

The New York Times

The Birth of Civil War Reenacting

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Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

On the morning of Feb. 22, 1864 in Hillsborough, Ohio, a crowd gathered for a celebration of Washington's Birthday. "The usual monotony of our peaceful and quiet town was agreeably broken," wrote the local newspaper, the Highland Weekly News, when three cavalry companies forming the 24th Battalion of the Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, armed and equipped with sabres and carbines, paraded in front of the public square. No one but the officers knew what would happen. In short time, "the 4-pounder known as 'Old Red' was brought out, and a gun-squad formed of a number of veteran volunteers." Then the cavalry galloped off to the outskirts of town, the artillery took position and the infantry began building breastworks.

Finally, "the secret was out," the paper reported. There was to be a sham battle, and once the crowd realized what was coming, the "excitement rose to fever heat," and "expectation stood on tip-toe." With the crack of pistols and carbines, hand-to-hand combat and "the sulphurous smoke of powder" — not to mention women screaming, boys yelling in delight and men and horses mingled in an inextricable mess, the scene is reported to have portrayed "a vivid imitation of the stern realities of war."

We tend to think of Civil War reenactment as a modern phenomenon, a way for people in the 20th and 21st centuries to experience a taste of what the conflict was like. But in fact, staged battles began while the war was still underway. Known as "sham battles," "mock battles" or "mimic battles," these battles were enacted for a variety of reasons: entertainment, practice and to demonstrate to civilians back home what happened during the war.

According to R. Lee Hadden, author of "Reliving the Civil War: A Reenactor's Handbook," people have been reenacting great events since the beginning of human society, including hunting experiences, religious events, and earlier wars. "Like today's

reenactments,” he writes, “there is noise, confusion, heat, and lack of shade.” On July 4, 1861, in Findlay, Ohio, a company of foot and mounted soldiers engaged in a sham battle, followed by fireworks, with great hopes that by the next July 4th the government and army “will be enabled to quell the rebellion in the South, hang all the traitors, and restore our beloved Union to its once happy condition.” On July 4, 1862, a sham battle in Bloomsburg, Penn., was “the feature of the day,” according to *The Star of the North*, and won “the great admiration of the large crowd convened to witness the fight.”

Independence Day wasn't the only occasion for reenactments. To generate the “Christmas feeling” in Alexandria, Va., in 1861, “the fun became ‘fast and furious,’” according to *The Local News*, “fire crackers sparkled and cracked” and “there was a mimic battle between opposing crowds,” mostly in uniform. “The whole vicinity was thronged with eager combatants,” according to the newspaper.

“The Yankees are great on shams,” the *Daily Nashville Patriot* noted on Dec. 5, 1861, and, indeed, shams seem mostly a Union phenomenon. A report from *The Richmond Dispatch*, published by *The National Republican* in Washington, on Feb. 5, 1862, bemoans “the negligence on the part of [Confederate] officers in accustoming their men to the details of actual battle ... This is in strong contrast with the Yankees, who try, but vainly, by such expedients as grand reviews, sham battles, &c., to accustom their men to danger.”

“They stand up to each other in mock battle like heroes, fight desperately with blank cartridges, and charge on their own lines with ... impetuosity,” *The New Orleans Daily Crescent* sneered about the Yanks on July 4, 1861, after determining that the “great firing of guns” and smoke observed near Hampton Roads, Va., came from forces under Gen. Benjamin Butler, “merely exercising his men in a sham battle.”

The report goes on: “Probably he means ... to frighten the Confederates ..., just as Chinese warriors sometimes attempt to scare the enemy by ringing bells and beating gongs.” Others saw Butler's battle differently. According to Maj. Troy D. Marshall, the site director of the Virginia Museum of the Civil War, the Yankees' need for shams, like the one fought in Winchester, Va., — “in enemy territory” — 10 days before the Battle of New Market in May 1864 “showed the trust they didn't have in their troops; they needed the drilling.”

Whether the men were sufficiently trained or not, such practice battles were used as ways “to get the men used to the excitement in the field,” “to familiarize themselves with rapid movements of all kind of ground,” noted one news account, “to accustom the Federals to the action that will early take place” and to teach the men how to get the feeling for war. Some places, like Fort Monroe, a Union outpost in Virginia, conducted sham battles daily. “I could not but think how easy a matter it was to so stir up the passions of men as to produce strife and deadly carnage between them,” one soldier reported on a sham near Culpeper, Va.

Occasional reports of Confederate sham battles surfaced as well. In Dalton, Ga., for example, the Confederates held a dress drill and sham battle on March 16, 1864, at which “there were a large attendance, especially of general officers” who witnessed musketry and artillery firing. According to *The Macon Beacon*, the day was “splendid — the whole affair was very imposing and drew forth the warmest praise of all who witnessed it.”

A month later in Dalton, Confederate Gen. William J. Hardee’s sham battle “was witnessed by a large number of ladies, soldiers, and citizens,” according to *The Memphis Daily Appeal*. “It proved to be a very agreeable affair.” Even though it was several years into the war, according to the paper, visitors to the area “had a gay and unusual time for the past few days. Sham-battles are taking place, army theatricals have sprung up, dancing has been instituted, and mirth reinstated, almost beyond measure.”

Although generally shams were “a luxury the Confederates could not afford,” according to David Slay, the acting park historian at Vicksburg National Military Park, in late winter 1864 at Dalton, “a snowfall shut down operations and provided the Confederates with all the ammunition they could hurl at one another. What began as horseplay developed into a full-scale battle as the snowballing went from disorganized tribal melee to full Napoleonic battle array complete with regiments, flags, and officers.”

In fact, many spontaneous skirmishes were of the “snowball battle” variety, according to John Hennessey, the chief historian and chief of interpretation at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Snowball battles often used the same tactics as sham battles but were “raucously — sometimes ultra violent — fun.”

Today, Civil War reenactments are a multi-million-dollar industry involving tens of thousands of Civil War enthusiasts, historians, “living historians,” families, civilians and

modern-day veterans who participate as a hobby. What is the link from the celebratory and practice battles of yore to the reenactments today, where actors embody those who came before, and the dead rise at the end of each event?

“The most direct line to reenactment of today is not the participants, but the spectators,” Mr. Hennessey said. The American tradition of watching war began during the Civil War: At the First Battle of Bull Run, he said, 500 spectators from Washington, D.C. — “a civilian horde” — drove out to the battlefield on a Sunday to watch the fighting. Congressmen, senators, common folk, and “a few huxter women ... with carts loaded with pies and other edibles” — not unlike the vendors at reenactment battle sites today — came to watch men kill and be killed. Today people “swarm by the thousands on hot summer afternoons ... to watch men pretend to kill each other in reenactments.”

Within days of the war’s end, veterans were being put into reenactment service — even before the end of the war had been officially declared. On April 21, 1865, the town of Massillon, Ohio, was right back into the business of luring crowds with sham battles as part of a day-long “jubilation over the recent victory of the Federal armies and the surrender of Lee.” Two months later, in planning events for July 4th, The Cleveland Leader suggested that “one of the most attractive features that could be introduced would be a sham battle ... There will be here returned veterans enough who would be glad to unite in such a project,” a replay of what one sham participant called “a smoky, stunning old time.”

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Sources: The Vermont Phoenix (Brattleboro), May 16, 1861; New Orleans Daily Crescent, July 4, 1861; The Tiffin Weekly Tribune (Tiffin, Ohio), July 12, 1861; Letters from Cyrus Morton Cutler, Oct. 28, 1861, courtesy of John Hennessey, chief historian and chief of interpretation, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park; The National Republican (Washington, D.C.), Nov. 9, 1861; Shreveport Semi-Weekly News (La.), Dec. 2, 1861; The Daily Nashville Patriot, Dec. 5, 1861; The Local News (Alexandria, Va.), Dec. 26, 1861; The National Republican (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 5, 1862; The Daily Intelligencer (Wheeling, Va.), May 29, 1862; The Star of the North (Bloomsburg, Pa.), July 16, 1862; The Pomeroy Weekly Telegraph (Pomeroy, Ohio), Aug. 22, 1862; The Memphis Daily Appeal, Feb. 6, 1864; The Rochester Union and Advertiser, Feb. 26, 1864; The Highland Weekly News (Hillsborough, Ohio); February

25, 1864; The Macon Beacon, March 23, 1864; Memphis Daily Appeal, April 6, 1864; The Daily Ohio Statesman, April 24, 1865; The Cleveland Leader, June 20, 1865; R. Lee Hadden, "Reliving the Civil War: A Reenactor's Handbook," Second Edition; John J. Hennessy, "War Watchers at Bull Run During America's Civil War," Civil War Times, June 12, 2006; Thomas R. Flagel, "The History Buff's Guide to the Civil War"; Bloomberg Businessweek, Feb. 25, 2011; interview with John Hennessy, chief historian and chief of interpretation, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Sept. 19, 2014; email correspondence with David Slay, acting historian, Vicksburg National Military Park, Sept. 21, 2014; interview with Major Troy D. Marshall, site director, Virginia Museum of the Civil War, Sept. 26, 2014..

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