the re-enactment, the battlefield, is theoretically where the highest degree of authenticity is achieved. Tourists and spectators, however, never reach this place of high historical illusion, they only observe others in that space. Sutlers’ row, where merchants in period-dress sell period-appropriate items as well as plastic cap guns and books, and the army camps are critical sites where the re-enactor’s vision of the past and the 21\textsuperscript{st} century mingle. At Cedar Creek (fig. 3) the spectators entered near the “Symposium Tent,” where short lectures and discussions of history were held throughout the weekend, the local law enforcement and emergency medical staff staging area, and the concession stands. Although re-enactors pride themselves on authenticity and fidelity to the lifestyle of the past, hobbyists are often spotted in the concession area eating hotdogs and funnel cakes. At more hard-core events this would be frowned on, if not impossible since many of those events are not open to the public. Unlike sutlers’ row, in these spaces it is re-enactors who look out of place, their uniforms and hoop skirts a bizarre anachronism next to cotton candy machines and EMT equipment. These public areas, which underscore the event’s dependence on 21\textsuperscript{st} century conveniences, often feel the most surreal for a spectator.

\textsuperscript{28} Quoted in Michael S. Bowman, "Looking for Stonewall's Arm," 114.
Mingling with the Past: Sutlers’ Row

Sutlers’ Row provides a low-pressure place for the re-enacting community’s representation of the past and spectators to mix. As a place of commerce, the interaction between hobbyists, spectators, and sutlers takes on a familiar form. Sutlers are merchants who sell reproduction 19th century items to re-enactors but are also historically appropriate, sutlers followed Civil War regiments during the war (fig. 4). The relationship between sutlers and re-enactors or living historians is amicable; these merchants provide a useful service to those individuals just starting out in the hobby. Some “hard-core” living historians, however, consider it inappropriate to purchase items from sutlers. In addition to uniforms, reproduction firearms, and hoops for skirts the sutlers also carry era appropriate food, like hard tack and rock candy, reproduction antique toys, and sewing kits. During the Gettysburg re-enactment the sutlers’ area included some small living history exhibits on firearms and a place for a band to play southern songs popular during the war. Unlike living history areas, which depend on the spectator’s engagement with the past, the sutler’s area provides a place to enter the past without the pressure of interacting with living historians.

The sutlers’ area also includes advocacy organizations that explicitly argue for particular understandings of the past. Historical organizations like the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) or the North-South Skirmish Association (N-SSA) frequently staff tables to conduct outreach to the re-enacting community and the lay
audience. Although these organizations already have deep ties to the re-enacting community, some of the representatives dress in period attire only so that the re-enacting community accepts them.\textsuperscript{29} These volunteers distribute information about the legacy of the Civil War as interpreted by their organization and work to encourage involvement in historical stewardship projects. Of particular importance to the individuals working at the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) is the legacy of the Confederate flag. Eleven of the thirty-one photocopied articles that the SCV distributed at the July 2008 Gettysburg re-enactment responded to critiques of the Confederate flag. The articles came from a variety of sources and touched on other topics as well, especially newspaper stories that underscored the organization’s repudiation of racism and the “inappropriate” use of the Confederate flag. This booth is one of the few places where contemporary politics and Civil War politics merge into one issue. Generally, however, the 21st century political climate remains outside the gates.

The increasing separation between the sutler area, living history, and souvenir stands is a direct result of the midway atmosphere observed by critics at early re-enactments. John Cash describes the sutlers’ area as a place “much like a circus midway.”\textsuperscript{30} However, at the events visited for this study sutlers’ row did not feel carnivalesque so much as like a public shopping area. Musicians performed, but they played

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{29} Michael Bell, interview by author at the re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008.
\textsuperscript{30} John Cash, "Borrowed Time," 237.
\end{flushleft}
period music and the crowd rarely rowdy. Food and drink stands remained separated, and whatever games or shows occurred emphasized the 19th century context. Establishing a distinct area for commerce helped bring the re-enactment back into favor with the NPS and created a place of controlled interaction between the spectators and re-enactors.

Like a public shopping mall, visiting sutlers’ row is as much about consuming goods as it is about observing other people. Spectators and re-enactors spend down time browsing the items for sale. More importantly, however, this space allows for the examination of a group with different habits or priorities for the re-enacting experience. Bowman argued that the ambiguity of situations that force a tourist to confront her own expectations and habits underlies the tourist experience as well as creates anxiety.31 For spectators, the sight of a bone and bristle toothbrush signals that they are in a place/time removed from where they came from. In addition to this signal of difference, the objects and people in costume situate the spectator as an outsider getting a glimpse of a different time.

In addition to the experience of the spectator, the space created in the sutlers’ area encourages social interactions among the re-enacting community. Re-enactors often have friends who re-enact on the “other side.” It would not be period appropriate for a Confederate infantry man to visit a friend in a Union camp, but on sutler’s row each side patronizes the same merchants, allowing them to mingle without disturbing the camp’s

31 Michael S. Bowman, ”Looking for Stonewall's Arm,” 116-117.
impression. Several of the women who re-enact with the Civilians of Gettysburg explained that they enjoy shopping at sutlers’ row because they frequently use the sutlers’ area to socialize with other living historians or re-enactors who may be encamped on the “other side” for the weekend. Spectators may encounter re-enactors while they browse sutlers’ row but it is comparatively uncommon for unacquainted spectators and re-enactors to speak with each other.

The sutlers create an important space that brings two halves of the event together, even if they are united in commerce rather than in debating history. Many sutlers, but not all, dress in period attire and have done an incredible amount of research on the objects they recreate. A tinsmith at Gettysburg explained that he travels to museums and measures the objects he produces in order to ensure that the proportions are exactly correct. His customers certainly expect accuracy, but beyond the economic motivation, there was a palpable sense of pride as he described the work that went into each piece. Despite the community’s attachment to physical objects, and the obvious care that many sutlers put into their merchandise, few sutlers participate in the battle re-enactment, preferring instead to keep their shop open throughout the day. Sutlers may be historical, but the motivation appears to be less about communing with the past and more about making a profit. This difference in motivation may contribute to the feeling that a

32 Civilians of Gettysburg, group interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008.
uniform purchased from a sutler is somehow less authentic than one made by one’s own hand. Individuals posting in the forums on a website for more hard-core re-enactors, AuthenticCampaigner.com, frequently use the phrase “sutlers’ row” to insult the wardrobe and accoutrements of other participants. Many campaigners sew their own clothing or make as many of their own materials as possible. While the community values handicraft and skillfully produced objects the majority of sutlers remain outside the core of the community.

This ambiguous relationship to the community of re-enactors helps establish sutlers’ row as a meeting place for spectators and participants in the re-enactment. Sutlers are both part of the tourist-event and part of the living history community without being primarily tied to either group. For spectators unwilling to venture into living history areas this space becomes an important place to interact with the past through objects and commerce but without having to personally confront someone “from” or “in” the past.

**Participation: Learning and Teaching**

Despite many participants’ loud claims to prefer re-enacting without an audience, the community as a whole loves to perform. Spreading knowledge about the “true history” of the Civil War requires that the perceptions of others be changed as a result of their action. Audience members form a critical part of the re-enactment, if not part of the community. Encounters in living history areas differ both in form and in content from
the encounter of a spectator watching a battle re-enactment. Understanding these two
dynamics within the community is critical to a comprehensive understanding of the event.

**Living History Areas: Welcoming the Public into the Past**

All living historians are re-enactors but not all re-enactors qualify as living historians. Many individuals who self-identify as living historians reject the term “re-enactor” as something that trivializes the work they do to educate the public. Living historians participate in re-enactments in three ways: as presenters at the history tents, as members of the living history encampment that is open to the public, and as members of a re-enacting unit that may or may not be available for public inspection. Each of these activities requires a different level of didacticism from the living historian and a different degree of interaction with the public. Ron Cole, who portrays General John Brown Gordon, explained that some of the hardcore re-enactors “do it for themselves, not for the people [who attend re-enactments].”

Living history is generally understood to be focused on the audience, hence its popularity among museum scholars, while re-enacting is about the personal experience and the connection between the re-enactor and the past.

Battle re-enactments generally last about forty-five minutes to an hour but the event’s coordinators want people to spend the day at the re-enactment. History lectures and presentations provide a way to fill history buffs’ time without staging a battle every

---

33 Ron Cole, interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 19, 2008.
hour. Spectators and re-enactors who do not wish to browse the sutlers’ row are invited to visit the tents for programs or the living history area. The most didactic events at re-enactments are the lectures and presentations in the living history or presentation tents.

The number of scheduled events and how frequently, if ever, the content repeats depends on the size of the re-enactment. Content ranges from medical history to ghost stories to re-enactors who portray generals introducing themselves. Although these presentations resemble a school lecture, in which someone stands at the front and talks for fifteen minutes to an hour about a particular aspect of the Civil War, the presentations are greatly aided by the ability to hold up or pass around a relevant object. When Doug and Julie Decker (also known as “The Blue Nun”) attend re-enactments as part of the Union’s medical corp, they take great pride in the degree of accuracy in their impression and their ability to engage an audience (fig. 5). While there is typically time for a question-and-answer session after the presentation, when the lecture concludes individuals in the crowd almost always come forward to speak to the presenter or ask to examine the materials they brought to the event. This familiar format gives spectators an easy way to approach the past and the re-enactors without the pressure sometimes experienced in living history camps.

Outside the program tents history is made physically present in designated “living history villages.” Members of the living history areas rarely present a formal program in their camp. Instead, they carry on the business of 19th century camp life and wait for the
public to ask questions or stop to observe what they are doing. The informal approach helps ensure that re-enactments feel like a natural interaction with the past. At Cedar Creek and Gettysburg these living history areas were close to sutlers’ row but distinct from the military camps. Spectators are invited to come wander among the 19th century camps and ask questions of the people performing a variety of domestic tasks. While everyone who participates as a re-enactor values an authentic impression, individuals who participate as living historians tend to be especially cautious about letting 21st century items into camp. Cole explains this dedication to authenticity by explaining that, “if I was a spectator I’d want to see what it was like, not soda cans and stuff laying around.”34 The Civilians of Gettysburg, a group based in Pennsylvania, explains that these items “mess up the image.” When Hilda Koontz, who portrays an ancestor of hers, tipped a soda can over and joked about it, saying, “I knew that soda can would get us in trouble.”35 Unlike the soldiers’ camps, living history areas are open to the public and living historians happily interact with visitors.

Living history areas require that visitors interact with the past to have their questions answered. Although this can be overwhelming for some guests, it also fosters the formation of a personal relationship with the past. However, living history areas have clear limitations when it comes to unpleasant aspects of the era. Pledging fidelity to the

34 Ron Cole, interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 19, 2008.
35 Hilda Koontz, interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 19, 2008.
19th century and the goal of igniting an interest in the past are sometimes at odds, especially when it comes to questions of race or gender relations. While most re-enactors will acknowledge these problems in the past, there is little to no representation of slavery or the gendered nature of 19th century society. Citing concerns about offending spectators, these aspects of history are left out and mentioned only if asked about directly. The natural affinity people have for that which is familiar is useful for the living historian wishing to start a conversation with the spectator. Unfortunately, the interaction with living historians sometimes depends more on empathy than on a desire to acquire critical knowledge of the past. Instead of approaching the presentation with the intent of examination, the spectator feels kinship with the past. Archeologist Kevin Walsh wrote in *The Representation of the Past* that by neglecting information that came after an era, for example critical histories produced during the Civil Rights movement, first-person presentation is “one of the most dangerous and anti-critical modes of representation available.”

By chatting with living historians about a range of topics on which they may be more or less informed, spectators do not consciously confront history as a process even while they participate in the manipulation of history in the present.

Visitors come to re-enactments with their own knowledge of history, culled from books, school, and popular fiction. Few re-enactors and/or living historians consider that the public may be critically engaging with the narrative of the past presented at re-

36 Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past*, 104.
enactments. In general, re-enactors conceive of the public as a passive recipient of the information provided by re-enactors. Living history areas, where spectators come into contact with the quotidian aspects of the past, potentially challenge or augment the spectator’s understanding of the 19th century. By watching as someone performs a familiar task in an unfamiliar way, the spectator is encouraged to find similarities in the past. This emphasis on surfaces, epitomized by the exclamation, “that looks just like our frying pan/notebook/blanket/etc,” may spark the kind of interest in history that leads to reading or pursuing independent research. Unfortunately, personal identification may work against spurring a spectator to future research because the spectator may feel that she already understands life during the Civil War.

**Camps: Entering History, Hiding From Today**

Military camps and the battlefield form the center of the historical experience. Although the military camps are sometimes less authentic than the living history areas, in that re-enactors will eat 21st century food openly or take photographs with a digital camera, they are also the areas most removed from the public eye. Whatever actions happen here are not for the audience who paid to attend the re-enactment, they are instead for the benefit of one’s re-enacting peers. In that way, the camps allow the re-enactors to focus only on their experience with the past and present. The rules for mixing the past and the present become more blurred in the camp life, especially when camps are closed to the general public as they are at Gettysburg. When the public does not have to
be entertained or educated the re-enactors can use the history in ways that are more personal or meaningful to them.

Camp life, living history areas, and visitors mix in one event, the period church services on Sunday mornings. Depending on the re-enactment’s size, there may be era-appropriate worship services for both Catholic and Protestant denominations. A group of living historians who portray the U.S. Christian Commission, which sets up a tent and demonstrates the work that the USCC did during the war to comfort the wounded, assist with nursing, and preach to the soldiers, sometimes sponsor these services. These USCC camps typically remain distinct from the living history area. Although these Sunday services serve an educational function and are open to the public, they are also actual church services that fulfill a need in the community. Since they are comparatively early on Sunday mornings it is rare for many members of the general public to attend.

**Battles: The Main Event, An Imaginative Moment**

The center of the re-enactment’s physical layout is the battlefield itself, this area is also the most spatially distinct from the rest of the event. Unlike the camps or sutlers’ area, into which a spectator can wander, the battlefields frequently remain closed to the public and are surrounded by bleachers, folding chairs, and loudspeakers. The battle re-enactment has a paradoxical relationship to re-enacting culture. For spectators, the battle is often the highlight of the event but requires substantially more suspension of disbelief
than other activities. While a living historian can say, “this is what the clothing looked like,” it is very difficult to claim with any sincerity that, “this is what a battle was like.”

Scale and duration, combined with the absence of death, make the battle re-enactment itself the most difficult portion of the event to reconcile with the re-enactors’ desire for authenticity. Detached from the battle’s historic location, it is much easier for spectators to see re-enactors as playing a game for their amusement.

The scale of the battle poses problems for re-enactors who claim to faithfully represent what the war was like. Even the annual Gettysburg re-enactment attracts fewer participants than there were casualties in the 1863 battle. In addition to the smaller numbers of soldiers, the space itself is incorrect. The battle of Gettysburg took place throughout the area while the re-enactment is confined to a comparatively small plot of privately owned land. At Cedar Creek the re-enactment fills only a small portion of the preserved field available. One can walk from the Union to the Confederate camps in roughly five minutes, all the way across the battlefield.

Like the physical scale of battles, the duration of the battle also separates the re-enactment from a faithful depiction of the war. At re-enactments wars begin and end on time, not unlike any other theatre performance or television show. Although actual battles lasted several hours and tapered off slowly, at re-enactments the artillery fire signals the beginning of the battle and the re-enactment ends neatly, usually about an hour later.

37 Scott Hartwig, telephone interview by author.
During the battle a battlefield guide narrates what happened historically and attempts to map that knowledge onto the re-enactors movements on the field. At Gettysburg this is a particularly challenging task. Although a registered Gettysburg battlefield guide provides the narration, he actually has to explain the battle and ensure that the spectators are able to map the action on this false terrain onto their knowledge of a battlefield that exists just a few miles away. Walsh found this kind of historical displacement particularly troubling as it promotes “at best, [spaces] which people construct as different only through the consumption of heritage pastiche, and at worst, perceive as tourist space, points on a leisure map of the mind.” These inauthentic battles become entertainment divorced from its historical context. These events merge with other vacation memories, part of a personal past that is not continuous with the 19th century past.

Because the representation on field cannot provide real closure the re-enactment’s entertainment factor trumps whatever didactic or memorial purpose originally drove someone to attend a re-enactment. During the battle re-enactors fire artillery, shoot blanks, and let out a “rebel yell.” Unlike watching a movie about the Civil War, spectators at a re-enactment feel the ground shake with artillery fire and smells gunpowder’s acrid smoke. The excitement that flows from this sensory experience is not tinged with the fear of death. Battle no longer evokes fear and, according to Cash, simply “resets things to the

38 Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past*, 137.
start again. The war goes ever on and on, and it is meant to.”

39 These events grant the war a “transient yet eternal potency” that prevents the inclusion of anything after 1865 in the interpretation while simultaneously existing as a place out of time. 40 What someone remembers about the Battle of Gettysburg will not be history but the memory of a performance. Whatever knowledge they gained about troop movements or historical weaponry will be “heritage pastiche” removed from its historical context or a larger narrative of American history.

The defining experience of war, death, is completely absent from a Civil War re-enactment (though injuries are common and faking death constant). Rob Hodge, the hard-core re-enactor profiled in Confederates in the Attic, works on his bloating impression, so he can more closely resemble a rotting corpse. 41 Without the real possibility of death the feeling of war cannot be replicated. Ron Cole, a re-enactor based in western Virginia, complains that people who re-enact as northern soldiers tend not “to die too easy… must be that Kevlar wool they wear.” 42 Federal re-enactors have the same complaints about their Confederate counterparts. A few members of the 14th TN, one of whom makes rifles professionally, said that the first time he went on the battlefield with a rifle and...
pulled a trigger it felt very real. Re-enactors will acknowledge that without the possibility of death they will never be able to really understand what their historical counterparts went through.

The pretended death, however, is nevertheless a profound experience for the re-enactor. Yori explains that laying in the field and playing dead is often as moving as marching or camping with the rest of the unit. The moment of "resurrection" when all the "dead" re-enactors have to stand and walk off the field used to be a difficult moment for the re-enacting community, it signaled that their representation was an inaccurate portrayal and not a "real" memorial. However, at some point it became custom to signal the time to "rise up" by playing taps. At this signal both sides "rise from the dead" and mournfully walk off the field. Cash speculates that the custom began at the 1988 125th Anniversary of Gettysburg but does not provide a citation. Yori’s self-published account from 1988 makes only a brief mention of taps and does not indicate that it was the signal to rise up, only that everyone on the field “living” and “dead” took a knee in remembrance of those who fought in 1863. At any rate, this addition to the form allowed the battle re-enactment to seamlessly flow into the commemoration of the Civil War dead. Although many re-enactors claim that education is their primary motivation

---

43 James Orr, Interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28, 2009.
46 Tom Yori, Impressions of the Recent Re-Enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg, 60.
for re-enacting the Civil War, commemorating the bravery and heroism of Civil War soldiers also motivates many re-enactors. While the battle itself may not be particularly useful as an educational experience it does collapse memorialization into the main activity at a re-enactment.

**No Battle, Just Drill: The Private Re-enactment’s Central Event**

At the 14th TN’s winter encampment military drill formed the central activity of the weekend. A Union soldier famously described a day in the army by writing that, “the first thing in the morning is drill, then drill, then drill again. Then drill, drill, a little more drill. Then drill, and lastly drill. Between drills, we drill and sometimes stop to eat a little and have roll call.” Like their historical counterparts, the men of the 14th TN practiced different skills for forty-five minutes with fifteen to twenty minute breaks starting early in the morning and continuing until evening (fig. 6). The group’s leader, Sandy Andrews, pulled the drill lessons from a variety of 1860s sources, including *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* by Colonel W.J. Hardee and William Gilham’s *Manual of Instruction for the Volunteers and Militia of the Confederate States*. Each book includes instructions on proper military posture, positions, maneuvers, tactics and commands. Hardee’s text includes simple illustrations and diagrams (fig. 7) in order to clarify how an individual soldier or unit moves. For the men of the 14th TN drill mastery is only displayed as a performance

during a living history day or re-enactment. However, the desire to understand how the Confederate military actually did things and to do them correctly remains profound. Simply making the unit look like they are doing something correctly is not the same thing as being able to perform the moves of a Civil War soldier. Unlike the re-enacted battles, these encampments more closely approximate a Civil War experience in so far as they emphasize drill and do not have to confront the absence of death.

Although the interest in history and respect for the soldiers is genuine, it does not preclude a substantial amount of joking and horseplay in the ranks. The hobby is fun; sometimes lost in studies of re-enacting is the sense of play present among members of a unit. One man at the winter camp, a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), explained that the fellowship he feels with his re-enacting “family” is much the same he feels for his fellow VMI cadets. He also said that, while the drills done at Fort Snyder are “real,” they are “less intense” than his work at VMI. For example, during drill the commander, Sandy Andrews, also practices his role and makes a fair number of errors. The men in the lines jokingly asked him if “‘shit’ is the military command for ‘do the opposite of what I just said.'” Other than the banter between commander and men in line, the men in the ranks produced their own stream of running commentary on the behavior of everyone else or the relative competence of their commander. This jovial

48 Aaron Creggar, interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28, 2009.
49 Ibid.
atmosphere, though present at public re-enactments, tends to be subdued slightly when spectators are in camp. The group’s banter was undoubtedly good-natured, but nevertheless separated the experience from that of a “true” military camp.

Conclusion

Civil War re-enactments allow the spectator to confront the past in a variety of spaces, each with a unique relationship to the event as a whole as well as to the presentation of the past. The 21st century periphery and battlefield core bracket a space in which the past and present mingle without the guidance of a teacher or official interpreter of history. By freeing historical objects from the confinement of a museum and putting them to use, re-enactments foster a personal, physical relationship with the past. Ironically, the battle itself is rarely questioned as inauthentic though this portion of the re-enactment may be the most susceptible to distortion and misunderstanding. For spectators, the excitement generated by cannons removes fear and death from the representation. For re-enactors, the battle cannot approximate the experience of the Civil War soldier because the re-enactor does not truly fear for his life. Nevertheless, the battle and surrounding event allows spectators to approach history in a way not possible in books or even museums. Once this history becomes part of a set of life experiences it ceases to be dry, stable facts and turns into heritage.
Chapter 2. Re-Enactors: Demographics and Motivation

Re-enactors position themselves as the medium through which history and social memory become heritage—the personal, enacted relationship to that which occurred before their, or the spectator’s, own time. When history becomes a physical experience or personal encounter it ceases to be merely the work of historians and academics and merges with a community to be reworked and made relevant. Although the re-enactment provides a forum for this presentation, it is the re-enactors themselves who translate historical knowledge into contemporary experience. Despite the central position that the re-enactor occupies, little attention has been paid to these men and women as individual members of a larger community. Re-enactor studies have not typically relied on any quantitative research. Scholarship tends to focus either on the macro level, studying groups of re-enactors or the hobby as a whole, or to reduce the activity to a single person who becomes a stand-in for the entire group of hobbyists. A quantitative study of the community, via an online survey, indicates that it differs substantially from its public image as a bastion for rednecks and the uninformed.

Unlike the “super hard-core” re-enactors that often come to the public’s attention, most re-enactors lead comparatively average lives. While the image of gun-toting rednecks dominates the mainstream media’s representation of the hobby, in fact most re-enactors are middle-aged, white men from formerly Union states. The hobby may attract
people with a more conservative world-view, but this does not appear to be the primary motivation for a person’s involvement. These individuals re-enact historical events while they enact Americans’ cultural memory. Through the mundane tasks of setting up camp, drilling, or learning to mend a uniform re-enactors keep the image of a past, uniquely American time active in the present. Their embrace of these outdated skills encourages others to value the past even while they live solidly in the 21st century.

Too frequently scholars outside the hobby describe the re-enacting community without consulting its participants. In his dissertation folklorist John Cash argues that a major flaw in scholarship about re-enactments is their heavy focus on the representation (the battle) while ignoring the community that surrounds this event. While the previous chapter dealt with the relationship between spectators and the re-enactment as an event, this chapter discusses of how the re-enacting community views itself and its relationship to American culture.

**Surveying Re-enactors: A Community Snapshot**

Surveys allow the researcher to gauge the thoughts and feelings of an entire group. This study collected demographic data on the re-enacting community, something previous scholars have not done, and as a result disproves some common assumptions about the hobby’s participants. Much of the first half of the survey dealt with basic demographic

---

information in order to obtain a more complete image of the racial, gender, and socioeconomic make up of the hobby. The second portion of the survey included a significant number of open-ended questions about the activity in order to more accurately gauge the range of opinions that exist within the community. True to form, the hobbieists who answered the open-ended survey questions expressed a variety of feelings about their activity and demonstrated a nuanced relationship to the American past as well as contemporary culture. Re-enactors understand that the activity touches on politically sensitive topics but generally feel that remembering the past trumps whatever temporary discomfort the hobby may cause.

Subject Recruitment and Survey Administration

In order to easily obtain survey results from individuals outside the mid-Atlantic region this survey was administered online via SurveyMonkey. Respondents were also recruited online via Civil War forums and discussion groups (including Authentic-Campaigner.com and CWRe-enactors.com), Facebook groups, and by emailing groups and asking them to participate in the study. These email addresses were collected from the website “Civil War Living History/Re-enactor Website Links.”

At the end of each invitation to participate in the study I encouraged the respondent to forward the survey on to any members of his/her unit that may also be interested in participating. The survey

2 http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Lair/3680/cw/cw-re-enact.html. This listing is by no means comprehensive but it did serve as a useful clearinghouse of contact information.
was online between November 14, 2008 and February 2, 2009. It had a completion rate of 78.3% and the average number of responses across the entire survey was approximately 333. Reliable estimates of the size of the re-enacting community remain difficult to come by. In 1994 Dennis Hall estimated the community size at roughly 30,000 participants but it is likely higher today. The re-enactment of the battle of Gettysburg in July 2008 attracted at least 15,000 re-enactors. Contemporary estimates range from 50,000 to upwards of 400,000 active re-enactors in the United States. In 2005 the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) contracted an independent research firm to study the relationship between tourism and Civil War enthusiasts; their study did not focus specifically on re-enactors. Nevertheless, there is broad agreement between the demographic results in the CWPT report, “Blue, Gray and Green,” and those presented here. Age, education, and the value these individuals place on the battlefield suggest that there is some overlap between the average re-enactor and the more general Civil War enthusiast. This study augments the results of the CWPT’s research by suggesting that

---

demographics alone are not enough to fully understand the pull of historic sites or the
desire to dress in period-attire.

**Suspicion in the Re-enacting Community**

In general, re-enactors love to talk about their hobby. Distributing the survey
online, however, I encountered some skepticism about the project. Although I intended
to limit contact with survey respondents, on a number of occasions individuals who found
my request online contacted me in order to ensure that the study was legitimate or that my
motives were “purely” academic. One man who telephoned me, Joe Roman of
Wisconsin, explained that in the past some politicians have attempted to shut the hobby
down citing its use of firearms and military discipline as evidence of militia activity.\(^6\)
There is no evidence to suggest that this is anything more than a fairly common re-enactor
rumor.\(^7\) Nevertheless, the desire to ensure that I was who I said I was motivated several
re-enactors to contact me directly or post probing questions as a response to my initial
message board post. Occasionally these contacts turned into a longer conversation that
became an important source of information on the hobby. Where appropriate, I will
indicate if a quoted re-enactor initially learned of the study by taking the survey rather
than by being approached at a re-enactment.

---

\(^6\) Joe Roman, telephone interview by author, November 17, 2008.

Terminology

Survey respondents represented both those individuals who self-identify as living historians or campaigners and individuals who participate in re-enactments with less stringent codes of authenticity. Since the survey used the term “re-enactor” throughout I will default to that term in this chapter. Although there is a great deal of tension between the two groups, the distinction between those who identify as living historians and those who are comfortable with the term re-enactor is not always as clear-cut as some living historians might suspect.\(^8\) Shortly after distributing my survey to the Authentic Campaigner forum, known for its dedicated and ‘hard-core’ membership, I received a message from a forum member and ‘hard-core’ re-enactor Chris Houk explaining that, “you speak of ‘re-enactors’… I personally take offense to that term… I consider myself a ‘living historian…’ Re-enactors by and large are hobbyists. They buy whatever is available on ‘Sutler Row.’ The difference is plain when you look at original articles and ours side by side.”\(^9\) Participants feel that the distinction between re-enactors and living historians and campaigners clearly separates those who are serious about history from those who simply want to “blow off black powder.”

Without discounting the incredible amount of research that frequently goes into participating as a “campaigner” or living historian, it is important to recognize that these

\(^8\) Todd Bemis, e-mail to author, January 6, 2009.
terms too are as loosely defined as “re-enactor.” In a living history tent at the Cedar Creek re-enactment I spotted several soda cans and yet these individuals claimed the term “living historian” for themselves. Some individuals participate both in the long-term campaign events as well as in more mainstream battle re-enactments. Given the loose definition of these terms in the community, the term re-enactor will serve as a blanket term for all people who participate in Civil War representations.

**Who Are Re-enactors?**

Popular perceptions of the hobby cast re-enactors as “Southern rednecks” or “white trash.” Harry “Skip” Koontz, who re-enacts with the 14th Tennessee, says that people outside the hobby often display a “very ignorant attitude to southerners because of the politically correct world we live in now.”

Survey results indicate, however, that the average Civil War re-enactor is a 43-year old, married, white, male with a college degree and a white-collar job who did not serve in the military and lives in a former Union state. Even members of the re-enacting community sometimes describe other re-enactors are less educated or “trashy.”

One respondent wrote that the best part of re-enacting is “shooting inbred redneck traitorous bastards.” While it is safe to assume that this

---

11 Terrence Lee Daley, interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008.
comment was left in jest, it is worth noting that the re-enactors acknowledge the stereotype.

A precise definition for the term “redneck” remains illusive but generally implies that someone is uneducated, white, and from a lower socioeconomic status. The redneck also embodies cultural anxieties, making him a creature of scorn and fear in mainstream culture. Author and professional provocateur Jim Goad writes in *The Redneck Manifesto* that, “a redneck is someone both conscious of and comfortable with his designated role of cultural jerk... the redneck has the troublesome capacity to make ironic sport of the greater public's repulsion/fascination with him.”

It is the redneck’s embrace of his outsider status that turns him from an average “poor white,” in Goad’s phrase, into a cultural villain, someone capable of upending the established social order. Some, though certainly not all, spectators at a re-enactment come to see what the “locals” are up to, perhaps expecting to have a laugh at the expense of the non-urban. Although Civil War re-enactors infrequently use the term redneck to describe themselves, many individuals who are not familiar with the hobby assume that it is a bastion of white supremacy or other distinctly poor, southern evils. Russell Seibert, who attended the 14th TN’s winter encampment, admitted that for the first few years he was involved with the hobby he wondered it if it was just a “front” for something more sinister. Seibert joked that he felt

---

like there had to be something else going on. Exposure to the hobby often mitigates these initial feelings of unease. One current re-enactor wrote that, “I first saw a newspaper article about some re-enactors and I thought that they must be some fanatics, but then I saw them at an event and was very impressed. They didn't look silly, but looked like Civil War soldiers.”

American popular culture often parodies the “South will rise again” mentality and has used the re-enactor as a stand-in for the rural, possibly racist Southerner. The re-enactment’s combination of entertainment and a specific version of Civil War history often evokes conflicting emotions in the spectator. Though a critical visitor might feel some discomfort at the open celebration of the Confederacy without a discussion of its social history, re-enactments’ emphasis on a pleasurable encounter with history often make this kind of critical engagement with the past difficult.

Historically, re-enactments celebrated a version of history that exclusively valued the contributions of white men. This trend continues today. The re-enactors who answered the survey represent a group that is overwhelmingly white (96.2%). Although there are African American re-enactment groups, like the 54th Massachusetts, and African Americans do participate in units representing both sides of the conflict, no African

---

13 Russell L. Seibert, interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28, 2009.
14 Response number 3 to question 12.
Americans responded to this survey. This suggests that African American and minority re-enactors remain a very small subset of the hobby as a whole.

Unlike their ignorant redneck image, re-enactors generally display a high level of education, just over 40% of respondents have a college degree and an additional 20% have a graduate degree: a significantly higher percentage than the population at large. Given their level of education, it is perhaps unsurprising that nearly one quarter (23%) of respondents work in the field of education, either as students, teachers, or classroom support staff (librarians, school administrators, etc) and an additional third (31.5%) of re-enactors surveyed fill white-collar jobs. Although racially homogenous and comparatively highly educated, re-enacting attracts individuals from all walks of life including everyone from manual laborers to academics.

The hobby itself skews toward a middle-aged demographic. The average Civil War soldier was in his mid-20s while fighting the war. In contrast, the average age of a Civil War re-enactor is 43-years old and 50% of the re-enactors who responded to the survey were between 45 and 60-years old. Similarly, the CWPT’s report indicated that tourists to Civil War battlefields tend to be in their 40s and 50s. The slightly older age of Civil War hobbyists may be the result of several factors, including the high cost of re-enacting—it can cost over $1,000 just to begin the hobby—and the substantial amount of

15 Native Americans and Hispanics made up the other 3.8% of survey respondents.
16 40.1% of respondents have a bachelor’s degree and an additional 19.8% have a graduate degree.
17 Civil War Preservation Trust, "Blue, Gray and Green."
time spent away from home during the spring and summer.\footnote{Dean Toda, “A Civil (War) Action; a Weekend as a Re-Enactor Means Heated Battles, Cold Nights and a Passion for Authenticity,” \textit{The New York Times}, May 30, 1999.} This survey did not seek responses from individuals under 18-years old, but it is worth noting that a number of families re-enact together and bring even their young children to events. It is not uncommon to see families with toddlers dressed in period-correct attire or for teenagers to participate as soldiers. Douglas and Julie Decker, who both re-enact as field hospital staff, have taken their children to re-enactments since they were born; Ms. Decker proudly described a photo of their daughter on a cannon at Gettysburg when she was just six months old. The Decker’s children, now in their teens, became officially involved with re-enacting groups at the ages of eight and six.\footnote{Julia and Douglas Decker, interview by author at Gettysburg Remembrance Day, November 22, 2008.} On the older side of the spectrum are men like Bill Lyons, who re-enacts with the 1\textsuperscript{st} Virginia Infantry, and is now 67-years old. Mr. Lyons began re-enacting during the Civil War centennial celebrations and has essentially been re-enacting since. As he gets older, Lyons explains, his wife has become less supportive since he “probably shouldn’t be outside running around a field.”\footnote{Robert Lyons, interview by author at Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008.} Despite the toll that re-enacting can take on the body, re-enactors seem loath to quit and will make jokes about keeping a portable defibrillator or other piece of medical equipment hidden in their tents.
Re-enacting remains dominated by men, but many of these men are or were married. Most re-enactors are married, approximately 69%, and another 3.5% live with a partner. Just over half of the respondents to this survey (53%) participate in re-enactments as a couple or family. In fact, the Deckers say that they never go to a re-enactment alone, at least two members of the family always attend. Still, the hobby’s most dedicated participants remain men. Some groups do not allow women to join because this would not be period correct. Thus, as a re-enactor becomes more “hard-core” it is less likely that his wife or partner will be able to join him. She may participate as a nurse, civilian, or other non-military role, but that frequently means camping in a different location or attending separate events entirely. More mainstream groups generally try to make room for the wives and children of their participants. This sense of re-enacting as a family event came up time and again during the interviews and free-response survey questions.

Re-enacting is not just a hobby popular in the American south. The geographic distribution of respondents indicates that the community is just as active, if not more so, in historically Union states. Survey respondents represent thirty-six states, the District of Columbia, and five foreign countries. The overwhelming majority of re-enactors live east

21 This survey did not ask questions about sexual orientation. However, it is worth noting that both Facebook and Yahoo! Groups contain pages dedicated to gay, lesbian, and bisexual Civil War re-enactors. Future research ought to examine the position of GLBTQ re-enactors in the larger re-enacting community.

22 Julia and Douglas Decker, interview by author at Gettysburg Remembrance Day, November 22, 2008
of the Mississippi River. Wisconsin is heavily represented in this study, 17% of survey respondents currently reside there (63), nearly thirteen times the number who currently live in Alabama (5). Of formerly Confederate states Virginia has the highest number of re-enactors (26) followed by North Carolina (13). One respondent noted his location as “CSA (Occupied).” This kind of humor remains common among Civil War re-enactors and should not be taken as evidence of a serious “South will rise again” mentality so often parodied in popular culture. The survey results also reflect international interest in the Civil War, three respondents hail from the United Kingdom and one each from the Netherlands, Canada, and Australia.

Geography determines neither a re-enactor’s historic loyalty nor the side on which he participates. The relative size of the Union and Confederate forces in the re-enactment community are difficult to gauge, some observers and participants feel that the Union is only about one third as large as the Confederate side. In 1988 author Rita Mae Brown visited a small event in Stanardsville, Virginia and observed that, “the Stars and Bars are more prominent than the Stars and Stripes, even though the north won the skirmish.” A number of re-enactors either participate as part of a unit not historically from their region (i.e. men from New Jersey re-enacting as Virginians) or will be prepared to “galvanize,” re-enact as the other side, in order to make a re-enactment run smoothly. This frequently

23 Terrence Lee Daley, interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek.
happens at re-enactments in the south. Ron Cole, a re-enactor based in western Virginia, claims that, “[The men in Union uniforms are] usually Confederates playing as Union because the Union won’t come south. If it is a battle they lost you’ve got a real hard time getting them down [there].” 25 This study suggests that galvanizing remains common. When asked to select on which sides they participate, 52% of all survey respondents indicated that they at least occasionally re-enact as Confederates while 67% indicated that they at least sometimes don Union uniforms. One survey respondent wrote that, “I portray both sides depending on the needs of the event. I have no problems with this as I have ancestors on both sides who fought.” 26 The survey did not, however, ask about which side someone prefers to re-enact on and, given the geographic distribution of respondents, should not be understood as disproving the perception that fewer people portray Union soldiers. While people may personally feel sympathetic towards one side or the other, most re-enactors place the success of the event over their own sense of historical loyalty.

Civil War re-enacting celebrates, if not outright glorifies, the military experience and attracts a higher percentage of veterans than make up the general population.

According to the 2000 Census veterans make up roughly 13% of the American

26 Comment 35 to question 22.
population. More than one quarter (26.6%) of surveyed re-enactors are veterans, most of whom (43.88%) served in the United States Army. Despite the high percentage of veterans in the hobby, the activity nevertheless depends on the active involvement of non-veterans. One recent veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Illinois-based re-enactor Brett Keen, confided that he perceives some slight tension between men who have actually served in the military and those that have not. Keen, who contacted me after learning of the study, is quick to emphasize that the tension comes out on Internet message boards more so than at events, especially during those rare discussions that examine contemporary events and wars. The Illinois-based re-enactor explains the appeal of re-enacting for non-veterans by noting that, no matter how affirmative the event, after “you’ve been in a war, having a gun pointed in your face loses some of its charm.” Although it is beyond the scope of this project, the veteran’s attraction to re-enacting deserves further study. The hobby’s emphasis on military history, which some re-enactors perceive as increasingly missing from school curriculum, may provide veterans with a space in which their experiences and priorities are validated.

28 Brett Keen, telephone interview by author, January 10, 2009.
29 The relationship between veterans and war re-enactments is outside the scope of this paper and the author’s expertise. Future research could explore the motivations that veterans have for participating in battle re-enactments. Special attention might be paid to the relationship between re-enactments and coping with the trauma of war.
30 Brett Keen, telephone interview by author, January 10, 2009.
This perception of the hobby as dominated by men who have not seen combat is almost as old as the hobby itself. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Mitchell, a World War Two combat veteran who organized the 1961 re-enactment of First Manassas, echoed Keen’s observation. Civil War re-enactors are “playing at games because they’ve never been in a war,” Mitchell believes, “if they knew what a war was like they’d never play at it.” While many men without a military background choose to participate as soldiers, other men who chose not to go into military service in their ‘real lives’ prefer to re-enact in the medical corps or as civilians. The re-enacting community takes military history and tradition seriously but does not appear in any way to stigmatize men who have not served in the military.

What Do Re-enactors Think About their Hobby?

Obtaining a more complete understanding of the Civil War past motivates nearly all re-enactors. In order to reach this fuller understanding of the war, detail, the search for a “true past,” and a sense of community form the center of the re-enactor’s project. At times each of these themes is a goal to be achieved while at other times they are the means to the greater goal: understanding history. The relationship between these three motives is critical to understanding the hobby as a whole.

31 Quoted in Rita Mae Brown, "Fighting the Civil War Anew."
32 Tom Yori, Impressions of the Recent Re-Enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg and Civilians of Gettysburg, group interview by author at Reenactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 19, 2009.
Emphasizing Detail

Attention to the historical details of dress, weaponry, and all other aspects of life forms a central concern among re-enactors. In part, the attention paid to these small details heightens the re-enactor’s experience of the past. When all the material objects are just right and when fellow re-enactors take the project of historical representation seriously it is easier to obtain a “period rush.” However, a major motivation for ensuring that spectators do not observe flaws in the representation is to keep the hobby considered a serious pursuit by non-re-enactors. Although entertainment makes up a large part of the appeal of re-enactments for spectators, a fact which re-enactors themselves acknowledged throughout the survey, fun ought to stem from the re-enactors banter or historical stories. The re-enactment itself, which takes honoring the past as one of its central concerns, should remain a serious pursuit. Despite vocal claims that re-enactors do not participate in their hobby for the spectators, just fewer than half the responses (48.9%) emphasized the presence of non-re-enactors in camp as a major motivation for ensuring that details are correct. One respondent wrote that, “This is not a private hobby. When in the public eye, we bear an academic burden to make our details, both internal and material, as consistent as possible with the historic record.” Several respondents noted that without

33 Comment 290 to question 29.
paying attention to details one is “just camping in funny clothes” and worried that “[spectators] might think we’re a joke.”

Authenticity, though often used by participants, is a difficult word to define in relationship to Civil War re-enactments. Accuracy, sometimes used by the community as a synonym for authenticity, exists along a spectrum. On one side are men willing to march barefoot and on the other side are true amateurs uninterested in the material culture of the past. Most re-enactors fall somewhere in between. During interviews and in survey responses re-enactors used the term authenticity to refer to both accuracy in historical details as well as the general practice of getting the overall impression right. Sometimes re-enactors use phrases like “period-correct” or “accurate” to talk about the constituent elements of an authentic camp. After spending over twenty years with the re-enacting community, folklorist John Cash argues that their understanding of authenticity combines two elements: selectivity and sincerity. He defines selectivity as the “choosing of themes and material culture for the representation, what is rightly understood as historical accuracy” and sincerity as the desire to “represent credibly within the necessary theatrical construct of the suspension of disbelief.” As a community re-enactors have created standards for the credibility of a representation. These standards are constantly in

34 Comments 322 and 323 to question 29.
flux, established to accommodate the needs of the present community while still ensuring that the Civil War past is presented in a respectable and recognizable fashion.

Hard-core re-enactors, sometimes derisively called “thread counters,” insist on accuracy as a critical way, perhaps the only way, to get in touch with the past. For many of hard-core re-enactors the logic is, “if you take care of the little things the big things will take care of themselves.” These men often correct others or complain that an event is not staying true enough to Civil War history. For them, correct detail in dress and weaponry ensure that the re-enactor is set up to experience 19th century reality. While re-enactors will express frustration at hard-core re-enactors, the survey respondents split essentially 50-50 on whether or not this subgroup of re-enactors “focus too much on details.” Skip Koontz, whose regiment is part of the 14th Tennessee Company B, established his unit’s credibility by describing a recent re-enactment: “Last weekend, our gear was two inches under water, soaking wet, don’t get any sleep, were wet for twenty-four hours and when people ask you what was it like, you can get this little feeling and you can make it a little bit more believable.” After relating this story Koontz went on to claim that his least favorite part of the re-enacting community are the “hard-cores.” It seems that everyone in the re-enacting community simultaneously strives for authenticity without turning into the kind of person Koontz refers to as a “stitch Nazi.” The hobby enjoys the appearance

36 50.88% probably disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree that hard-core re-enactors focus too much on details while 49.12% probably agree, agree, or strongly agree that this group focuses too heavily on details.
of inclusivity, but the seriousness of the cause that underlies the activity, honoring the Civil War dead, often means that arguments about appropriateness take on an especially heated tone.

Unlike the most hard-core of re-enactors, more moderate groups will bring modern conveniences into camp though, again, the degree of modern convenience varies widely by organization and event. For groups that do not value absolute accuracy, authenticity is typically understood as the degree of verisimilitude between the appearance of one’s camp and its 19th century counterpart. These re-enactors might be accused of being “farby,” a word with an unclear origin but that is used as shorthand for “far be it from authentic,” or of simply making realistic compromises to keep the activity popular. Many re-enactors, almost 60% of survey respondents, admit to taking 21st century food items into camp. Contact lens solution, hand sanitizer, and sunscreen also appeared fairly common. Re-enactors take pains to ensure that these things are hidden under quilts, behind wooden crates, or inside a 19th century container. Disguising an item as a 19th century object allows for some compromise between accuracy and needs of the participants. Despite the personal comfort that these items provide, hobbyists explain the need for disguise as ensuring the public obtains a clear impression of what the 1860s were like.

In camps that compromise between 19th century life and 21st century needs history remains recognizable, the camps still clearly represent a past way of life, but are not so
inhospitable to today’s families that a weekend spent living there is intolerable. Less than 1% of respondents said that paying attention to details was not important. For this minority, “it's not as important as many think. A good general impression and basic knowledge is all you need.” Anthropologists Eric Gable and Richard Handler argue that in an historical recreation “the attention to the management of impressions allows for the dream of authenticity to remain viable even in an environment in which all available empirical evidence could easily be constructed as… undermining authenticity based claims to truth or value.” Accuracy is much easier to achieve in material culture, one can really cook over an open fire or sleep under one blanket, than it is with interpersonal relationships or battles. Authenticity, a good faith effort to reproduce the 19th century experience, emerges from the negotiating the limits of accuracy versus appearance, impression versus fact. The obsessive emphasis on the material culture of the past or antiquated production techniques preserves the most concrete performance of American heritage.

Searching for the Truth

A desire to transcend “book learning” motivates many re-enactors’ initial involvement in the hobby. The re-enactment’s ability to turn abstract lists of facts and

38 Comment 210 to question 29
figures into experiential memory separates the hobby from the work of well-read Civil War “buffs.” One survey respondent wrote: “I wanted what the books couldn’t give me. Before I started re-enacting I was reading everything I could… and was wondering what it must have been like. The more that I read the more I wanted to walk a mile in their shoes… Re-enacting had the possibility of giving me a small taste of what it could have been like and I was hooked.”

Like Yori, whose time at Gettysburg allowed him to “leap through the medium,” there is a sense among re-enactors that if the impression is just right and one’s fellow re-enactors also take the hobby seriously a “period rush” is obtainable: seeing what the Civil War soldier saw, feeling like it is 1863 again. Through this rush (and the attempts to get a rush) knowledge of the era becomes incorporated into lived experience and personal memories. Several survey respondents echoed Jay Anderson’s suggestion that historians and anthropologists could learn a great deal about the era and people they study by trying to live like their subjects.

Re-enacting as a research tool, what Anderson termed “experimental archeology,” emerged as a key theme in the survey responses. Many individuals felt that in order to really understand the war, instead of just repeating facts and figures, they needed to experience a small portion of the life of a soldier. One person explained that, “A friend invited me and I realized that despite a lifelong study of military history, I had no real idea of what it was like to wear

41 Response 308 to question 33.
wool in summer and fire a black powder weapon.”

Trying to feel what it was like has limits, which nearly all re-enactors acknowledge, and few believe that they will ever achieve more than the occasional “period rush.” History thus becomes more than just a set of dates and facts, it becomes a sensory experience in the present.

If people do not feel comfortable to experience the place, or do not have the tools to imagine the past, social memories cannot circulate or be made valuable in the present. During their retracing of Pickett’s Charge, Tony Horwitz and Rob Hodge attracted a group of “gawkers.” Though initially he feels like an animal at a zoo, Horwitz realizes that the tourists at Gettysburg “didn’t know quite what to do with the empty fields, the silent cannons... By charging across the landscape in our rebel uniforms, we’d given a flesh-and-blood boost to their imagination, a way into the battle the modern landscape didn’t easily provide.”

Not knowing what to do at an historical place, especially one with the added pressure of being “hallowed ground,” can stifle the experience of heritage. John Cash asserts that, “telling history, providing historical tales... keeps the people and actions of a community’s identity in circulation and open for interpretation by the community.” The “telling of history” Cash describes occurs among fellow re-enactors as well as between spectators and re-enactors. Despite complaints about the “dumb” questions they get from spectators (i.e. “is the fire real?”) most re-enactors sense that children are enthralled.

---

43 Comment number 328 to question 12.
44 Tony Horwitz, Confederates in the Attic
by their presentation. One survey respondent wrote that, “It makes me feel real good when little boys think I'm a ‘Real Live Rebel.’ I get a kick out of telling 'em stories ‘bout [sic] battles (all [of it] is true) but I tell it as if I was actually there. I think it helps spark interest in the public” (emphasis in original). A complete, authentic impression of a military camp or field hospital allows the re-enactment and re-enactors to serve as a memory aid for spectators when they leave the event.

The sense that learning about the Civil War is a pathway for understanding America animates even early discussions about the war’s place in American life. Robert Penn Warren’s essay, The Legacy of the Civil War, emphasizes the ambiguous meanings and difficult truths about America that emerge from careful study of the war. Tony Horwitz closes Confederates in the Attic by quoting Robert Penn Warren’s suggestion that, “to experience this appeal may be, in fact, the very ritual of being American.” Horwitz himself suggests that his attraction to the Civil War, like his immigrant Grandfather’s, may be the sense that it will explain America or at least give him a sense of what America imagines itself to be. Roughly 55% of re-enactors agree or strongly agree that the “Civil War Defines America more than the Revolutionary War.” Throughout interviews and in the survey responses participants explained that their attraction to the war comes from the Civil War’s central role in defining America—politically and socially. An immigrant who

46 Comment 163 to question 32.
47 Quoted in Tony Horwitz, Confederates in the Attic, 389.
re-enactor the Civil War said that, “I think I've learned more about the United States through participation in and study of the Civil War than any other life experience I have had. I believe I have a better perspective on America and American culture and current affairs because I have a sense of where we came from and how we got there.”

Explaining the pull of the era, a survey respondent wrote that, “It is and was a big part of our history. Many things that the founding fathers incorporated into the founding of this nation were changed by the Civil War.” Today’s re-enactors who responded to the study emphasized that the hobby helps them understand the 21st century and what it means to be American.

Re-enacting the Civil War provides people with a way to understand their own “ritualistic” relationship to their present lives. Gable and Handler believe that, “heritage is a form of cultural salvage. A ‘lost world’ or a world about to be lost that is in need of preservation.” Almost everyone surveyed (72%) or interviewed for this project expressed real concern that Americans are loosing their sense of history. The Volunteers of the 40th Maine, interviewed during the Battle of Cedar Creek, complained loudly that Americans are quickly becoming “sheep—you’ve got to make a video game if you want...

---

48 Response 18 to question 32.
49 Response 91 to question 32.
50 Eric Gable and Richard Handler, "After Authenticity At an American Heritage Site," 568.
anyone to pay attention. Whether it is to spectators or each other around the campfire, re-enactors spend a tremendous amount of their time talking about American history. The 40th Maine explained that at some points men will spend days arguing about something as small as which way a hat should be worn and bring out books or old photos to support their case. Arguments about details inform larger arguments about honoring the past and learning from the past. Re-enactments and the detail in a period impression allow these narratives of the American past to stay active in the present community.

Education, in many different forms, lies at the center of Civil War re-enacting. In much the same way that spectators’ experience is cited as a critical reason for the pursuit of accuracy, teaching the public a “true” history of the war motivates many re-enactors. 17.5% of respondents listed teaching the public as their favorite part of the hobby, second only to friendship with other enthusiasts, saying: “history told on an intimate, personal level is more informative and better understand than a list of battles, presidents, and dates.” In his article on re-enactors Literature professor Dennis Hall somewhat derisively notes that, “many re-enactors are down-right learned in their own way. Unlike professionals in the academy or the museum, however, they are amateurs in the strictest

---

51 Volunteers of the 40th Maine, group interview by author during the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008.
52 Ibid.
53 Response 91 to question 29.
sense; they simulate history... for, if you will, the pleasures of the text as lived.\textsuperscript{54} For Hall, this substitution of the senses in place of the mind ensures that re-enacting cannot be a "pedagogical exercise; it is a hobby and the pleasures of the diversion reside in taxonomy and association, not in analysis.\textsuperscript{55} Hall’s critique comes quite clearly from his experience as a professor who does not interact with a lay public and discounts the ability for re-enacting to spur research into 19\textsuperscript{th} century life. One respondent explained that, “often during the course of an event I will come across something I need to do, wonder how it was done ‘back then’ and research it when I get home (or ask other participants what they do).”\textsuperscript{56} Denying that re-enacting serves an educational function ignores a large part of the hobby’s appeal for both its practitioners and spectators. Half the fun, for many re-enactors, comes from debunking myths about the Civil War. Douglas Decker, who re-enacts as a surgeon, said that he consistently enjoys telling spectators that “biting the bullet” is an expression without any basis in Civil War medicine.\textsuperscript{57} Re-enactors skim over the more complicated aspects of the war, most obviously slavery, and in this sense Hall’s concerns about the pleasures of the text trumping critical thought are valid. Understanding history on a deeply personal, sensual level emphasizes pleasure. However, given the method’s popularity it ought to be given equal attention as understanding.

\textsuperscript{54} Dennis Hall, "Civil War Reenactors and the Postmodern Sense of History."
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Answer number 91 to question number 32.
\textsuperscript{57} Julia and Douglas Decker, interview by author at Gettysburg Remembrance Day, November 22, 2008.
history analytically. The information re-enactors and living historians provide may be a different form, but the experience of sleeping in the rain or learning to sew is nevertheless a real piece of knowledge.

**Slavery’s Presence in the Re-enacting Community**

While seeking to understand Civil War animates many discussions at re-enactments it remains comparatively rare to hear about slavery. There are a very small number of re-enactors who portray slave catchers but these men are generally not liked by either side and have not managed to start a larger conversation about the role of slavery in the Civil War. Horwitz noticed this in *Confederates in the Attic* but those inside the re-enacting community, like Illinois-based re-enactor Brett Keen, also observe that the group generally remains silent on the issue of slavery, preferring instead to endlessly debate subtleties of dress or exact troop locations. David Lowenthal, a geographer and former secretary of the American Geographical Society, wrote in 1999 that, “the past is burdensome because much of it increasingly seems inglorious, not to be celebrated but regretted. Ours is an era of apology.”

Cash believed that this silence on slavery may stem from the re-enacting community’s desire not to dishonor the dead by emphasizing a national, moral shame like slavery. His explanation does not take into account the relationship re-enactments have to the present, acknowledging the horrors of slavery

---

would implicate the re-enactors themselves in this institution. Distancing the war from slavery is a critical component to ensuring that the Civil War remains a useable past for today’s Americans. Heritage often celebrates only the positive aspects of the American past. Although some re-enactors urge the community to remember all of the nation’s history, the hobby does not lend itself to larger questions about the war’s non-military aspects. The story of the Civil War told through the eyes of the common soldier is comparatively removed from questions of slavery in the pre-war South. Re-enactors can only present part of the past, the part that is tied to military and very basic civilian history. If understood as a limited window into the 19th century re-enactments may not need to include narratives about slavery.  

However, given the desire of many re-enactors to teach individuals the “real” history of the Civil War, ignoring this component itself distorts the past and contributes to the “romanticism” so often critiqued in Civil War scholarship.

Teaching spectators the history of the Civil War often means butting up against the historical narratives taught in school. Correctly or not, re-enactors tend to believe that Americans have not learned the “real” history of the war and are especially critical of the way public schools handle the topic. Of the re-enactors surveyed 63% agree or strongly agree with the statement, “the Confederacy fought to preserve state’s rights.” An additional 30% of respondents believe that professional historians make too much of

---

60 For a longer discussion of the interplay between individuals and nations and why participant-based history cannot reconstruct the past see Roy Rosenzweig, Thelen, David, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 126.
slavery’s role in the Civil War. In Skip Koontz’s view, “states rights and slavery run hand in hand but slavery was the straw that broke the camel’s back. It was the catalyst that got everybody moving [towards war]… Once the Republicans were voted in, the rest of the South felt they had no chance to state our [sic] rights.”61 The belief that the war was not primarily about slavery is not confined to the Confederate interpretation of the war. Terrence Lee Daley, a Federal re-enactor based in Maryland, firmly believes that the “Civil War had nothing to do with slavery, [it was] definitely states rights. People make too much of the slavery thing.”62 Despite fighting against the perception, or in the eyes of some re-enactors the misperception, that slavery was the dominant issue in the Civil War, re-enactors claim that most people who come to these events do not ask “too many” questions about race.

Within the community slavery and its legacy remains comparatively undiscussed. In part this stems from the community’s aversion to “politically correct history” but it also allows the American past to remain morally unambiguous. Although some hobbyists no doubt harbor racist tendencies, in general re-enactors will welcome anyone who works to create an accurate impression. This often means that units sort along race lines, but it also

62 Terrence Lee Daley, interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008.
keeps the hobby overwhelmingly white. \textsuperscript{63} Explaining his feeling on the question of race, one white re-enactor told anthropologist Cathy Stanton that, “I think that our systems try to apologize for what we’ve done and who we are and what made us what we are, instead of just saying, ‘this is what happened…’ If we want to teach ethics, that’s another course. But to teach history, it’s facts… They try to take a slant on it now.” \textsuperscript{64} Stanton’s work emphasizes that African American re-enactors are “no threat” to the community as long as they depict values like “gallantry, loyalty, [and] martial decorum” but once these re-enactors press for a debate about morality or racial history they tend to be pushed out or ignored. \textsuperscript{65} As a hobby re-enacting must remain enjoyable if it is to continue. Discussions of slavery, racism, and historical responsibility often make people feel uncomfortable. Discomfort and celebration cannot coexist in the hobby, so the aspects of the Civil War that affirm the re-enactors’ sense of America are celebrated at the expense of a more complex presentation of history.

\textbf{Brothers in Arms}

Fellowship and camaraderie are the two words frequently employed by re-enactors to describe their attraction to the activity. This fellowship is felt on two different levels.

\textsuperscript{64} Quoted in Ibid., 265.
\textsuperscript{65} Quoted in Cathy Stanton and Stephen Belyea, “‘Their Time Will Yet Come,’” 265.
First, many re-enactors feel a deep, personal bond with the 19th century soldier and in re-enacting are able to more closely connect with this aspect of American life. Second, re-enactors themselves form a tight-knit community and frequently find friends that they value for life. Each form of connection is required for the construction of a counter-narrative of the American Civil War that emphasizes fellowship and honor over economics or racism.

Paying tribute to Civil War soldiers underlies debates about authenticity, education, and the relative appropriateness of re-enactments in general. The National Park Service’s reticence to host re-enactments stems from their concerns about the appropriate way to honor the past. Re-enactors, though they may not say so explicitly, behave as if they are the guardians of the Civil War soldiers’ memory. Keeping the past “alive” and honoring those who went before was cited by 18.9% of survey respondents as a motivation for participating in the hobby. The NPS may own the land, but the soldiers’ legacy belongs to the community of re-enactors. The bond they feel with the hobby and the past requires a deep appreciation for the men who participated in the war. Koontz explained that, “there’s too many people that we’re out here honoring to take it silly [sic] and make a game out of it. Yeah we have fun, but when it all boils down to the end of it, it is those guys layin’ out there on that field that we’re honoring.”

Sensing that the “guys” are still on the field often implies that they, the dead, are the most important

---

audience. It is, in fact, this sense of physical proximity that helps establish the “eerie presence” sometimes felt by re-enactors when camping near actual battlefields.\textsuperscript{67} Chris Houk closed his note by emphasizing that, “those in the past are not so far away and not very unlike us. They are just over our shoulders and barely out of sight.”\textsuperscript{68} When the past is felt this way, as a visceral sense of duty, it motivates re-enactors to keep an honorable narrative of that past alive in the present. The Civil War dead no longer exist only in history books but in gut feelings and as an imagined audience. This connection brings the past into the present as a motivation and a standard against which to judge a re-enactment or re-enactors.

Genealogy and family stories help establish this personal connection to past soldiers. Just over 80\% of re-enactors surveyed have done some kind of genealogical research and significant percentage (69.3\%) identified family members who fought in the Civil War. Explaining the close tie between re-enacting and genealogy a respondent wrote that, “re-enacting adds a dimension and a kind of relevance and connection to the period that would not be there otherwise.”\textsuperscript{69} For some re-enactors, including the 1st Virginia’s Cindy Smithson, now based near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, genealogy brought her into the community. She began re-enacting after doing research on her family and now

\textsuperscript{68} Chris Houk, Private Message on Authentic-Campaigner.Com, January 5, 2009.
\textsuperscript{69} Comment 65 to question 20.
participates with the same unit one of her ancestors belonged to.\textsuperscript{70} Those individuals who did not have ancestors in the Civil War often felt that they needed to explain why not or to make a joke about their inability to locate someone. Frequent explanations included families that immigrated in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century or comments like, “No, and it really ticks me off!” as well as the simple “dang it anyway!”\textsuperscript{71} A personal connection to the past is highly valued in the re-enacting community, but this activity is distinctly different from hereditary organizations like the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War or Daughters of the Confederacy. Unlike these organizations, with national leadership and a bureaucracy, the re-enacting community functions as a more democratic method of staking a claim in the past. Family connections help people feel like the history belongs to them and that they have the authority to shape the presentation and memory of history.

Re-enacting the Civil War, for most people, is a hobby. So while education and the preservation of American history are worthy reasons to participate in the activity, fundamentally it must be a lot of fun: wearing wool in July just is not for everyone. One respondent admitted as much when he wrote that, “I can say a lot about the extension of research, the tribute paid to our ancestors, the education of the public, but let's be honest. [sic] Even though those things are all very important, no one would do this if not for two

\textsuperscript{70} Cindy Smithson, interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008.
\textsuperscript{71} Comments 119 and 94 to question 20.
fundamental aspects. 1. It's a hell of a lot of fun and 2. The people you do it with.”

The most frequently cited reason for participating in Civil War re-enactments is friendship and community (53.45%). Like Civil War soldiers themselves, re-enactors need to fill a tremendous amount of down time at events; even the largest events rarely stage more than two or three battle re-enactments a day. Time spent around the campfire, debating history, cooking, or just ‘visiting’ and joking allow these bonds to form. The nature of friendship is beyond the scope of this study, but the role it plays in keeping the community together cannot be understated. These friendships also provide social support for re-enactors who attempt to move the historical narrative away from slavery and toward one that emphasizes duty or patriotism. The social sanction these groups provide is a critical part of the hobby, and its narrative’s, success.

Community ownership of an event like the Civil War ensures that it circulates in the present and informs the identity of contemporary Americans. Rather than letting the memory of the war collect dust, these groups of friends, sitting and talking together, enact American heritage for the sake of preserving history and keeping memories from turning stagnant. Folklorists, like John Cash, emphasize the importance of camaraderie in the articulation and revision of an historical narrative. He believes that, “camaraderie involves the participation in the discourse necessary to articulate this [historical] counter-

72 Survey answer number 166 to question number 32.
narrative." This counter narrative can inform understandings of the present, as with individuals who use re-enacting to understand contemporary politics, and can move the use of history toward an alternative model of the past. However, to achieve either of these things requires a community to participate in the construction of the narrative and to make this narrative common through retelling. Americans will continue to debate the meaning of the Civil War, no one interpretation or representation will achieve closure. Re-enactments present history as it belongs to the community, whether or not this is a legitimate, or even appropriate, representation remains a topic of intense debate between academics and re-enactors as well as among re-enactors themselves. The specific memory of the war that re-enactors portray for an audience continues because of the bonds between fellow Civil War enthusiasts. Feeling supported in one’s heritage is required for the perpetuation of a social memory.

**Dissension in the Community**

Without disagreement, the re-enacting community could not establish itself as a sphere for the preservation of historical meaning. When meaning becomes fixed, as it does in museums or textbooks, it becomes lifeless. What heritage requires, and what social memory depends on, is the use of history in the present. The community’s internal politics, which sometimes play out in debates about the past, may in fact make the bonds

---

73 John Cash, "Borrowed Time," 144.
74 Ibid., 22.
among individual group members stronger. Complaining about the priorities of others reinforces the interpretation of the group.

Even among like-minded friends, a community as large as the re-enacting world will have internal divisions. Re-enactors frequently sing the praises of their unit or “pards” but will complain about the endless internal politics between larger groups or subgroups within the hobby. Over half of the re-enactors surveyed listed “behavior of other re-enactors” as something they like least about the activity. Tom Yori observed that, “every [re-enactor] is in some form a prima donna, priding himself on his particular knowledge—but particularly not shy about letting you know that so-and-so over there is someone you shouldn’t listen to.” Some of this may come down to where individuals or groups locate themselves on the spectrum of authenticity and accuracy. Although debates about how to wear a hat or which event to go to may seem comparatively trivial, these arguments and the egos behind them can eventually split units. Joe Roman explained that his own group, the 3rd Wisconsin Infantry, split a few years ago because of hostility about degrees of accuracy. Roman feels that the hobby attracts “just too many egos, there are constant arguments.” Nevertheless, re-enactors also feel that, in general, re-enactors in all roles tend to respect each other. Over 60% of re-enactors agree or strongly agree that

---

75 55.8% selected “behavior of other re-enactors” as a response to question 33. Individuals were allowed to check more than one box and “behavior of other re-enactors” made up 33.84% of the total answers.
76 Tom Yori, Impressions of the Recent Re-Enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg, 19.
77 Joe Roman, telephone interview by author, November 17, 2008.
Federal and Confederate re-enactors respect each other. Tension in the re-enacting community ought to be considered as competing visions of the counter-narrative constructed in the community.

**Conclusion**

The homogenous racial and gender make up of the re-enacting community should not be used as evidence of its ideology. Rather than harboring “fanatics,” the hobby attracts the well educated as well as the self-educated to form communities in which new narratives of the national past emerge. In debates about the relative worth of “farbs,” the best way to honor the men who died in battle, and through discussions about books and new source material what was once confined to history and scholars becomes part of an active expression of heritage.

Re-enactors do not wish to change history, indeed no re-enactor would consider deviating from the “script” that is the historical record. Rather, at re-enactments history becomes malleable and not as fixed as it is in books and museums. It is in this malleability that the community can reclaim its past and bring it into the present. Much of what re-enactors do is about making history matter in the here and now. The hobby is less about

---

78 63.24% selected agree or strongly agree that Confederate and Federal re-enactors respect each other. An additional 25.88% selected that they “probably agree” with that statement.
the individual soldiers who fought and died and more about the ways in which those soldiers became “us” in the present tense.
Chapter 3. Playing the Clown: Re-Enactors in the Media

On the whole, popular culture is not friendly to the historical re-enactor. Major media outlets frequently use him as a joke’s punch line or as comic relief in stories about the Confederate battle flag and contemporary racism. In contrast, the niche media created for the history buff community often views re-enactors only as a subset of their readership and occasionally expresses concern at how the perception of re-enactors will reflect on war buffs as a community.

Media representations of re-enactors reproduce popular perceptions of the community as well as re-inscribe these assumptions and inform future understandings of the hobby. As cultural products, these representations take on a secondary role as evidence in wider debates about American culture. A number of studies have been written about the representation of the American Civil War on television, in film, and fiction.¹ Typically, historians use these cultural artifacts as a way to examine how American society processed the Civil War and included it in a larger narrative of the past. Scholars often mention the role that re-enactors play in a film, usually as extras or small characters, but assume that the presence of re-enactors indicates only the director or producer’s desire for an authentic cast without a substantial expense. Although re-

enactors have appeared in a number of media outlets and form a major audience for Civil War-oriented books, films, and television programming, their presence in and use of popular culture remains unexplored.

The one-dimensional representation of re-enactors common in popular culture reinforces stereotypes about “rednecks” and prevents a deeper discussion about American identity, history, and heritage. The tone and content of coverage of the hobby differs drastically by medium. In print, coverage tends to remain fairly straightforward and devoid of value judgments. However, television coverage of re-enactors highlights the more bizarre and comical aspects of re-enacting culture without any serious consideration of the activity’s value. As a result, re-enactors tend to be self-conscious of their portrayal in popular culture and the niche market. This self-consciousness has lead to distrust of media producers in the re-enacting community. Re-enactors understand that their ability to serve as a film’s “clown” motivates many directors to seek them out. During this study several participants mentioned that they felt The Unfinished Civil War, a documentary on re-enacting culture produced for the History Channel, manipulated them and misrepresented the hobby. Skip Koontz, Buddy Mellor, and Rob Hodge each made brief appearances in the film but felt that the producers “turned the tables” on them and made the film about racism. Buddy Mellor explained that, “what the movie was about, and what they told us it
was going to be about were two very different things in my opinion. Feeling manipulated by producers and editors appears to be a common sensation among re-enactors who agree to participate in television programs. Hodge emphasized how willing re-enactors are to help people understand the hobby but how often they are mislead or outright lied to for the sake of some other story. Despite these concerns many Civil War re-enactors continue to work with journalists and academics.

Ironically, popular media tie the activities of Civil War re-enactors to contemporary life and politics more frequently than do niche media. The discomfort many re-enactors feel in regards to media portrayals stems from the association between re-enacting and symbols of racism, white pride movements, and nationalism. Civil War re-enactors, who defend the Confederate battle flag and celebrate the pre-war South, lend themselves to inclusion in the hillbilly and redneck stereotypes. After all, they embrace a pre-Civil Rights world, are overwhelmingly white, and interested in weaponry. However, given the educational and professional background of many re-enactors, this representation of the community is unfair at best and misleading at worst. Historian Anthony Harkins points out that the hillbilly stereotype has persisted essentially unchanged long after other racial and class stereotypes became unacceptable. Although there is little humor in the abject poverty prevalent in some Appalachian communities, the

---

2 Charles "Buddy" Mellor, email to author, March 15, 2009.
3 Robert Lee Hodge, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2009.
Civil War re-enactor “costume” makes laughing at presumably poor, white, and under-educated people acceptable. Dressing up the poor, rural, white in a “costume” that signals his defense of a world that no longer exists indicates that he is not a person to take seriously. Sensing that the hillbilly evokes a “there but for the grace of God go I”-mentality in much of middle-class America, television programs often highlight carnivalesque aspects of Civil War re-enacting culture and down play the time and research that goes into preparing an impression. Harkin believes that this is because the image of a hillbilly or redneck simultaneously “celebrates and denigrates the American past.”

Niche media, like illustrated magazines for the re-enactment community specifically, often work against these stereotypes by limiting their discussion to the 19th century context, ignoring the way the war’s legacy functions in the present.

**Common Themes in Coverage**

Civil War re-enactors appear as the subject of a number of different media including books like *Confederates in the Attic*, an episode of the animated series *South Park*, as the subject of documentaries, and as the setting of other television programs. Across these forms and program genres three themes emerge in the representation of re-enactors: their hillbilly traits, the re-enactor’s relationship to racism, and how or if the hobby

---

explains contemporary life. This study focuses primarily on two specific representations of re-enactors, *South Park*’s episode “The Red Badge of Gayness” and a documentary produced for the History Channel, *The Unfinished Civil War*, both of which re-enactors often reference as examples of how American culture at large views the hobby. In addition, newspaper and magazine stories from mainstream and niche media will serve as a contrast to the coverage on television.

**Re-enactors Are (Not) Hillbillies**

Despite feeling resentment about their portrayal in popular culture, re-enactors nevertheless play up some of the very stereotypes they wish to dispel. Instead of becoming overly self-conscious, many re-enactors go along with the cartoonishly “ignorant southern white” image, fully aware of the potential to subvert the situation by embracing the stereotype. During this study a number of fellow graduate students suggested that visiting the 14th TN’s winter encampment at Fort Snyder would be “just like *Deliverance,*” the 1972 film that solidified the image of the rural white in the American imagination. This association is surprising because the film does not include any representations of Civil War re-enactors, only a few brief shots of the Confederate battle

---

5 A number of television programs have used Civil War re-enactments as a backdrop for their plot, most recently the CBS drama *Without A Trace* in December 2008. The second season of *Everybody Loves Raymond* also set an episode during a Civil War re-enactment and several magazine news programs have interviewed re-enactors. The programs selected for this study simply represent the most frequently referenced representations and is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

flag, and the 14th TN’s camp is located in Pennsylvania not the “Deep South.” When told about these comments, Skip Koontz and fellow re-enactor Russell Seibert laughed and immediately suggested we should all “stage a photo” to take back as evidence of their “creepy” nature. Cognizant that their hobby pushes cultural buttons, re-enactors enjoy getting the chance to challenge popular understandings of the war and hillbilly stereotypes. In *The Redneck Manifesto* Jim Goad, writer and provocateur, emphasizes that the redneck has accepted his role as a “cultural jerk,” “clown,” or “jester” and through this acceptance manages to laugh at the culture laughing at him. Although re-enactors often serve as the negative example or the butt of a joke, in fact most participants understand their role in contemporary media. Instead of thinking of the re-enactor only as victim of a forum/form he does not understand, it is critical to consider that the re-enactor participates in these productions consciously.

Television documentaries and fictional television shows deploy the re-enactor as a stock character and use this stereotype for both comedic and political purposes. Re-enactors lend themselves to film and video because of their identifiable “costumes” and their ability to “perform” for an audience. Brett Keen, a re-enactor based in Illinois,

---

7 Harry "Skip" Eugene Koontz, Interview At the Winter Encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28, 2009 and Russell L. Seibert, "Interview At the Winter Encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28, 2009.

8 Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto*, 84.
suggested that re-enactors are “natural method actors.” These same talents also allow for their image’s manipulation by producers and directors. Historian Anthony Harkins wrote in *Hillbillies: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, that the image of a poor, barefoot, white southerner is “consistently used by middle-class economic interests to denigrate working-class southern whites… and to define the benefits of advanced civilization through negative counter example.” The prospect of using re-enactors as a “circus act” against which the wealthy, educated, or otherwise “better” Americans can be juxtaposed remains prevalent in television coverage of the re-enacting community.

The comic potential of the “country bumpkin meets educated elite” represents a stock-narrative for American television shows. A piece of “recent news” on the “Civil War Re-Enactor’s” Facebook group illustrates the way that Hollywood thinks of re-enactors. A CBS employee, Sarah Tooke, wrote the group asking about their potential involvement in a new reality television show: “there is a segment being produced for the show called 'The Osbournes Meet The Osbournes', which will feature Ozzy, Sharon, Jack and Kelly spending a day in the life of another… Osbourne family. Currently, we are looking for people with the last name… Osbourne who take part in civil war [sic]

---

9 Brett Keen, telephone interview by author, January 10, 2009.
reenactments...”11 It remains unclear if the Facebook page’s administrators posted this note as a serious announcement or to generate a laugh at outsiders who do not take the hobby seriously. After his involvement with *Confederates in the Attic*, Comedy Central approached Rob Hodge about doing a show on re-enacting culture. Hodge declined Comedy Central’s request saying he suspected the audience would laugh at him, not with him.12 Harkins emphasized that the hillbilly is “uniquely positioned as a ‘white other,’ a construction both within and beyond the confines of American ‘whiteness’…”13 In his position as an “other” the hillbilly serves a useful function for television producers because American audiences can still laugh at the poor white without risk of offending anyone important.

During the mid-1990s country and western singers, NASCAR drivers, and politicians embraced their roots in the rural south and began reclaiming the terms “redneck,” “white trash,” and “hillbilly.” By the late 1990s Civil War re-enactors gained a prominent place in American popular culture: *Confederates in the Attic*, released in the spring of 1999, became a bestseller; in the summer and autumn of 1999 filmmaker Glen Kirschbaum set out to document the men and women who re-enact the Civil War; and

11 Sarah Tooke. ““Recent News” on Civil War Re-Enactors Group Page,” http://www.facebook.com/s.php?init=q&q=Civil%20War%20Reenactors&ref=ts&sid=a56cc8538f41a8f6c1f72a89a83094f&n=-1&o=4&k=200000010&sf=r#/group.php?gid=2204591646 (accessed March 12, 2009). It does not appear as of this writing that the series or this segment have been taped or aired on television.
12 Robert Lee Hodge, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2009.
South Park’s “Red Badge of Gayness” aired in November 1999. As a result men like Rob Hodge and Skip Koontz were propelled into the national spotlight. Kirschbaum’s film, *The Unfinished Civil War*, exemplifies many of the hillbilly/redneck stereotypes prevalent in American culture. The film uses Confederate re-enactors as a negative example of American culture but unlike the South Park episode portrayal is not intended for humor.

Both South Park’s “The Red Badge of Gayness” and The Unfinished Civil War were produced during the 1999 controversy about South Carolina’s decision to remove the Confederate battle flag from the state house and towards the end of the Clinton presidency, itself an era steeped in hillbilly/redneck discourse. Against this backdrop South Park, an animated show for adult audiences, parodied the “South will rise again” mentality, while *The Unfinished Civil War* explicitly tied the behavior of Civil War re-enactors to activities of racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Neither representation addressed the re-enactors main goal, educating the public, or its relationship with official organizations like the National Park Service. These omissions created a one-dimensional picture of the hobby that ignored its internal complexity and range of motivations.

In “The Red Badge of Gayness” the male citizens of South Park, Colorado participate in a Civil War re-enactment and then, fueled by schnapps flavored like s’mores, the popular marshmallow, chocolate, and graham cracker camping snack, begin to actually

---

re-fight the Civil War. The episode parodies re-enactment culture while also poking fun at the fear of private militias prevalent in the 1990s. Stylistically the episode parodies Civil War documentaries by including sepia toned images and voiceovers. It also factually addresses some opaque aspects of re-enacting culture, like how do you know when to “die.” Despite these sophisticated references, the episode presents the hobby only as men “playing soldier” and a deeply absurd pastime.

Although the show’s humor is crude, South Park’s creators construct pointed social satire and assume that its audience will pick up on allusions to high culture. The title of this episode clearly references Stephen Crane’s novel The Red Badge of Courage but does so by using the word “gay” as a negative description of the hobby’s participants. Using the term gay to refer to someone intensely disliked or “uncool” has been a fixture in American teens’ vocabulary since at least the 1970s. South Park’s language suggests that the dominant American culture views Civil War re-enactors as a disliked group. The episode briefly alludes to the presence of gay re-enactors. At one point Mr. Garrison, the openly gay teacher, wakes up next to another man and suggests everyone play “grab ass” around the campfire. The episode may imply that re-enactors form sexual relationships

---

15 This episode of South Park is available for free in its entirety online: http://www.southparkstudios.com/guide/314/
17 Trey Parker and Matt Stone, “Red Badge of Gayness,” South Park Season 3 Episode 14 (1999): approximately 00:14:30-00:14:40 and 00:15:50-00:16:05.
with each other but does not judge Mr. Garrison for his sexual identity. In the episode, Mr. Garrison’s suggestion heightens the sense that re-enactments are an absurd way to spend the weekend and constitute little more than camping in costume. During the course of this study several re-enactors made off-hand jokes about the homosocial nature of the hobby as a way to assert their heterosexual identity. Although the characters in *South Park* use the words “gay” and “fag” as an insult, in general the show’s political and social agenda highlights intolerance of intolerance. As a whole the show does not necessarily present a negative depiction of homosexuality. Indeed, *South Park* was nominated for a Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation award. Nevertheless, the title emphasizes re-enactors role as “cultural jerks” by referencing teenage slang for something “uncool” and a famous Civil War novel.

Re-enacting lends itself to parody; participants’ outsized personalities, frequent use of alcohol, and a profound willingness to talk make them easy prey for the humorist. Rob Hodge explained that *South Park*’s creators really “nailed” the re-enacting subculture and that, although he laughed along with the show, he wanted to “throw away all [his] gear and

---

18 Volunteers of the 40th Maine, group interview by author during the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek, October 18, 2008. Also, Yahoo! and Facebook both contain groups for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual re-enactors, indicating that at least some members of the hobby identify as homosexual and feel comfortable doing so openly.
20 Ibid.
give up this stupid hobby." The episode highlights the aspects of re-enacting culture that make its connection to the past seem particularly artificial. During the South Park event orientation, Grandpa Marvin Marsh is introduced as, “the only man actually old enough to have seen the Civil War [pause] re-enactment of 1924” (fig. 8). The episode makes clear that re-enactors actually do not re-enact the past but participate in representations of the past. During the re-enactment Eric Cartman, South Park’s resident troublemaker, breaks from the scenario, which confuses the crowd and causes Grandpa Marsh to halt the event saying, “The Confederacy can’t take the bell… G-damn it! Now we have to start over!” Of course, no one actually believes that history can begin again, hence the humor. However, J.R. Poole and other historians have emphasized that the desire “to begin again” defines the American relationship to the past. The belief that history can begin again remains central to how many Americans think of the war.

Although newspapers infrequently present the re-enactor as a clown in the same way television and film does, stories about re-enactors often support the hillbilly stereotype even as they try to “humanize” their subject. A February 2009 article in the Virginian-Pilot detailed the recent discovery of a “live” cannon ball in the home of a Civil

---

21 Robert Lee Hodge, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2009.
22 Trey Parker and Matt Stone, “The Red Badge of Gayness,” approximately 00:01:50.
23 Ibid., about 00:04:00-00:04:30.
Fred Harrell, the cannon ball’s owner, observed that seeing the fuse made it “exciting to own.” However, this excitement eventually attracted the attention of the local authorities and FBI. Although the author notes that Harrell keeps a long white beard to “look the part,” at no point does the author say that Harrell participates in Civil War re-enactments. The image of the southerner as a Civil War-obsessed “gun nut” continues to serve as a humorous diversion.

Like South Park and some newspaper coverage, The Unfinished Civil War trades on the same cultural stereotypes that established the poor, southern, white as an object of scorn. This presentation of re-enactors encourages the viewer to judge him instead of understand him. Kirschbaum employed a number of visual devices to signal that the white Civil War re-enactor is a “redneck” or a “hillbilly.” Like earlier representations of the barefoot hillbilly, the film emphasizes that some re-enactors choose not to wear shoes, and displays their course manners and “strange” behavior. When the viewer first encounters John Krausse he yells that, “there is only one point of view, it is out there on that field trying to stop the Yankees.” Krausse quickly emerges as the central character in the film and his lifestyle and beliefs became a stand-in for those of all re-enactors.

Charles “Buddy” Mellor, who attended the 14th Tennessee’s winter camp and took part in the documentary explained that Krausse was “destroyed” by his portrayal in the film.

---

Mellor defended his friend saying, “to watch that movie you would think [Krausse] was some country bumpkin. That impression is so far from the truth. John was a very knowledgeable and passionate man when it came to the Civil War.” However, in many respects Krausse displays typical hillbilly traits; he works a blue-collar job, speaks with an accent, was adopted, lives with a girlfriend, and does not have a college degree. The film ignores his knowledge of the war or special information that he contributes to his re-enacting group. Mellor and Hodge explained that many re-enactors, even those without formal historical training know a great deal about specific areas of Civil War military or material history. The film, however, reduced Krausse’s motivations to the Confederate battle flag and an inaccurate image of the pre-war South. These things do indeed take place at re-enactments, but the documentary ignores the sense that this is a temporary and alternate identity for many re-enactors.

Re-enactors Are (Not) Racists

Both implicitly and explicitly The Unfinished Civil War ties the re-enacting community to modern racism, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and the otherwise ignorant and intolerant. The re-enacting community generally felt that the film unfairly represented them by focusing too much on one individual, John Krausse, and editing around the

hobby’s moderate voices. Kirschbaum readily admitted that his film became more political than he had anticipated because he believed that the re-enacting community is deeply involved in the debates about historical interpretation unfolding today. Though re-enactors acknowledge that they want to defend the Confederate battle flag as part of American history, good and bad, the film did not take seriously the re-enactors’ concern that eradicating the flag is a poor substitute for actual reconciliation.

*The Unfinished Civil War* opens at the 1999 Re-enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg. After briefly introducing the hobby, the film cuts to clips of a white supremacy rally and David Duke, former leader of the KKK. Less than two minutes into the movie the link between re-enactors and overt, hostile racism is established. Perhaps most unfair about this connection is that none of the members of these scenes actually appear to be re-enactors. A member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans at the 2008 Gettysburg re-enactment went to great pains to assert that his group includes some African Americans and opposes the use of the Confederate battle flag by white supremacist groups. It is important to the reputation of his organization and to him personally to have the SCV seen as an organization that opposes bigotry without ignoring the historical role that the flag played. These men would like to keep the flag in its 19th century context, in an era before the KKK’s revival in the 1950s and 1960s or its use by

---

neo-nazi groups. The re-enacting community at large tries to provide a space in which the opinions of all members are respected, if not always agreed with. The growing presence of African Americans, women, and other minority groups in the hobby suggests that there is room for a variety of voices. Though there is no doubt that racism exists within the re-enacting community and that the symbols the group embraces are, at best, misunderstood and at worst offensive, the community’s goal is to honor the 19th century.

As a counterbalance to the portrayal of John Krausse the film relies heavily on what it terms the “surprising” presence of Joe McGill, an African American re-enactor with the 54th Massachusetts. The voices of African Americans remain underrepresented in the re-enacting community and the inclusion of Joe McGill and his fellow 54th MA members presents an important alternative voice to the white re-enactors who dominate the hobby. However, the filmmakers set up McGill and Krausse as near mutually exclusive versions of re-enacting, not as co-existing strains of the same hobby. Re-enacting involves the constant negotiation of historical meaning between individuals and groups as well as between the re-enacting community and the public at large. Unfortunately, the film downplayed the productive arguments that occur internally and focused on an external event that happened to attract the attention and time of the re-enacting community. The two men meet at the end of the film and embrace, but the filmmakers set up McGill as a sympathetic character and Krausse as something akin to the film’s villain.
Slavery’s legacy remains a deeply emotional topic for many Americans. In *The Unfinished Civil War* one family of re-enactors suggested that slavery “wasn’t so bad” while McGill makes a pilgrimage to sleep in a slave cabin and understand his ancestors. The family who question slavery’s negative legacy appear only long enough to make that statement. The vast majority of hobbyists, however, acknowledge slavery’s negative legacy and make no attempt to defend the white South’s labor practices. Unlike this serious examination of slavery’s legacy, *South Park* downplays this reality and instead uses it as an empty threat. “The Red Badge of Gayness” touches on slavery’s role in the war and the “South will rise again” mentality. When Cartman arrives dressed as General Lee he bets Stan Marsh and Kyle Broflovski, the third-graders who are the show’s central characters, that the South will win the battle this year. Knowing about the historic battle’s outcome, Stan and Kyle take the bet and tell Cartman he will have to be their slave for a week.29

Stan, Cartman, and Kyle’s position as third graders allows the series’ creators, Matt Parker and Trey Stone, to get away with much more in their satire than other programs. In this episode, slavery’s role in the war is acknowledged but literally reduced to child’s play and, not unlike in the re-enacting community itself, made a non-issue by the emphasis on military strategy. Similarly, Cartman’s suggestion that the Confederacy “doesn’t have to lose. Gentlemen, we can win this battle. Sure we could lose, and tonight we could go back to our families and say ‘we did it, we lost like we were supposed to, aren’t we proud.’

29 Trey Parker and Matt Stone, “Red Badge of Gayness,” about 00:02:10-00:03:00.
Or we take that hill… and yell ‘not this year! This year belongs to the Confederacy!’” In response to Cartman’s speech, the Confederate re-enactors, who have imbibed a fair amount of s’mores schnapps at this point, excitedly agree and express their desire not to “be [the Union’s] bitches” this year.30 In a reference to the reconciliation theme, a prevalent method of framing Civil War stories during the period immediately after the war, one South Park Confederate says, “oh we can all be friends now” even though the Union feels the South “ruined the re-enactment.” Most re-enactors feel a good-natured rivalry with “the other side” but take fidelity to the historic event seriously.

South Park is known for its biting satire of political and cultural figures. Given the show’s quick production schedule, most episodes are written and animated in about one week, the show can respond to current events more quickly than other non-news television shows.31 The series’ politics are difficult to pin down and are simultaneously defined as anti-political correctness, anti-liberal, anti-religion, and anti-conservative. In his essay, “South Park Heretics: Confronting Orthodoxy through Theater of the Absurd,” writing professor Randall Fallows emphasizes that the program’s humor is based on the “ridiculous all-or-nothing thinking that not only characterizes the [show’s adult characters]

30 Ibid., about 00:04:45-00:06:00.
but has also become increasingly common in American culture."32 The show’s writers and producers are keenly aware of its position in pop culture. *South Park* manages to remain popular by pillorying almost any and all aspects of American life thought ridiculous or too taboo for a live-action sitcom or network television.

*South Park* episodes frequently reference current events or contemporary social anxieties. “The Red Badge of Gayness” positions the re-enacting community in relationship to the mid and late 1990s fear of militias. The modern militia movement grew in the 1990s and generated a number of major news stories. In a 1996 article for the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* lawyer Joelle E. Polesky analyzed “The Rise of the Private Militia” and emphasized that by the mid-1990s public anxiety about armed groups who practice military tactics reached its peak.33 Public concern stemmed in part from the events in Waco, Texas; at the “Ruby Ridge” compound in Idaho; and the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. In addition, Americans felt an increasing anxiety about the rise of far-right and racist ideologies. A complete analysis of the modern militia movement is beyond the scope of this project, but this anxiety in the mid and late 1990s adds depth to *South Park*’s references to the re-enactors run amuck in as “a frightening


radical group” and “right wing terrorists.” No doubt references to the National Guard standing off against a group of American civilians would resonate with viewers familiar with current events.

It was apparently during the 1990s that concerns about re-enactment groups serving as modern militia groups surfaced, though there is no evidence that the government seriously attempted to ban the hobby. In the *South Park* episode Grandpa Marsh tells the advancing National Guard that, “[re-enactors are] not terrorists, they’re just a bunch of drunk wankers from Colorado.”

Though these scenes are humorous because the men fire blanks and are propelled more by alcohol than ideology, the fear of militias and radical white men was very real at the time. Today’s re-enactors often joke about their inability to cause any “real” trouble. At the 14th Tennessee’s winter encampment Chris “Doc” Fisher and a few other members mimed trying to charge while using a cane and several individuals detailed their back problems or general lack of interest in contemporary politics. Re-enactors emphasize the absurdity of anyone actually feeling afraid of their military potential in the present. The 19th century techniques they master are valuable precisely because of their difference from contemporary warfare.

---

34 Trey Parker and Matt Stone, "Red Badge of Gayness," approximately 00:11:05-00:12:30.
35 Chris Fisher, interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28 2009.
and Russell L. Seibert, interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF, February 28, 2009.
More recently, re-enactments have become entangled in debates about the appropriate commemoration of the war’s 150th anniversary. Stories that tie re-enactors to current events frequently focus on public funding for events or battlefield preservation. During the economic downturn of 2008 and 2009 a number of municipalities cut back or ceased funding history days and battle re-enactments. The controversy in South Carolina, and its coverage, exemplify the way that re-enactments and historical commemorations in general become political issues. Planners for the war’s upcoming 150th anniversary told the Charleston Post and Courier that given the war’s continued controversy finding private donations can be very difficult. Roger Stroup, executive director of the South Carolina Archives and History Center, explained that, “people don’t want to be seen as promoting one side or the other or one issue or another… There’s just a hard-core group of people that feel like slavery was not the cause. We’ve got the declaration of causes right here in this building. One of them says ‘to preserve slavery.’ You can’t get around that.”

Although the newspaper did not take a side in the controversy, stories about upcoming commemorations often include fears of offending one group or another.

Unlike celebrations in the 1960s, which focused on celebrating military valor, today’s event organizers work to include the voices of all communities touched by the war. This project, however, is laden with “historical landmines.”

---

military history allows a municipality to avoid difficult conversations about the role race played in shaping a community. In the *Charleston City Paper* journalist Greg Hambrick speculates that, “Just as the centennial shined a light on the civil rights struggle nearly 50 years ago, this commemoration will be less of a reminder of where we were and more of a mirror reflecting where we are.”

Using these stories as a way to reflect on current political tensions indicates that re-enactors have, at least in part, caused the public to think about the past. Unfortunately, in the view of many re-enactors, these conversations remain too tied to 21st century politics and social norms. By questioning its value and the appropriateness of these projects, however, the coverage suggests that those who uncritically celebrate the past are insensitive if not outright prejudiced.

**Re-enactors Can (Not) Explain 21st Century Life**

Coverage of re-enactors in print outlets often connects these debates about history to contemporary life. At times the Civil War and re-enactors are expressly invoked as an analogy to current events. Although this tactic is comparatively uncommon, it suggests that the Civil War’s ability to speak directly to an American sense of identity has not waned with time. Over twenty years ago *The New York Times* used the re-enactor as a way to reflect on the modern condition. In her 1988 article novelist Rita Mae Brown tied the appeal of re-enacting to the horror of modern war’s civilian death, firebombs, and other

---

38 Ibid.
atrocities. She wrote that, “There may still be valor in combat but no longer any honor. Small wonder that some Americans become Civil War re-enactors. Since we don't know how to go forward, how to cleanse our degradation, why not go backward?”

The Civil War continues to function as a metaphor and analogy used to help Americans understand the mass death of Americans. Shortly after the September 11 attacks the USA Today ran an article reflecting on the possibility that 9/11 might eclipse the Battle of Antietam as the bloodiest day in American history. The author explained that, “those who come here say the causes that men fought over on Sept. 17, 1862 -- freedom, liberty, the right to self-determination -- are more important than ever.” That the reporter chose to emphasize the Civil War, an incredibly destructive war, in a time of national unity through mourning highlights the war’s place as a watershed moment in the construction of the nation. The author makes comparisons between the 21st and 19th Centuries at the most superficial level: body counts. Although the author reflects on the meaning of the Civil War and of 9/11, re-enactors serve as background color in the piece and their role as self-appointed guardians of history is left undiscussed.

The war’s role in the present often frustrates re-enactors who wish to understand the event in its 19th century context, ignoring how it is understood today. Recently,

39 Rita Mae Brown, "Fighting the Civil War Anew."
41 Ibid.
however, Civil War enthusiasts have begun to discuss the wider public’s perception of their hobby. In *America’s Civil War*, a magazine produced for the “history buff” community, lively debates about the war’s role in modern life occur in the letters to the editor section. The magazine’s readership clearly recognizes that the magazine, and their hobby, exists in the 21st century. These readers also express worry about publishing too many photographs of controversial Confederates on the cover. In the March 2009 *America’s Civil War* a reader from Minnesota wrote to scold the magazine for publishing a photo of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a founding member of the KKK, on its January issue. He wrote that, “less than one week from the probable election [sic] of the first African-American president of the United States, and on the cover of *America’s Civil War* is a fill-sized color picture of the founder of the Ku Klux Klan.” The reader goes on to assert that, “the ‘best’ benefit of the doubt I can give the editorial board of your magazine… is that no one gave any thought to the juxtaposition of the magazine’s release and the date of the election. The ‘worst’ unfortunately, is that you are simply racist; that you considered the message that might be sent by featuring Forrest … and decided to release it anyway.” Another reader, from California, echoed his feelings about the timing but suggested that the article might let modern Southerners know “what the Confederacy was really fighting for.” Unfortunately, these debates rarely continue to the re-enactment

---

weekend. In part this may stem from a desire to ensure that camp-mates get along, but these debates also indicate that tension exists in the Civil War enthusiast community between those who see the war as a completed historical event, sealed in the 19th century, and those who think the war continues to have an impact today.

**Media By and For Re-Enactors**

Several magazines dedicated to the Civil War are available in major bookstores. *Civil War Times* and *America’s Civil War*, both published by the Weider History Group, Inc. and edited by Stephen Petraneck, are glossy full-color magazines for the history buff community. Their stories emphasize the war’s events and personalities with less attention dedicated to the material culture of the war. Each publication occasionally expresses frustration with the re-enacting community, concerned not only by their behavior but with safety. A brief piece titled “Fools and Firearms” in the March 2009 issue of *America’s Civil War* warns that, “taking the field with dabblers who mishandle their weapons can be annoying… Occasionally these re-enactors cause serious injuries.” Likewise, a “Civil War Today” section in the October 2008 issue of *Civil War Times* emphasizes that poorly handling weaponry or shells, even antique ones, can cause serious injury or death. Although stories like this appear in mainstream media, the *Virginian-Pilot* piece discussed

---

earlier is a good example, the tone varies dramatically by outlet. The stories in local papers report community news but in the context of a human-interest story not something that causes real concern. The serious tone in Civil War magazine articles about re-enactors points to some concern that the re-enacting community can be reckless or even inappropriate, it also suggests that the Civil War buffs take re-enactors and their project seriously.

Magazines produced for the Civil War re-enacting community specifically make up a small subset of the total number of history magazines available to the war buff. The Camp Chase Gazette (fig. 9), founded in 1972, speaks directly to the re-enacting community. Although there are a few other magazines dedicated to Civil War re-enacting, the Camp Chase Gazette appears to be the most influential magazine of its kind. The magazine publishes ten issues a year, each with seventy pages. It is in the Camp Chase Gazette that the philosophy and priorities of the re-enacting community are most clearly articulated. The magazine’s imagery and content emphasize material culture from the 19th century and offer tips on how to improve an impression or modify a weapon to more closely resemble its Civil War counterpart.

Unlike magazines intended for a broader audience of Civil War enthusiasts, the Camp Chase Gazette only addresses historic battles through the lens of re-enacting. Each issue is published predominately in black and white, with only a few central pages in color. Each month these color pages are dedicated to first-person accounts of a recent re-
enactment (fig. 10). These accounts are not written from the perspective of the historical impression, i.e. a Civil War soldier, but as a modern re-enactor reviewing the weekend as an event. The re-enactors who write these pieces often report on whether or not the scenarios, how the battle’s are staged, are exciting and interesting. Very little, if any, of the column addresses the historical battle’s events or significance. This focus on the re-enactment’s success or failure makes sense in the context of a hobbyist’s magazine, but it stifles any critical discussion of the past in favor of entertainment in the present. Civil War enthusiasts, whether they are re-enactors, history buffs, or academics, form a large market for Civil War-specific media. A number of publications, some founded during the 1960s centennial celebrations, provide this community with information on everything from perfecting one’s impression to battlefield maps and book reviews.

The publications created by re-enactors for re-enactors often ignore controversial topics or 21st century political debates. The tone and theme of the Camp Chase Gazette is remarkably consistent, in all ten issues published in 2007 the editor’s letter criticizes how history and/or civics is taught in the United States and the ever-smaller role military history plays in school curriculum. In April 2007 he began his letter with an anecdote regarding lecturing school groups and the American Constitution. After cataloging the various ways the education system has failed to teach young Americans civics, he ends with a rallying cry: “the only time most students would see Constitutional Amendments in action is in grade school. Knowing the Constitution is an American life skill that every
citizen within these borders needs to achieve before they are 18-years old.”

In other letters, Sexton worries about the effort to define military culture as “counter culture” and growing political correctness in American school systems. He claims that, “the ‘P.C.’ mentality, which is so prevalent among modern scholars and their students, is dangerous and threatens our very existence. It is time for the nation to sit up and start putting our historical house back in order.”

This combative defense of military history, and the Civil War in particular, clashes with the tone often taken by teachers and even writers in more mainstream Civil War magazines. It is difficult to know if Sexton’s “Dispatches” pushed the community towards a more aggressive tone, or if he is reacting to what he perceives as a threatened community. In either case, Sexton’s letters echo the most common talking points re-enactors use to describe their motivations. However, his editor’s letter is the only place in the magazine where contemporary politics intrude on the coverage of re-enactments, material culture, and tips for hobbyists.

In magazines geared toward Civil War history buffs, who do not identify with or participate in historical re-enactments, writers occasionally express concern that this group will be taken to be the example for the entire community of Civil War enthusiasts. While there is little outright hostility, letters to the editor often belie the subtle tension between the two groups.

---

46 C. Reece Sexton, Dispatches, Camp Chase Gazette, April 2007, 7.
Conclusion

Each kind of niche publication provides a space in which the re-enacting community can affirm its priorities and present itself without apology or hillbilly expectations. Though the *Camp Chase Gazette* and more general Civil War publications prioritize different components of Civil War history and scholarship, both types of magazines take the re-enactor seriously as an audience and participant in the creation of historical narratives.

Re-enactors clearly form a key demographic for these publications and they are treated with respect. Letters to the Editor of *America’s Civil War* and the *Civil War Times* often begin with a statement of the writer’s re-enactment credentials as a method for establishing credibility. Mike Mears from Hueytown, Alabama wrote to correct the *Civil War Times* description of the historical unit to which Mears belongs. Not only does Mears open with his re-enacting position, as a captain in the 15th Alabama Infantry, but he goes on to include photographs and a number of academic citations with his work.48 In contrast to the *Camp Chase Gazette*, the letters to the editor section in *America’s Civil War* and *Civil War Times* are substantially more active and present nuanced arguments about the war, its coverage, and historical practices. Letter writers here include professors from a variety of institutions in the United States, including Bradley University in Illinois and

---

Purdue University in Indiana, re-enactors, and members of the Park Service or museum staff.

It is an understatement to say that the Internet has had a profound effect on the re-enacting community. Like many hobby communities, re-enactors increasingly organize their events online, use e-mail to communicate, and take advantage of online archives and other resources. Rob Hodge explained that, in his opinion, the presence of online forums, publications, and groups has actually hurt the hobby by making the exchange of information instantaneous and the fracturing of groups along political lines significantly easier.\(^4^9\) Despite this criticism, many of the re-enactors who agreed to participate in this study said their units do a great deal of planning online via Facebook or Yahoo! groups and visit forums like Authentic-Campaigner at least occasionally. Although beyond the scope of this study, the Internet’s ability to create interest groups across geographic distance seems particularly well suited to the perpetuation of re-enacting culture. Social media are quickly gaining popularity within the community. Many of the traditional forums for information exchange, like *The Camp Chase Gazette* or *The Civil War Times* have not successfully migrated online. Although the *Civil War News* has begun to post back issues online, the content is not easy to search. Like traditional media outlets, these niche publications have been hurt by the growth of online media.\(^5^0\) It is difficult to see how a

\(^4^9\) Robert Lee Hodge, telephone interview by author, March 5, 2009.
\(^5^0\) Kay Jorgensen, telephone interview with author, February 26, 2009.
publication like *The Camp Chase Gazette* which has event listings as a substantial portion of its content will survive when that information is available on the web.

The popular media continues to cover re-enacting events and has begun to focus on re-enactments of other eras. A November 2008 article by Stephen Regenold, “Past is Back: Deer Hunting Frontier Style,” in *The New York Times* highlighted the appeal of antiquated living styles, weapons, and processes. Citing the strain of historical re-enactment that runs through these events, he notes that the group “got bored with modern deer hunting” and wanted a challenge.\(^{51}\) The feeling of escape into another time remains prevalent throughout the coverage of re-enactors in major newspapers. These articles typically appear in the Travel section and underscore the sense of a re-enactment as someplace else in both time and space. A lengthy *New York Times* article from late February 2009 described a group of re-enactors who participated in a Battle of the Bulge re-enactment.\(^{52}\) The author nevertheless suggests that re-enacting is a bizarre hobby that attracts people who do not truly understand how emotionally charged history can be. Instead of taking seriously the work that re-enactors do to translate historical information into the present or how the enactment of history can alter a nation’s understanding of the past these media outlets perpetuate the image of an under-educated hillbilly, insensitive to the feelings of others and somehow threatening to modern life.


Conclusion

Re-enactors use elements of history, the documents and objects from the past, in order to present Americans with an interpretation of their collective memory. By making this collective memory physical and accessible the re-enactor ensures that old skills at risk of fading away regain value as part of the shared American past. By presenting heritage using historically accurate or authentic pieces of equipment the re-enactor ties cultural memory to tangible objects, freeing history from the sealed space of textbooks or museum display cases. Although there is little risk of the war losing its near mythic status in American life, re-enactors understand that the social value attached to the war is tied to the stories people pass on to one another.

The risk with Civil War re-enacting, as with all living history displays, is that its emphasis on empathy and pleasure stunts any serious consideration of the past. Unlike textual histories, which give voice to alternative narratives of the Civil War and antebellum South, the re-enactment ignores nearly all the history that came later: civil rights, Jim Crow laws, and the economic and political results of reconstruction. Turning away from these uncomfortable aspects of the past is no doubt easier than confronting them in a living history representation. Spectators would not visit regularly if they were made to feel uncomfortable or “bad” about the American past. As a vacation spot, the re-enactment would die. Indeed, few re-enactors are willing to participate in the more controversial
aspects of re-enacting, including portraying slave catchers. It is a mistake to assume that because of these omissions hobbyists are motivated by more sinister goals.

Re-enacting is fun. People would not spend thousands of dollars, wear wool in July, and give up their weekends if the hobby was not personally rewarding. Many components of re-enacting, camping, guns, and “family values,” are common interests among Americans. The celebration of heritage central to re-enactments, one that celebrates the white experience of the Civil War, reaffirms this community’s American identity. When done well, re-enactments highlight the military experience of the Civil War and reaffirm the value of the 19th century past without negating others’ experiences. The jovial tone at re-enactments reinforces the idea that, while the African American past is under-represented, the event’s goal is not to suggest that only the white experience is valid.

American heritage remains a complicated issue, fraught with emotional and political baggage that continues to cause heated debates. After all, one group’s history signals another group’s oppression. Although re-enactors sometimes appear insensitive to the history of other (i.e. non-white) groups, the hobbyists who took part in this study suggested that it is important to remember all of American history, even the uncomfortable parts. Unfortunately, few re-enactors openly address these uncomfortable issues. This avoidance is not necessarily the same thing as denial; re-enacting must remain fun to survive. Conversations about race may be valuable but they are not always
compatible with a weekend vacation. A surface-level reading of the hobby, that its participants and the rural Southern whites portrayed in Deliverance are not so far apart, ignores the real value the hobby creates by enacting one variation of American heritage for an audience. In addition, the re-enacting community functions as a community by offering social support to its members and creating a space in which stories about the Civil War and its legacy circulate freely.

Ultimately, like all communities, the hobby will change as its demographics shift. Younger re-enactors appear more willing to critique the hobby and are less emotionally invested in some of the debates about the hobby’s relationship to white supremacy. Although it is difficult to draw a causal relationship between re-enacting’s favored narratives of the war and shifts in American social memory, the continued popularity of re-enactments suggests that it will remain a force in American life. By keeping this history alive through the enactment of a social memory of the Civil War, re-enactors ensure that a specific narrative of the past continues to circulate among the many narratives that define American life.
Figures

Figure 1. Relationship between history, social memory, and heritage.

Figure 2. Photograph of the constructed version of the Gettysburg Seminary. Gettysburg Re-Enactment, July 4, 2008. Author’s photograph.
Figure 3. Map of the 144th Anniversary of the Battle of Cedar Creek. Scan of the official program.

October 17-18, 2008.
Figure 4. Inside of a sutler’s tent. Gettysburg Re-enactment, July 4, 2008. Author’s photograph.
Figure 5. Douglas Decker, top center, and unidentified assistants. Medical demonstration at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek. October 18, 2008. Author’s photograph.
Figure 6. 14th TN practices stacking arms at winter encampment, February 8, 2009. Author’s photograph.
Figure 7. “Lesson Fifth” and illustrated plate. Colonel W.J. Hardee, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* (New Orleans, LA: H.P. Lathrop, 1861). Scan from Kent State University’s microfilm, retouched by the author using Photoshop.
Figure 8. Screen shot from Trey Parker and Matt Stone, "Red Badge of Gayness," *South Park.*

Approximately 00:01:50 into episode.
Figure 9. *Camp Chase Gazette*, June 2007. Scan of cover.

Scan of pages 38-39.
References


Yori, Tom. Impressions of the Recent Re-Enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg as Related By a Participant and Member of the 11th Company of Unattached Others. Brooks, ME: [Self Published], 1988.


**List of Interviews**

Bell, Michael. Interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek. October 19, 2008.


Creggar, Aaron. Interview at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF. February 28, 2009.


Koontz, Harry “Skip” Eugene. Interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF. February 28, 2009.


Lyons, Robert. Interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek. October 18, 2008.

Orr, James. Interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF. February 28, 2009.

Seibert, Russell. Interview by author at the winter encampment of the 14th TN and CMF. February 28, 2009.

Smithson, Cindy. Interview by author at the Re-enactment of the Battle of Cedar Creek. October 18, 2008.