

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Civil War Reenacting

By **Clint Johnson, Color Sergeant for the 26th Regiment of North Carolina Troops**

Shelby Foote, a historian who spent more than 20 years writing a three-volume history of The Civil War, was surrounded by several reenactors outside of a university where he was speaking. One asked the obvious question to a man who had written more than 3,000 pages seemingly covering every aspect of a war that stretched from New Mexico to New York: “Is there anything about the War that you don’t know?”

Foote’s response was immediate: “I still don’t know how they did it. How does a starving man march 20 miles then go into a three-hour battle?”¹

Civil War reenactors attempt to answer Foote’s rhetorical question by putting their 21st century selves into the roles of 19th century people.

Why Reenactors Do it

Reenactors have a variety of reasons for dressing up on the weekends then plunging into their interpretation of a war that killed, by recent estimates, 750,000 people.

A love of history of all time periods is common though reenactors focus on the 19th century. Reenactors believe that a weekend playing soldier or civilian brings them closer to understanding the experiences of the men and women who lived in that time. One can read the history of how Confederate Major General Ambrose Powell Hill’s Light Division marched 22 miles from Harpers Ferry, Virginia to Sharpsburg, Maryland. and then went into battle to save Lee’s army, but until one has marched that same route, it is all theory. The exhaustion felt at the end of that reenacting march brings home the realization that the soldiers of the Civil War were tough.

Reenactors enjoy camping, cooking over an open fire, guns, loud noises, marching, military discipline, and telling stories. What’s not to like?

Reenactors accept discomfort, port-a-johns, close quarters, and the aches that come with carrying gear that weighs 20 pounds or more.

¹ Shelby Foote to the author in 1999 at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory NC.

Who Can Reenact

Reenacting can be a family hobby with Dad, Mom, and the kids all portraying 19th century roles. Families wishing to stay together all weekend can portray civilians. Or, Dad can stay in the military camp while Mom and the kids stay in a civilian camp.

Prospective reenactors should research units to judge how accepting they are of family participation. Some units focus on the military side of reenacting, preferring to keep civilian women in a separate camp while other units allow children to run around the military camp. Few units allow people in 21st century garb to camp in the military camp as it detracts from the reenactment atmosphere. While family involvement may be the goal of some reenactors, others enjoy the freedom of being away from the family on the weekend. Camping with one's friends can be an attractive incentive to pack up the gear and drive away rather than staying home doing chores.

Reenactors adopt what they call "impressions" based on the type of person they want to portray. No one in the 21st century really knows what it was like in the 19th century, but one can develop an idea from reading about the time period and convert that idea into a reenacting reality. For example, most reenactors portray common soldiers, but maybe someone wants to portray a foreign-born ancestor so their impression will be augmented by speaking in an accent. Perhaps a particular company or regiment in the war had distinctive uniforms. A reenactor could choose that impression by joining a reenacting unit following those uniform guidelines.

Whoever is physically able can take to the battlefield with certain age restrictions. Little children have no business on the field because they can become separated from parents. But, there are legitimate roles for reenactors in their early teens to act as runners, or fifers or drummers if they are musically inclined to join units which have field musicians.

Most units require members to be at least 16 years old before they can fall into ranks with a musket because of the maturity necessary to handle a firearm.

The physically disabled cannot take the field as soldiers, but the impression of a wounded soldier in a period wheel chair being pushed by a civilian in period clothes is welcome.

Women reenactors portraying soldiers are not uncommon, just as there were women in ranks during the Civil War. Women have to make the effort to disguise themselves as men. That will mean pushing long hair under a hat, taking off ear rings, and doing their best to hide the evidence of being female.

All races and ethnicities can reenact. During the Civil War Native Americans, Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics fought on both sides. Between a quarter and a third of the Union army was made up of European immigrants so real or imitation Irish and eastern European accents are welcome.

Particularly welcome—and needed—at reenactments are Black reenactors. While some historians downplay or even deny the existence of gun-toting Black Confederates, insisting the only Blacks in Confederate gray were body servants, Black reenactors often have family knowledge that their ancestors did fight for the Confederacy. It is common to find Black reenactors sprinkled in the Confederate ranks. Also welcome are Black reenactors portraying slaves or free blacks, teamsters, horse handlers, or other roles common to the period.

The United States Colored Troops, the freemen and runaway slaves who joined the Union army in numbers around 180,000, are a small, but highly appreciated branch of reenacting.

The problem with modern day reenacting for USCTs is that they were not at many of the major battles because the original Union generals refused to put them into ranks beside white soldiers and because significant numbers weren't enlisted or trained until the middle of 1863. The USCTs fought as all Black units commanded by white officers.

It is one of the rich ironies of reenacting that Black Confederates march side by side with white Confederate reenactors, while Black Union troops usually only participate in battles where the USCTs were present such as New Market Heights, Virginia., and Olustee, Florida. That does not mean that single, unit-unaffiliated Black reenactors in blue will not be allowed in ranks at reenactments such as Gettysburg, but it is not historically accurate.

History of Reenacting

Reenacting Civil War battles began during the War when both sides staged mock battles when heavy snows kept the men in camp from going out and killing each other. Instead they staged brigade-sized snowball fights.

In 1913 elderly Union and Confederate veterans met at the 50th anniversary of Gettysburg and put themselves through their paces—but without the muskets they had used against each other. Then again in 1938, those same veterans returned. With sound recordings, new generations could hear the Rebel yell—yelped by 95-year-old men who still had the spunk to give it.

Reenacting the Civil War as a hobby got off to a shaky start during in the 1960s when authenticity was ignored in favor of doing something, anything, to commemorate the Centennial. Men and boys threw on gray and blue pants and work shirts, grabbed whatever arms they could find, and marched out onto whatever fields were handy to recreate battles. Photos from the time period show some men marching in ranks with M-1 Garands, World War II semi-automatic rifles.

The most famous reenactment of the 1960s was the July 1961 Battle of First Manassas or Bull Run, held on the Manassas National Battlefield. After a near disaster where one reenactor was hit by a Minié ball fragment left in a musket that had been live

fired before the event, the National Park Service thereafter banned reenactments from being held on its battlefields. The NPS decided that mock battles detracted from the commemorative nature of the battlefields.

The Centennial created some interest in Hollywood, resulting in some Civil War era television shows like *The Gray Ghost* (1957) and *The Americans* (1961), and movies like *Shenandoah* (1965). While those shows inspired then young, now-middle aged reenactors to study the war, the producers paid little attention to authenticity. That inattention to historical details led to groan-inducing scenes (for reenactors anyway) in *Shenandoah* where Jimmy Stewart's teenaged son grabs a Trapdoor Springfield and starts fighting. That model Springfield was not developed until 1869.

Reenacting remained a small hobby during the mid-1970s when events numbering several hundred reenactors were common.

Two TV mini-series, *Blue & Gray* (1982), and *North & South* (1985) drove interest in reenacting in the early 1980s. Both shows used reenactors for the first time, a revelation for Hollywood directors who suddenly realized that their extras knew how to act like Civil War soldiers.

It was anticipation of the 125th anniversary events, starting in 1986, when reenacting turned into a serious hobby. Reenacting units staged living histories to explain weapons and uniforms at venues like schools and public parks to recruit new hobbyists. City, county and state governments and private entrepreneurs with connections to those reenacting units saw the tourist potential of staging mock battles on private or public land.

Local video entrepreneurs filmed those 125th anniversary reenactments on VHS tapes, selling them to the reenactors who hoped to see themselves acting as Civil War soldiers. They, in turn, showed the VHS tapes to younger historians, who learned that the soldiers on screen were not actors, but young men acting out their historical fantasies.

By the time Ken Burns' PBS special *The Civil War* debuted in 1990 interest in the War was on an upswing. Then, the reenactors, tourist bureaus, and entrepreneurs realized that starting in 1991 they could stage larger-than-usual events at five-year intervals starting with the 130th anniversary of the start of the War.

Now that the sesquicentennial is over, the future of reenacting is being debated. Some of the young men who started reenacting decades ago when the 125th anniversary events attracted them are now passing through middle age. They are wondering if sleeping on the ground is as much fun as it was when they were young. Reenacting is at a cross-roads.

How Reenacting Units Are Organized

Reenacting units are organized in some of the same ways as Civil War companies and regiments. Reenactors living near each other form around a company that comes from that same geographic area. Larger regiments will combine those companies to form a state-wide organization. A local company commander will be assigned to recruit new members, train them in the basics of military drill, and guide them in the purchase of the correct gear.

Finding a reenactment unit has gone 21st century. Most reenacting units have both a website and a Facebook page, making it easier for people to find local units. All reenactors come into the unit as privates. As they learn how to be a soldier, they take tests and advance through the non-commissioned ranks to corporals and sergeants. If they try for officer ranks like lieutenant and captain, they must take even more rigorous tests to demonstrate that they know the commands that moved men around the field. Some larger units will have majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels.

Only a handful of men will make generals and they must know how to command at that level. And, they must already have relationships with the brigades and divisions they want to command. No reenactor will respond to an unknown general who walks onto the field and tries to take command of units who do not know him. Just as in the Civil War armies, men who take on the rank must be able to perform at that rank. While reenacting is a hobby, it has some of the trappings of operating in an actual army.

The Branches of Reenacting

Most reenactors join the infantry, which is followed in popularity by the artillery, then the cavalry and there are a few naval interpreters. Some units have fifers and drummers. There is at least one Civil War era brass band using period instruments and playing period music. Which branch reenactors join is up to their interest in each branch—and their financial resources.

Infantry is the easiest branch to learn and to finance. The main thing one has to learn is the infantry drill, and to follow orders to execute maneuvers.

Artillery reenactors are expected to know how to work all of the positions of the cannon, which can cost upwards of \$15,000 and likely belongs to one person. If the unit is a horse-drawn battery, the reenactors are expected to help groom, water, and feed the horses. Cavalry reenactors have uniforms that are patterned after original cavalry uniforms. Cavalry reenacting is the most expensive branch to portray as the mounted soldiers have to buy period saddles, bridles, carbines, shotguns, pistols and sabers in addition to owning and transporting the horses to the events.

Civilian reenactors are the least expensive impressions to achieve, and have the most flexibility since the clothes chosen can range from elegant to simple. Some civilian reenactors may choose to portray professions such as mortician or battlefield surgeon

with some women roaming the field as nurses. The most stare-inducing women reenactors are those ladies portraying Catholic nuns who served as nurses during the war.

The Essential Gear of Reenacting

Authenticity, while ignored in the 1960s, is now universally required by reenacting units. Many units keep a stock of uniforms and other equipment on hand in order to let people try the hobby out rather than invest in it only to discover that they do not really like playing the role of a 1860s soldier.

Once a prospective reenactor joins a unit the next step is to buy gear from sutlers, merchants specializing in the hobby named after the original civilian shop keepers who catered to the needs of Civil War soldiers. Sutlers set up large tents at reenactments and also sell on-line. Reenacting units keep a list of approved sutlers that have proven to stock authentic and well-made goods. Just as in the 1860s, some reenacting gear can be “shoddy” (a Civil War era word), so taking knowledgeable advice from other veteran reenactors in one’s unit makes sure newcomers do not buy the wrong gear.

Uniforms are all wool for Federal portrayals, and a wool and cotton blend for Confederates. Reenactors need a shirt, coat, pants, wool socks, and a hat. While the uniforms are generally—well—uniform, hats (at least for Confederate portrayals) can be a matter of personal choice. While Confederate regulations called for a kepi, most men opted for a slouch hat, a broad-brimmed hat of varying styles.

Brogans are broad-soled half boots with leather soles worn by the common foot soldier. Be prepared to be footsore! Arch supports were not invented in the 1860s, but feel free to put anything inside that helps you march. Modern day work boots are not acceptable.

Leather cartridge box, belt, bayonet scabbard and cap box come in a variety of types and colors such as russet brown, but most men choose black so the same accoutrements can be used for both Confederate and Union impressions.

A haversack, a kind of handbag worn over the left shoulder, is generally black. It is where the Civil War soldier carried his food and where the reenactor will carry his food, wallet and car keys.

A canteen holding about two quarts of water is critical. In summer, many men carry two. There are a wide variety of canteens including wooden ones that Confederate soldiers carried, but which would not be appropriate for Union soldiers.

Finally, there is the largest investment of all, the musket and bayonet. While there are several models such as an early war smoothbore musket, or a mid-war rifle musket, there are really only two brand choices for infantry. These would be reproduction arms originally manufactured by Springfield and copied by the Confederates, or Enfield, which was an English import used by both sides. Both firearms are basically the same, but it is

critical that reenactors choose the longer 3-banded models over the sometimes available two-banded models.

While two-banded muskets were very common in ranks during the War, reenactors should not use them because of safety concerns with respect to the length of the barrel. A musket will shoot a flame of fire and unburned powder out the muzzle. The further that is away from the face, the better. The only difference between the Civil War and the reenacting firing is that no Minié ball is rammed down the barrel. Otherwise, the 60 grains of powder and a piece of paper wadding for each charge is authentic.

Nearly all of the muskets available today are made in Italy, but some used ones manufactured back in the 1970s and 1980s are available from Japan and England. And, if one wants, one can carry original muskets if they are safe.

One note for reenactors living in states with strict gun laws. Some states require even single shot, reproduction muskets to be registered with the government. Check your laws!

No detail about a reenactor's appearance should be ignored. Nothing spoils the look of a rank of men in a battle line then seeing someone wearing modern day glasses or ear rings. Real sticklers discourage men from wearing wedding bands as that custom was not around during The Civil War. For those men who need vision correction and who do not wear contact lens, there are sutlers who deal in eye glasses which are correct for the period.

The basic costs of outfitting an infantryman will run between \$1,500 and \$2,000 with the bulk of the cost being in the \$800 musket. Once the basics are purchased, reenactors move on to acquire other gear like a canvas dog tent, or a larger A-frame tent, a gum or rubber blanket/poncho for putting down on the ground or wearing as rain gear, and cooking gear like tin frying pans and cooking grates. Winter reenactors will want heavy overcoats which can cost upwards of \$300. The fully equipped reenactor will spend around \$2,500 to \$3,000, but that gear, with the exception of brogans, will last as long as the reenactor will.

Dual Impressions

Most reenacting units require members to own dual impressions; both Union and Confederate. The reason is obvious. Reenactments are only fun if there are enough enemies on the other side. Since the war took place in the South, it is more difficult for Yankees in Northern states to make the events in the Southern states. That means most Union forces on Southern battlefields likely talk with Southern accents even though they are in blue. This practice of changing uniforms to fit the reenactment's needs is called "galvanizing" –based on a real term applied to captured Confederates who were released from prison camps if they joined the Union army to go west to fight Indians.

There is no poll showing where reenactors live, but observation would put a majority of them in The South. Still, American Civil War reenactments can take place wherever the hobbyists can find ground. That could be in California, Wisconsin, or even Russia.

Many units will choose opposite unit impressions that have something to do with the primary unit they portray, or perhaps a unit that passed through their home area. For instance, the 26th Regiment of North Carolina Troops also portrays the 24th Michigan of The Iron Brigade when it reenacts as Federals. The 26th North Carolina Troops and the 24th Michigan ran head-on into each other on the first day of Gettysburg in McPherson's Woods. At battles where the 24th Michigan with its distinctive long frock coats and tall black hats was not present, the men of the 26th North Carolina Troops put on common Union shell jackets and portray whatever Union units were present.

Reenactors who claim: "My ancestors would roll over in their graves if I portrayed the other side" are frowned upon. They are encouraged to buy their opposite impression as soon as they can afford the cost. That is also the reason why most leather gear is black, the standard Union color. Once the leather gear, muskets, and bayonets are purchased, only the opposite side's coat and pants are a necessary purchase to correctly portray the other side.

Specialty Impressions

While the vast majority of reenactors are standard uniformed Confederate and Union soldiers, there are some small numbers who wear unique uniforms. Berdan's Sharpshooters were a Federal unit of sharpshooters who wore dark green uniforms as an early form of camouflage. They carried Sharps rifles. The United States Marines wear distinctive crossed white belts. There are Federal Zouave units who wear bright red pants, red trimmed jackets, and turbans. Confederate Zouaves called Louisiana Tigers wear striped baggy pants.

The problem with these specialty impressions is that they only operate as units. Reenacting units organized around a specific regiment with a general type of uniform will not allow a Berdan sharpshooter or a Louisiana Tiger in the ranks. That means single reenactors in a specialty uniform must search out similar reenactors to fall in with at events.

In addition to special uniforms, some reenactors will be tempted to get special firearms. Check with your reenacting unit before buying any gun. While the three-banded musket is standard, there might be the occasional chance to carry something else. At some late-war battles such as Bentonville, North Carolina and Saylor's Creek, Virginia, Federal units armed with repeating rifles chewed into Confederate ranks. At the reenactments of those battles, Federal reenactors with access to repeating rifles like the 1860 Henry or the Spencer rifle or carbine will brigade together to recreate those particular actions. Being at that part of the line during the reenactment is special as it clearly reinforces the advantage the Union army had with repeating rifles. Confederate

reenactors armed with single shot muskets have no choice but to fall or withdraw in the face of men using rifles that could carry upwards of 13 rounds that could be fired in a matter of seconds.

The Personality Types of Reenactors

There are essentially three types of reenactors; mainstream, campaigners, and stitch counters. The three types seem to always be warring with each other in blog posts with the campaigners laughing at the age of the mainstreamers; the mainstreamers laughing at the campaigners with their dirty faces; and the stitch counters laughing at both of them for wearing a uniform that was proper in 1862, but which wasn't worn in 1864.

Mainstream is exactly what it sounds like, reenactors ranging in age from teenagers to well-beyond middle age who like the hobby, but who also do not fit the Civil War image of soldiers being thin and between the ages of 18-25. Mainstreamers cheerfully accept the nickname TBG- which stands for Tubby Bearded Guys. They like to bring tents, camp chairs, hidden ice chests, and other gear that the original army would never have had. Units of mainstreamers may number from 20 to 100. When brigaded with other units, a reenactor general may command 200-300 men. A group of men this size can engage in brigade drill, practicing the same types of maneuvers the Civil War soldiers learned in order to face an enemy coming from any direction.

Campaigners are usually young and pride themselves in carrying a minimal amount of gear, sleeping in the open, and being as uncomfortable as they can be, which was the way it was. On the downside in terms of authenticity, they operate in much smaller groups that sometimes preclude them from being able to do the complicated drills that Civil War regiments would have done, and which the mainstreamers relentlessly practice.

Stitch counters are authenticity historians who know the history of hats, shoes, uniforms, muskets, buttons, even how a uniform was manufactured – thus the nick name. The stitch counters can belong in either the mainstream or the campaigner camp. Both sides tolerate them. After all, every one of the reenactors at an event arrived in a 21st century vehicle of some kind. And that will generally be a four-wheel-drive SUV as all reenactors will one day find themselves in a muddy field wondering if they will be able to get out in time to get back to work on Monday.

Types of Events

Mega-events, reenactments where reenactors number several thousand, are likely gone forever now that the 150th anniversary events ended in 2015. The largest event was likely the 135th Gettysburg reenactment where an estimated 15,000 attended. While still too small in numbers to simulate actual Civil War battles, the mega-events at least gave reenactors a sense of what the major battles would have been like.

These events were often staged with paying spectators in mind, leading to sights that irritated reenactors such as rushing the enemy in a charge—but with multi-tiered bleachers behind the enemy. Mega-events made it hard to lose one's self in the moment when a narrator was giving blow-by-blow accounts of the battle over loud speakers.

Mega-events also created problems for reenactors such as too little and too far away parking, too little drinking water, and too few port-a-johns. While reenactors do like authenticity, they draw the line at paying upwards of \$30 for registration fees, but finding over-flowing port-a-johns by Sunday morning.

Invitation events are smaller events where organizers limit the number of participants in order to better manage the scale. When events are not limited by the numbers of participants per side, some events have seen Confederates outnumber Federals by five to one—at battles which the Federals won.

Immersion events are small reenactments that attract campaigners. Reenactors carry everything with them with no resupply from a vehicle, speak in first person and essentially lose themselves entirely in the war for the weekend.

Speculation among reenactors is that smaller, focused events is where the hobby is headed. Some units are thinking of staging parts of battles as authentically as possible, complete with the scaled down, but statistically correct numbers of casualties, and the maneuvers mentioned in survivor accounts. The thinking is that events where only several hundred troops are participating can be much more manageable and affordable to stage than the huge events that required hundreds of acres of land for the reenactment itself, plus parking for thousands of participants and spectators. Spectators won't see much action, but the reenactors will see only other reenactors and no more bleachers.

Living Histories at original battlefields are by invitation by the National Park Service or the states that also maintain battlefields. In exchange for staging drill and firing demonstrations for the visiting public, the reenactment units (usually those with a reputation for authenticity) are allowed to camp on the actual battlefields.

Local living histories at venues such as historically themed parks are where many potential reenactors see their first living historians. Reenactors often do more interacting with the visiting public such as performing drill and firing demonstrations, and giving flag and equipment talks. The atmosphere is relaxed, allowing reenactors to recruit new members.

Be Careful - Reenacting is a Physically Taxing Hobby

While reenacting is fun, it is also a physically taxing hobby. With the exception of events where rains flood the battlefield, reenactments are rarely cancelled for heat or cold. The 150th Manassas, Virginia event was held when the temperature on the field was 114 degrees. The 125th Franklin, Tennessee event was held in minus 10 wind chill. The same uniforms worn in the summer are worn in the winter. Marches can range from a

mile or so from camp to the battlefield to more than 20 miles at special events. Rivers might be crossed. Mountains might be climbed.

While it is rare, people have died from the exertion. It is up to reenactors to know if they have the stamina to participate in the action.

Besides the weather elements, there may be holes in the field that twist ankles, yellow jacket nests that are disturbed, and poison ivy and poison oak lurking in the woods. Cavalry and artillery reenactors have the added burden of worrying about their horses and mules stepping into holes on the field. Horses, though trained to expect loud noises from cannons, rifles, pistols and clanging sabers, sometimes throw their riders to the ground.

And finally, muskets are real guns. The soldier in the rear rank must always keep his three-banded musket's middle band at the ear of the file partner in the front rank. Too far back and the soldier in the front rank is too close to the muzzle blast. Too far forward, and the percussion cap is exploding in his ear.

During fights with frequent firing, muskets have been known to cook off, a premature explosion of the black powder poured down the barrel caused by a still-burning spark. That's why reenactors, like Civil War soldiers, are trained to not put their hand over the muzzle of the musket; least they get a palm full of painful, burning powder.

To those who do not do it, reenacting may seem like an odd hobby; spending the weekend recreating a war that killed upwards of three quarters of a million people when the United States' population was just 31 million.

Reenactors do not dwell on that terrible human cost. That part of history cannot be changed. What reenacting does is give men and women a chance to walk in the footsteps of those people who came before us just a little over 150 years ago. What did the Gettysburg artillery barrage sound like? Can one really hear a Civil War era term – “the rattle of musketry”? How do your feet feel after marching 22 miles in a single day in thin-soled brogans? How did my ancestors survive battles, diseases, and prison camps on far away battlefields then return home to produce me?

It was I who asked historian Shelby Foote some 20 years ago: “Is there anything about The War you don't know?” I got the quick answer: “I still don't know how they did it.”

That is what reenacting is all about; trying to live for a weekend like a Civil War soldier or civilian to figure out how they did it.
