

A Pilgrimage to the Past: Civil War Reenactors at Gettysburg

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This article centers on the question: Why do some Americans take up the hobby of Civil War reenacting? In Matthew Amster's ethnographic work among the Kelabit, a small indigenous group living in the Malaysian-Indonesian borderlands on the island of Borneo, he developed an interest in the connection between ritual and identity. When he moved to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 2002, Dr. Amster soon became curious about the crowds that come to the area to participate in period reenactments, and eventually decided to join a reenacting group himself. Viewing this first-hand experience through an anthropological lens, Amster came to see commonalities between reenacting and the many powerful rituals that anthropologists regularly examine in their work.

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It was nine o'clock on a hot Friday morning in early July, 2005, when I pulled my car into the parking lot at the Gettysburg National Military Park to meet a group of Civil War reenactors. When I had first contacted the group, back in April of that year, I had explained that I was an anthropologist wanting to do research on reenactors and that I was interested in joining them on their visit to Gettysburg that summer. The group's leader invited me for the Fourth of July weekend, when there would be a Living History demonstration, and allowed me, along with one of my students, to make use of his loaner uniforms, generally reserved for potential new recruits. As the reenactors assembled into their regiments, my student and

I made a quick change out of our shorts, T-shirts, and sandals into our new clothes for the weekend: heavy wool pants and coats, misshapen leather boots, leather sacks, and an array of Civil War-era military gear, including our bedrolls. We were also handed heavy replica Springfield rifles and—before we had time to absorb what was happening—were nineteenth-century infantrymen lined up for some basic training and drills. Soon we were heading out in military formation, our normal lives transformed with the flip of some giant imaginary switch.

It was then that I had my first flicker of a surreal moment. For just an instant—as a haze rose around us from the gravel under our feet, the group moving along the trail in unison, only the sound of our gear clanging and a sea of blue uniforms with rifles pointed skyward—I momentarily grasped just a tiny bit of what it might have felt like to be one of these men in the 1860s, marching in the hot sun with a heavy rifle under someone else's orders. Even though I'd only been doing this for a very short time, something visceral occurred that gave me a taste of what makes reenacting appealing. I began to think about the difficult life of the infantrymen who wore these hot wool uniforms, carried all this gear, and walked in these uncomfortable shoes, not just for "fun" on a weekend, but for months or years far from home, experiencing death and disease and hardships I could never begin to imagine. As time went on and I got to know reenactors better, I learned how such uncanny moments—described as "period rush," "going into the bubble," "time travel," or "Civil War moments"—are a significant part of what keeps them coming back year after year.



The author (left) and anthropology student Mike Leader at a Living History encampment, Gettysburg National Military Park, July 2005. (Photo by Wendy B. Halperin)

Who Are Civil War Reenactors?

When I moved to Gettysburg to teach anthropology, one of the first bits of advice I was given was to leave the town in the summer. People warned me that nearly two million visitors descend on the small town each year, many of them in the summer months, transforming the otherwise relative tranquility into a historical fantasyland. In Gettysburg, one often encounters people walking the streets in period dress, including women leading bands of tourists on "Ghost Tours" and Civil War reenactors who stroll the streets dressed as if it were still 1863. At first glance, the hobby seems quaint and, at times, fanatical, particularly the element within the reenacting community that talks about lost souls roaming the battlefield trying to find their way home, engages in ghost hunting, recounts sighting of such paranormal phenomena as "orbs" of light floating on the battlefield, or tape-records the night air to hear lost souls of soldiers speak. While such beliefs and practices are common, at the heart of the hobby is a sincere love of history and a desire to breathe life and relevance into this history through reenacting.

American Civil War reenacting groups are found in such unlikely places as Europe, Canada, and England (Hunt 2004), though most come from places close to where the war was fought. There are no reliable statistics on how many have participated in the hobby, with estimates ranging from fifteen thousand to over twice that number, at forty thousand reenactors nationwide (Cushman 1999: 52). According to Tony Horwitz, whose book *Confederates in the Attic*, written in the late 1990s when the hobby may have been at its peak, there are "over 40,000 reenactors nationwide," and "one survey named reenacting the fastest growing hobby in America" (1999: 126). A number of reenactors with whom I spoke claimed that the hobby has diminished in recent years, particularly post 9/11, speculating that it may not be as appealing to reenact during times of actual war. Others theorized that the popularity of reenacting can be linked to the influence of media, with Ken Burns' documentary series *The Civil War* and such feature films as *Gettysburg*, *Gods and Generals*, and *Glory* having fueled interest in the hobby in the 1990s. Whatever the reasons for its popularity, reenacting has grown considerably from its early days in the 1960s, around the time of Civil War centennial when the current form of the hobby is said to have begun.

Reenacting is a mainly male hobby (although at the more mainstream events whole families can participate), and most reenactments are "blindingly white affairs" (Horwitz 1999: 137) although there are some black reenacting groups, including an all-black Union regiment that regularly marches through Gettysburg on the anniversary of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, or Remembrance Day, when thousands of reenactors parade through the town. Typically, however, the reenactor is a white male, though his socioeconomic background can vary. It is often pointed out that one can find people from very diverse lifestyles and careers reenacting side by side and that one's life outside of reenacting may not reflect one's position inside the hobby. As Horwitz was told by a reenactor during an event: "See that general over there? He's probably pumping gas at Exxon during the week" (1999: 134).

Most reenactors concentrate on doing a specific "impression," typically that of either northern "Union" or "Federal" soldiers, commonly referred to as "Yanks" or "Yankees," or of southern "Confederate" soldiers, also referred to as "Rebs" or "Johnny Reb." While some reenactors are willing to portray both sides in the conflict—in Civil War parlance known as "galvanizing," or switching sides—most tend to have strong affinities with one side.

Whites?

One reason why some do not “galvanize” is simply the expense, since even entry-level outfits, like the typical infantry kit complete with replica Springfield rifle, cost over a thousand dollars. Civilian attire is also an option for reenactors, and people specialize in a range of period impressions, for example sutlers (shopkeepers and craft specialists), medical practitioners, and missionaries.

Authenticity is a big issue for reenactors, and there is a broad spectrum in terms of individual levels of commitment. At one extreme, there are the most devoted and serious reenactors, referred to as “hardcore” or “campaigners,” who go to great lengths to be authentic. At the other end of the spectrum are more family-oriented “mainstream” or “garrison”-type hobbyists for whom authenticity is less critical. When spending time with reenactors, one often hears the term “farb,” or the adjective form “farby” (and various other derivatives, such as “farb fest”), both of which refer to anything that is inauthentic or modern. The term is commonly said to derive from the phrase, “far be it from authentic,” though there are other suspected etymologies (Thompson 2004: 291). References to farbs and farby items are rampant in reenactor discourse, and it is a common insult among reenactors to call someone a farb. Farby items can be virtually anything that would not be considered period—whether this is the presence of a cooler, a vehicle, a filtered cigarette, or simply one’s attitude or demeanor. For hardcore reenactors, even items out of sight, such as one’s undergarments, may be criticized as farby.

Most reenactors come to Gettysburg as part of local regiments attending one of the various events, the largest being a three-day-long battle reenactment that takes place each year, usually around the time of the anniversary of the actual battle, July 1–3, 1863. This annual reenactment, held on private land, is a for-profit commercial venture that draws tens of thousands of paying spectators and thousands of reenactors, who also pay a small registration fee to participate and camp on site. During the prominent anniversary years, such as the 140th anniversary of the battle in 2003, the event tends to draw larger numbers, and there is already a great deal of talk about the upcoming 150th reenactment in 2013. In addition to the private reenactment held away from the Gettysburg National Military Park, there is also a large regular gathering of reenactors that takes place in Gettysburg each year in November, commemorating the anniversary of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Finally, there is a steady trickle of reenactor groups who come to Gettysburg throughout the year, in cooperation with the Park, to offer Living History demonstrations.

For Civil War enthusiasts—reenactors and non-reenactors alike—Gettysburg is a place of great emotional significance, with the battle there considered a decisive turning point in the Civil War. For many, coming to Gettysburg and visiting Civil War battlefields can be seen as a pilgrimage experience. Gatewood and Cameron, who did research on tourists who visit the park, have noted religious-like elements in the experience of many battlefield tourists. Those who initially came with a casual interest are increasingly drawn to the emotional power of the landscape as “impressions of the site become more complex and more layered with repeated visits” (Gatewood and Cameron 2004: 213). It was precisely these pilgrimage-like characteristics of battlefield tourism and reenacting that drew me to this anthropological research, having previously looked at the phenomenon of religious pilgrimage elsewhere (Amster 2003).

The main purpose of this article is to give voice to reenactor stories and viewpoints in order to better understand what motivates people to participate in this hobby. Research was

pilgrimage

done over a three-year period, during 2004–2006, mainly during the summer months. Methodology included participant observation and interviews with dozens of reenactors. Most of my interviews took place immediately before or after reenactments, when I would spend time in reenactor camps. Interviews were conducted with individuals from a broad cross-section of the hobby—men and women, young and old, experienced and inexperienced, and, most importantly, Union and Confederate reenactors. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to interview reenactors from African American regiments, as the regiments they portray did not fight at the battle of Gettysburg and similarly do not tend to appear at Gettysburg reenactments. Each year, I attended both the annual commercial reenactments and a range of *Living History* demonstrations in the park, including the one where I myself participated, as a Union infantryman. By joining a reenactor group and “going native,” I got my most vivid glimpse of “the life”—as some reenactors call it—and the unforgettable chance to “feel the itch of the wool.”

“Civil War Moments”

When asking Civil War reenactors why they reenact, one is invariably told a number of “official” sounding answers: to educate the public, to commemorate and honor those who died, for love of country, and to better understand details of history. While all of these are, to a certain extent, true, there seems to be an unspoken agreement that when reenactors interact with the “public,” a certain façade must be maintained to shield their motives. It does not take much probing, however, to learn that there are a host of other reasons why people choose to reenact, most prominent among them being that it is fun.

So, *why* is reenacting fun? Reenactors often stress an intense camaraderie that accompanies involvement in the hobby: the good friends and people they meet, the pleasure of telling stories around the campfire at night, singing Civil War songs, drinking, and the deep bonding with others who share their interest in history. During my own participation in firing demonstrations, I could not help but notice how much the men enjoyed simply using their weapons. In such firing demonstrations, as well as battle reenactments, actual gunpowder is loaded in the rifles, though no bullets are used. At one point, after a particularly intense round went off and the smoke cleared, the man next to me, sporting a wide grin, commented blissfully to himself, “Love the sound. Love the feel.” As Jim, a Navy reserve officer in his mid-forties, put it:

It's the ultimate guy hobby. You've got camping, firearms, and the occasional beer, you know, weekends out with nature. It all makes sense. You have guys giving you all those fancy, you know, honor-my-great-granny-type stuff and some of them might believe it, but most of them are just here because it's a good time. You hang out with your friends, you do something that's somewhat interesting, and you learn a little bit, maybe you help someone learn a little bit, and you have a good time doing it.

Jim, who resides in the Philadelphia area, has a passion for both military history and firearms, and he readily admits that these interests, rather than some abstract altruistic desire to educate the public or honor the dead, are what motivate him to do this. Having done Civil War reenacting for more than a decade, Jim is also now among a growing group

of reenactors who have become involved in reenacting other wars. World War I, for example, has recently increased in popularity (Thompson 2004).

As I questioned Jim further about his particular motivations, he talked about how the hobby allows him to think concretely about the challenges of facing combat, something he has never actually experienced and does not want to experience. He said he often asked himself: "Could I have done what they did? Could I have spent time in the field the way they did? How would I have reacted in the same circumstances?" Jim was quick to point out that one can never really know what a soldier might have felt during a Civil War battle, but at least by doing some of the things reenactors do, one gets closer to the experience. "Whether it's eating hardtack or nasty salt pork or sleeping in the cold, marching in the rain," he said, "you know *they did it*."

Over and over, I heard similar comments about the deep experiential value of reenacting and the unique pleasure it brings reenactors. Wayne, a fifty-two-year-old Union reenactor from the Baltimore area, described his special moments in the heat of battle:

You get into certain reenactments or certain times and it's only milliseconds, it might last a few seconds. You're in a long line of battle, the breeze is a' blowing, the flags are a' fluttering, the smokes coming up, they're yelling commands, and for those small seconds you are almost transported back in time and [you] say 'I'm living this.' It gives you a time capsule, a time machine, to come back in time and experience something, even if it's for a little part of time. You almost put yourself back in that time period. Of course, you're not having the bullets go past your ear, you're not having blood splattered on you, you're not having bombs exploding in the air, but it's just small periods—you can blot out everything and you're there, you're actually there. So that's what pulls me. I enjoy it, I enjoy it immensely.

Bruce, aged fifty-one, from the Lancaster, PA, area, expressed similar reasons for why he was drawn to reenacting. He also cited family connections that drew him to the battle of Gettysburg specifically, including a great uncle killed by friendly fire and another relative who drowned while on guard duty. As a deeply committed Christian, Bruce saw no conflict between his love of reenacting and his religious beliefs and, indeed, merged them in his work, teaching history at a Christian school. He had been reenacting for five years and traced his love of the Civil War back to his childhood, when he began collecting Civil War artifacts at five years old. For Bruce, reenacting is a kind of "men's club" for people who like history. "I get personal satisfaction because it is fun. I like to camp, I love the camaraderie. I think the relationships that we build with our fellow reenactors come the closest to understanding what a soldier's heart is." He also brings students to Gettysburg and pointed out that this is an effective way to teach history. "A person standing out there in a hot uniform, with a smoking pole, is gonna grab somebody's attention, and hopefully they are going to learn from us what they don't learn from their teachers at school."

For many people I interviewed, their interest in reenacting was linked to personal experiences in the military, memory of combat, or simply a proxy for their fantasies about military life. As a teenager from Central New Jersey commented, through reenacting "you go into the military without paying the consequences of being in the military." For some veterans, reenacting can provide a kind of alternative to combat and perhaps even have a therapeutic effect. Keith, a professor at a major research university, became a reenactor because it helped him process some of his memories from Vietnam and offered him a place where he

history
sets
gun experts

the
rush

what kind
of
history?

↓
reminiscence,
invented
tradition

Why men's groups around war & history?

Sociality & militarism

could proudly wear an American military uniform without feelings of shame. While many of his academic colleagues could not relate to his military past or his interest in reenacting, he had much in common with friends in the reenacting community. Simply carrying a rifle and marching in formation evoked a powerful bodily memory that allowed him to think about his relationship to the military and his own, otherwise muted, patriotic feelings.

Jerry, a reenactor from Virginia in his late forties, first became involved in reenacting in his teens and then later joined the army for two years, a career choice he attributes to his prior involvement in reenactment. But Jerry far preferred Civil War reenacting to being in the actual military. He has been reenacting for twenty-five years and estimated that he had been to over three hundred reenactments and experienced roughly seven hundred battles, pointing out that it was starting to get mundane and he was considering stopping. For Jerry, the camaraderie around the campfire at night was by far the best part of reenacting, although what kept him coming back most of all was his sense of commitment to the group he founded and the men who depend on his leadership. For him, having "Civil War moments" (or "time bubbles," as he called them) was no longer important, and such experiences were fewer and farther between.

"Civil War moments" can be both individual and shared. One group of men told me about a collective moment when they were simultaneously affected by what sounded eerily like actual bullets whizzing by their ears. After the fact, they speculated the sound was caused by an echo off a nearby barn. One of the men called this a "Civil Wargasm," bringing up jokes about "multiple Civil Wargasms," a term that was used in the book *Confederates in the Attic* to describe a whirlwind tour of Civil War sites (Horwitz 1999: Chapter 10). Another man told me that his first Civil War moments occurred prior to becoming a reenactor and that he first experienced this moment as a spectator watching a battle, leading him to become involved in the hobby.

Cushman lists commemoration, instruction, and entertainment as the three main reasons why people reenact, adding the kind of special moments on which I have focused here as a fourth reason. "Reenactors also reenact in order to lose track of time, to fool themselves, to experience a mystical moment when the seemingly impermeable boundary between the present and the past suddenly dissolves" (Cushman 1999: 62). A common characteristic of these moments is that they are chaotic and confusing, which fits many reenactors' preconceptions about actual battle. Such moments are thus marked psychologically by a temporary loss of orientation, one that mimics what reportedly happened to soldiers in battle at Gettysburg.

One of the most prevalent themes among soldiers who did record their thoughts in diaries and letters around that time is confusion. Men were stupefied by the experience of battle—the deafening noise, the whirlwind of pain and death, the numbness of shock and horror—and had no idea what had just happened. Even the more sober and clearheaded would only have seen and remembered what occurred within a few feet of them, as that is as far as their vision and consciousness allowed them to record. (Desjardin 2003: 14)

It is thus the small and often chaotic details of battle, rather than the broader tactical view, that make reenacting seem realistic. Sitting down with Jason, a fifty-year-old Confederate soldier from Indiana I had met earlier the same day, after he had just come back from a long hot reenactment, it was clear he was overwhelmed with emotion. He described the

event in which he had just participated as incredibly “real,” in part because of the utter chaos. “We pushed the Yanks back, and they pushed us back, and then we pushed them back and it was just so totally real.” Slumped over on the rough ground, wiping the sweat from his brow, he spoke of his feelings, particularly toward his fellow soldiers:

Going up that hill elbow-to-elbow with your guys, it's just being full of worry for them and, you know, everything that goes through a soldier's mind. You think about home in a heart-beat, and you think about your buddy next to you, and you think about getting the job done for your officers. And then at the same time you gotta think, “Am I gonna make it?” You know, I don't know if I'm gonna make it. And then you make it! And the jubilation is just incredible. We weren't in somebody else's footsteps but we recreated somebody else's hard fight today. We didn't feel the bullets enter, but we felt the rest of the pain they felt, we felt the rest of the fear they felt, the anxiety, you know, “Am I going to be OK today?” By that I mean, am I going to do right by my fellows today? You know, what it really all boils down to is you're fighting for the guy next to you, you're not fighting for the officers, you're not fighting for the President whether he's in the White House, or in Mobile, or in Richmond; you're fighting for the guy next to you. And you know at the end of the season—there's no doubt in your mind at the end of a season—that if you had to kill somebody to protect your buddy, you would, for real . . . not just powder.

Referring to the same battle, a group of Confederates from Delaware told me. “It was so real it was incredible. It had us all torn apart.”

For many Confederate reenactors, their involvement in the hobby is often linked to their political views. As one told me, “The war is still on, the war is still on,” launching into a scathing assault of contemporary American politics and asserting that “the issues haven't changed . . . it's the same song, just a different choir.” As Horwitz points out, for many people from the South, “remembrance of the War had become a talisman against modernity, an emotional lever for their reactionary politics” (1999: 386). Similarly, Strauss (2003), who did participant-observation research among Confederate reenactors, points out that while one will not normally hear overtly racist comments, Confederate reenactors “had more in common with their Neo-Confederate counterparts than they were willing to admit” (160), including views that he describes as “symbolically manifesting discomfort with the eroding state of white hegemony in the United States” (159). Strauss also found that Confederate reenactors were often “adamant in their refusal to galvanize” (2003: 155), which I also found to be true of many Confederate reenactors, including those of southern heritage who live in northern states. When I asked a group of Confederates from New York State if they ever galvanized and portrayed Union soldiers, they told me in all seriousness that it was sacrilegious, in their view, to don a Union uniform, citing their “rebel blood,” and adding, “Nothing but Dixie. Won't catch me in a blue suit.”

Union reenactors, for their part, tend to portray Confederates as fanatical and would point out that Confederates take reenacting “too seriously,” citing the cliché that for some the war has never ended. While there is some truth in these observations, I noted far more similarities than differences, and, I would argue, playing up these differences is part of the performance and fun of reenacting. Confederate reenactors often told me that Union reenactors were more disciplined in terms of their military formations and procedures, which the Confederates said reflected actual differences, though this is historically questionable. Confederate reenactors also claimed that Union camp life was “cold.” In both Union and

Confederate camps at the commercial reenactment, however, there is a surprisingly strong family orientation and the differences between these enemies are more subtle than most reenactors admit. Indeed, some even refused to set foot in the other camp, though a family-friendly atmosphere prevailed in both camps. For Jason, who was divorced, reenacting provided him a venue to spend time with his fourteen-year-old son Dylan, who was in his second year of reenacting. Jason talked about the values he hoped to instill in his son at these events, not to mention the lack of video games. "You know, fourteen is where you lose a kid. He's not gonna get lost," he said, nodding toward his son. "Not while he's out here doing this with us. It consumes your focus."

Despite the carnival-like mood and commercialized aspects of Gettysburg reenactments, many people claimed to have experienced profoundly special moments, even with blaring loudspeakers and a large presence of spectators in the grandstands. After a major battle, a group of teenage reenactors from Central New Jersey described how the crowds completely disappeared as a group of them shot off a volley and three men across from them suddenly went down (known as "taking a hit"). "I felt it right there for at least five seconds," one said, pointing out that this was enough to make the whole weekend worthwhile. Others with whom I spoke said they preferred smaller events, especially those without spectators, where things "can get a little more intense." Describing an event at a remote Living History farm in upstate New York, a reenactor noted how "you can time warp a little bit better, or time travel a little bit better, because there's really nothing around you other than what is there in the camp."

Many women reenactors also described similar experiences of period rush. Carol, in her late thirties from San Antonio, had just come back from the thick of battle, where she had been serving for the first time as an "ice angel," bringing ice chips to soldiers. She was glowing with excitement: "It was overwhelming, I almost cried 'cause you just *almost* feel it. You feel like you're actually out there trying to fight for your ground." Julie, an experienced reenactor in her late thirties who comes to Gettysburg each year with her husband and two children, described her relationship to reenacting as an "addiction" that allows you to "leave the twenty-first century behind." She herself portrays a Union soldier. "It's so funny," she told me, "I can't wait to get out into ninety-degree weather in wool and shoot at each other, and smell the gunpowder, and campfires." Similarly, her seventeen-year-old daughter Megan said, "When I went out the first time, I came back and I went 'Mom, I'm never putting on a dress again.' I had black powder all over my face, but it was absolutely wonderful. I was sweaty, I was sticky, but it was fun." Another young woman in her twenties, who had just gone into battle as a Confederate soldier, told me: "It's such an adrenaline rush while you're out there. You forget everything in the world and you're just marching to the beat of the drum, climbing over fences and walls. It's fun. I love it."

Ultimately, part of the allure of such Civil War moments is their rarity. As one reenactor told me, "I've done this event so many times . . . man, I'm all out of magic moments." Another reenactor, in response to my question about whether he had experienced anything "special" or "magical" in a battle that particular day, said:

No, I didn't go through the bubble, I'm afraid. That truly is a rare thing. You can't psych yourself up for it, you can't put yourself in the mood, it's just something that happens. You know when it's real when you suddenly catch yourself, and you jerk back to reality and say

"what, am I going psychotic or something?" You can't pretend to do it and make it happen. It's 'cause it really is that true experience, as though, in your mind anyway, that you are really there for that split second. It's a beautiful moment.

As powerful as such occasional experiences are, they always remain partial. And, as Cushman points out, "No matter how completely they identify with their roles, contemporary Civil War reenactors do not come away from reenactments with post-traumatic stress disorder caused by their reenacting" (1999: 56). While many take the hobby very seriously, I never got the impression that reenactors *really* believed they were capable of time traveling or that they became another person, though it is clear that they enjoy the illusion of being in such moments, the ultimate pay-off for the hard work of living as soldiers of the era did. As Bruce, the history teacher from the Lancaster area, said: "While we're not facing the bullets and the shrapnel and guts flying all over the place, there are some things that I believe are very similar, like the friendships, the experiences, the heat, the smell." Finally, as a sixty-year-old Union officer told me, "We only do an impression. We don't live like it really was. I wouldn't want that anyway. I don't want diarrhea, I don't want lice, I don't want fleas. And, of course, there weren't too many soldiers pushing sixty years old running around there either, unless they were generals on a horse."

Authenticity and Experience: Some Final Thoughts

As a discipline, cultural anthropology places great emphasis on the value of participant-observation fieldwork as a key methodology through which anthropologists gain access to other people's perspectives. In a sense, reenactors also use and gain from this methodology, although, since "informants" from the Civil War are long dead, reenactors can only participate and observe via recreating the experience. While my own immersion in reenactor culture was brief, I emerged with a better grasp of what motivates reenactors to pursue this hobby and with an appreciation of the sincerity, passion, and even the fun involved.

I also began to see reenacting as having characteristics similar to those in cultures around the world, particularly in their religious and ritual aspects. Throughout history, human beings have performed rituals to express and reaffirm key values of their cultures, and reenactors, too, can be seen in this mold, carrying out their activities to maintain links to history, forebears, and sense of place. Whenever people hold auspicious rituals—whether part of a world religion or a remote indigenous culture—there is often an implicit understanding that in repeating acts believed to have been passed down for generations, one gets closer to something essential or primordial. By recreating the past through acts of remembrance, reenactors may have more in common with ritual practitioners who call up ancestors and divine spirits, Sunday churchgoers, and New Age pagans than they do with other hobbyists, such as those who might be passionate about sports, become devoted to coins or stamps, love to shop, or spend all their spare time maintaining the perfect lawn.

In a very real sense, then, what reenactors do when they come out for a weekend and put on their uniforms is not simply have fun, make good friends, and escape the modern world, but also reaffirm links to their heritage as Americans. This experience is heightened, as I have described above, within the seemingly authentic circumstances and performances

that result in intense and powerful bursts of emotion that are part of what keep people coming back. When such bursts occur, reenactors are like religious pilgrims traveling to a sacred site, as both groups seek to connect to something beyond their everyday circumstances. As such, reenacting has a quasi-religious (and perhaps civil religious) element. Of course, like any religious ritual or cultural practice, elements will change over time, and authenticity is always illusory (Amster 1999). This brings me to the topic of the Gettysburg National Military Park and its efforts to restore the landscape of the original battlefield.

In recent years, the park administration at Gettysburg has committed to a major project of battlefield restoration—what they call “rehabilitation”—with the aim of returning the landscape to its 1863 condition. Virtually every reenactor I spoke with applauded the park for its vision, which includes the current ongoing removal of 576 acres of “non-historic” trees, demolishing and removing structures that were not on the site at the time of the battle, and restoring fence lines and other features of the viewscape that can impact how tourists experience the battlefield. All of this is a reenactor’s dream, as it allows him to better experience the actual locations of battles as the soldiers might have seen them and improves tactical understandings of military events. As Bruce pointed out, removing trees helps one learn about the battle in a multisensory way: “You’re seeing it, you’re feeling it, you’re smelling it. You know, it’s one of those things—the more senses you bring in to learning, the better you’re gonna learn it. So I don’t have any problem with what they’re doing right now.” Another reenactor described how a large stand of trees that had recently been removed from the lower end of Little Round Top allowed him to get “a whole new perspective” on specific events. “When you see that opened up like that,” he said, “then you can understand, then you get a better picture of why and how things transpired in there.” His only complaint about the project was that “unfortunately, it is going to take ten years to get it complete.”

Another move by the park is to remove nonperiod architecture from the battlefield, such as the current Visitor Center and Cyclorama building, the latter constructed at great expense and with much fanfare in the 1960s and located near the heart of the battlefield. The current park administration now wants to remove these buildings, in part because they sit on “sacred” ground and interfere with seeing the battlefield as it was at the time. These recent attempts to provide a more “authentic” tourist experience, which have increasingly drawn in input from reenactor groups, represent a new approach to heritage and memory. As Jim Weeks points out, this trend has “pulled away from the family-friendly Gettysburg of the earlier era to create an authentic experience for enthusiasts” (2003: 187). Gettysburg, he observes, is now starting to resemble “a kind of giant hobby set for middle-class white America” (2003: 198). Critiquing this mindset, Weeks cites an example of a newspaper report by a black male who visited Gettysburg and had the uncomfortable experience of coming across a Confederate reenactor, pointing out one of the more obvious pitfalls that can accompany the obsessive pursuit of authenticity. One of my colleagues recently asked me, “What happens if Asian Americans want to get involved in reenacting? Would they be accepted?” These are good questions. There were, in fact, some Asian Americans who fought in the battle of Gettysburg, but it is telling that I have not yet seen an Asian American reenactor, nor black reenactors outside of an all-black reenacting group. Thus, in seeking to create accurate impressions, reenacting and battlefield “rehabilitation” both run the risk of promoting forms of exclusion, not just by implicitly limiting the participants in a reenactment,



*Trees being removed near Little Round Top, Gettysburg National Military Park, January, 2005
(photo by Matthew H. Amster).*

but by neglecting the possibility of other forms of commemoration, such as might be reflected in nonperiod architecture or allowing nonhistoric trees to stand as a different type of tribute on the battlefield.

Coming full circle, then, I return to my first day of reenacting and the events immediately following my own brief Civil War moment, described in the opening passages. As our group left the dusty path and crossed a modern road, we immediately encountered a group of tourists who stopped to take our picture. By then, I was fully back to present-day reality. Then, marching past General Meade's Union Headquarters on one side and the soon-to-be demolished Cyclorama building on the other, one of the men in my line, chatting idly, glanced over at the building and said, "It will be nice to get that off the battlefield." It was clear that his desire to see a more authentic battlefield landscape was entirely heartfelt, even though I find such views extreme, having some sympathy for the architectural preservationists who see this building as a valuable piece of our history as well. In any case, being there in formation on the battlefield with reenactors gave me a better perspective on what was taking place from both the reenactor and the park administrative perspective, now converging on the idea of the battlefield as "sacred ground" that is best commemorated through accurate historical representation. Having been freshly jarred out of my own brief time bubble by "farby" elements—the road, cars, tourists, the modernist building—in that moment I could

Question

Refer

more fully appreciate the ever-present challenges of achieving authenticity for such pilgrims to the past.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. Why do reenactors feel so strongly about issues of authenticity in trying to achieve authentic impressions? How does this relate to their personal feelings about the reenacting experience?
2. In what ways do the recent efforts to rehabilitate the battlefields in the Gettysburg National Military Park resemble the aims of reenactors? Is it appropriate or desirable for a federal park to try to recreate the authentic landscape of 1863, even when it entails the removal of trees and buildings? What should take precedence when the mission of historic preservation is at odds with protecting the physical environment?
3. In what ways might reenacting as a hobby exclude some groups of people? Consider the ways people of different backgrounds might respond to the reenacting community.

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