

Images:

Soldiers at Play – Photo by Mike Machian



Soldiers Drilling – Photo by Annabel Major



Union Army on the Field – Photo by Annabel Major



Living and Teaching History – Photo by Annabel Major



An Ambrotype of the 1st Nebraska Civil War Reenactors dressed in Grey – Photo by DC Rambow



Title: Civil War Reenacting in the Midwest

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As the chaos builds, the soldiers fall into strategically placed strokes on a battlefield canvas. An event that is over 145 years in the making is about to unfold in front of you. Rarely is one afforded the opportunity to time travel at the drop of a hat, or in this case, a kepi, so, you had better be prepared for the ride.

In April 1861, Confederate soldiers fired the first shots of the American Civil War on Fort Sumter in the harbor at Charleston, South Carolina. Shortly after that incident, President Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to help fight the rebellion. The call was heard all across the country, even in the fledgling territory of Nebraska. In June and July, 1861, companies were raised throughout the territory and surrounding states, and, by August the 1st Nebraska regiment was marching off to war. The regiment fought in the famous battles of Fort Donelson and Shiloh along with other engagements in Missouri and Arkansas.

In October, 1863, the regiment was changed from infantry to cavalry and transferred to the western frontier to battle the Plains Indians. The regiment was finally mustered out of service in 1866. By war's end, the Territory of Nebraska had offered more than one third of her eligible male population to the war, a percentage greater than even the most populous states in the Union.

Today's 1st Nebraska is a reenacting unit whose purpose and goal is to ensure that the memories of the Nebraskans and all others who served in the Civil War will be remembered and honored. Through displays, school programs, living history, and battle reenactments the public is able to learn of the great sacrifices made by Nebraskans during that horrible conflict, and to see why such horrors need not repeat themselves. Current members of the unit reflect the makeup of the original as they hail from various locales across the state and from several bordering states. The unit includes males and females who do a variety of military and civilian portrayals.

For more information on the 1st Nebraska Volunteer Infantry, please visit our website at http://www.geocities.com/1st_nebraska/home.html.

Reasons For War

As humble and just citizens, we choose the side of right and hold tight to our beliefs. But when we look closer and see the bloodshed, neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother, the question may arise. Why the war? This issue cannot be pared down into a simple answer, so I present here just a few of the heated topics by which war arose:

Slavery - While not the sole cause of this war, undeniably it goes hand in hand with many of the issues that revolve around the political turmoil that brought forth this great conflict. It is a substantial issue that both Northerners and Southerners alike would like resolved. Even at the time our Constitution was

composed, slavery was a hotly debated topic. Not from a moral perspective, however, but rather from a political perspective. As it was, the Northern states did not want slaves to be represented in the population count because the South would then have greater control in the House. Whereas our brothers to the South want slaves to be included, or else they stood to lose seats to their Northern representatives. As the physical borders of our country grew, the issue of whether new states should be admitted as free or slave states was fervently contested. It was an issue of who holds the power in our government.

Economics - The Northern economy was dominated by industry, the Southern economy was agricultural. With that in mind, each of us were dependant upon the other. The Southern produce was shipped to the Northern industries to be turned into finished goods. Even with this interdependence, the South also shipped their produce to other countries as well. That is why the national government's primary source of income, the tariffs, had a greater impact upon the Southern economy than on the Northern. Simply put, the South needed lower tariffs, the Federal Government set the tariffs, and the government is directed by those in power.

- At the beginning of the war, only 10,000 families owned more than 50 slaves, however, three-quarters of all Southern families owned none.

Why We Reenact

Glen Kelley: I may not be the brightest light in the bunch, but I want to let you know why my wife and I enjoy reenacting so much. Some 20 years ago, as my family watched the hot air balloons rise at River City Roundup, we saw a group of soldiers on the field in uniform. We went over to the grey guys to ask what this was about and they told us that it was part of a living history of the Civil War. This sparked a fire in my son's eyes, and ours too, as we love history! Well, as the grey wool makes me itch, we went over to the blue guys (as I call them). We at lunch there and exchanged stories for hours. They invited us to join them, and of course, we did. By the next spring we were well equipped and took to reenacting like a duck to water. We enjoyed meeting the people and telling them about the Civil War, but we learned a lot ourselves as well. There are no phones or televisions or radios. Just people living like life should be. We even went out and helped make the movie Gettysburg, as many a reenactor will tell you about.

Twenty years ago we could fit all of our gear into the Ford Bronco. Now we have a pickup truck and an 18 foot trailer to haul around our 'hobby'. You see, while making the movie I had a heart attack, and then another one quickly followed. But, by the grace of God I got better, but found I could no longer march. So, I built a cannon with the help of the school that my sons attended. I rebuilt that school's cannon and now we visit many school all over Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, and Missouri. I love talking to kids and adults about history. It is a great hobby, with great friends, and you can do it with the whole family. And my wife does this too. She cooks for us and she makes stuff for the grandkids when they come out, all eight of them. Now they know just as much, if not more, about the Civil War. And we hope to see YOU out around the camp fire someday!

Rex Wright: I have always had a deep interest in history, both that of my family, my roots and that of the nation and the world. My Mother's grandfather had been a Civil War veteran and she had passed some of his stories on to me. I had several of my sons at a Scout jamboree at Nebraska's Mahoney State park in 2000 and among the various presentations/demonstrations there we found a group talking about Civil War re-enacting: members of the First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry. I was hooked. I joined the group that winter and started my reenacting career the next spring. Reenacting is frequently referred to as

“the hobby”. My youngest step-son, Peter, joined along with me and the time we shared in the hobby is very special for me, a great bonding experience.

One of the main motivations I had for getting into the hobby was to try to experience some of what My Great-Grandfather had during his service. As with most reenacting groups the First Nebraska made it easy for us to get involved. There were uniforms and all the accouterments that we could borrow so we could participate and decide if this hobby was for us. Then we were able to make the investment in uniforms, tents, muskets and the rest over a period of time as we could afford it. When reenacting we camp as they did, dress in wool uniforms (regardless of the weather) as they did, drill and march as they did. The biggest difference is that when we are facing the “enemy” across the field, we know that no one is actually going to be injured.

I get a great deal of satisfaction from my involvement in the hobby. There is the obvious part: traveling to various places to participate in reenactments or living history events. There is also time spent with like-minded people who have diverse backgrounds of studying different aspects of Civil War history. We discuss and debate a wide range of subjects, and we help each other with the impressions we present to the public. One of my favorite parts of the hobby is when we do school presentations. Usually these are with middle school or high school aged students. Whether having the kids come to an event or going to a school to do the presentation, it is, for me, rewarding to be able to bring history alive and give the students an experience they may long remember. I think making history interesting to young people is one of the best things I can do.

Reenacting has spurred me on to a much deeper study of Civil War history and to digging deeper into my own family history as well. I have a photo of my Great-Grandfather on the wall in my study. I have found three other ancestors who served in the war. Three of the four survived the conflict. So now, I have four separate paths to pursue in my research into my family’s experience.

Regional Battles

Missouri is second only to Virginia in the number of Civil War engagements fought on the state’s soil. Here are some battles that took place in the Midwest. Troops from Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska and other western states and territories took part in these engagements. There were numerous smaller battles and skirmishes throughout northern and central Missouri.

Wilson’s Creek, Missouri: The first major battle in the west, Union General Nathaniel Lyon lead his army of 3,600 against a combines rebel force of over 7,000. The battle was roughly even until Lyon, in the thick of the fighting, was killed. Thereafter, the Union forces withdrew.

Lexington, Missouri: The “battle of the hemp bales” took place in 1861, two months after Wilson’s Creek, as the confederates attempted to gain control of Missouri.

Carthage, Missouri: Early in the war armies of largely untrained and ill-equipped men met in southeastern Missouri with the numerically superior rebels defeating the small Union force.

Lawrence, Kansas: The target of William Quantrill’s raid by Missouri Bush-whackers, intent on revenge against Kansas Jay Hawkers.

Pea Ridge, Arkansas: In the summer of 1861 a confederate army of 16,000 was preparing to invade

Missouri when they were engaged by Union General Sam Curtis' army of 10,000 in extreme northwestern Arkansas. Curtis was tenacious and achieved a decisive victory.

Shiloh, Tennessee: This two day battle in April 1862 started with a Confederate attack on union troops preparing to march on Corinth, Miss. The Federal troops were nearly beaten by the end of the first day, but General Grant pulled victory from the near defeat. The cost of this single battle was more casualties than anything seen before in American warfare. Nearly 24,000 men were killed wounded or missing. More than all of the casualties the colonial period wars and the Revolution combined.