



Hard Travel With Literature

Civil War re-enactment shows author true meaning of travel

By Robert Olmstead

M

y desire is to not travel the flat plane of time and place, but to cut free and wander the dimension where time bends, breaks, becomes elastic and the land is a scape to be felt, heard, smelled and seen in all its dimensions. Maybe I am desperate in this regard because I never left a small place in New Hampshire until I was 18, except by transport of books. It was my grandfather's dairy farm where I grew up, and as anyone employed in the mission of animal

husbandry will tell you, there's no such thing as a vacation, especially for dairy farmers.

So I became a writer and have since learned the reasons and value of travel. It tires us out and opens us up. It fills time in a time-filled world. It can be frightening. It reminds us we are not alone and there are people to be discovered who love us and hate us, and I think it makes us better than we are.

The trip I remember this Memorial Day is significant for how typically unusual my worldly peregrinations have become.

I was researching a novel, one as yet unfinished. Its frisson is the Civil War and our young country's inheritance of war through the blood of generations. In this pursuit my destination is Shiloh Church, Tenn., scene of the largest Civil War re-enactment ever.



The name Shiloh comes from 1 Samuel and roughly translates

“the place of peace.” Thousands are to assemble, and already the traffic of horse trailers and flatbeds conveying the implements of war is miles long. My skepticism mounts. I imagine a beer blast with cannon, sword and musket, a great frat party, only the boys will have black powder and bayonets.

Finally I enter the grounds, a farm contiguous to Shiloh National Military Park. There is an incomprehensible swarm of activity. Like war itself, organization lurks at the edge of control. Stretching out before me are 70 acres of Sibley tents and army wagons. There's a sutler row where can be found all the paraphernalia and accoutrements of 19th century war — guns, uniforms, tack and bladed weapons as well as antiques, books, food and collectibles. Over crackling fires black kettles hang suspended from iron tripods. Men buck hay and muscle their cannons from the flatbeds. An accordion plays somewhere and a boy and girl ride bareback on their father's lead.

In the hospital tent I witness a convincing demonstration of leg amputation. The surgeon explains the horrifying number of amputations due to the minie ball and its bone-destroying capabilities. He tells how the Confederates, desperate for suture material, boiled horse

tails to soften the hair fiber and inadvertently reduced infection dramatically because the boiling also sterilized. In 1861 the Union Army owned 20 thermometers.

I find that with a reporter's notepad and a camera slung around my neck I can squirrel my way into most places and some people's thoughts. I fall in with a battery from New Orleans and clearly see this is their passion. One a schoolteacher, another a horse trainer, lawyer, plumber, sort of like real war. All are admirers of Nathan Bedford Forrest, whose dictum “get there first with the most men,” quite succinctly distills the bookshelf of Jomini and Clausewitz. They have two 12-pounder Napoleons, limbers and caissons and they have a spare uniform, and I am touched when they challenge me to join up. I ask what my position on the gun crew would be, perhaps sponge or ram or thumb the vent. They tell me my position will be the stay-the-hell-out-of-the-way position. I assure them I can do that.

They share their food with me and all seem quite expert in what they know, but their passion ebbs and flows. One is missing his son's Little League game and another is in a relationship recently turned sad, but, warranted or not, they see sacrifices of person as condition to the re-enactor life. As the hours go by I'll see these men and women transform themselves into something frightening to themselves. In glimpses, they'll not be re-enacting; they'll be re-living the experience.

Then consistent with history, it starts to rain. Oh Lord, does it rain. Imagine the thousands of men and horses and wagon wheels churning that red clay into a knee-deep viscous soup. Access is closed, roads shut down and rumors fly that the event is called off. I sleep in my car that night to the drum of rain on the rooftop. It's sunk in mud to the fenders.



Morning breaks with steamy sunshine glassifying the air over a field of deep soupy clay. Inexplicably more soldiers have arrived in the night, while rumor has it the organizers have fled in frustration. As this was a soldier's battle, it will be a re-enactors' re-enactment. I am



CONFEDERATE KEP
COURTESY CHUCK TINDER

Men begin to fall dead as calvary crashes into the flank, hundreds of men on horseback. Stirrups flying, a riderless, wild-eyed horse flinging slobber almost knocks me over...

hungry and thirsty and go foraging.

I never do find my unit, but learn that war is imminent. I hurry to the field where all order has broken down and daring civilians such as myself are not stopped from sneaking onto the site. Suddenly, I am in the middle of a spontaneous battle standing close to a battery of 12-pounders, and when they explode the earth thunders. Their concussive force sets off car alarms in the mired lot. The cannons fire again and each time they quake the earth and send shock through my legs. I reach up to wipe my nose and discover it's bleeding from the blast waves battering my body. Two hundred cannons in 1862 were trained on this sunken road, a Union strong-point thereafter known as the Hornet's Nest.

Skirmishers shake out. Infantry fires in echelon. The Confederate line advances. Men begin to fall dead as calvary crashes into the flank, hundreds of men on horse-

back. Stirrups flying, a riderless, wild-eyed horse flinging slobber almost knocks me over.

In the van is a bearded officer in butternut, wielding a saber in his rein hand, a shotgun in the other. I'm told the rider is Nathan Bedford Forrest. Not that he's personating him, but it is him. For a spine-tingling instant I am the recipient of his cold stare.

As Homer writes in *The Iliad*, "... even so did the horses of Achilles trample on the shields and bodies of the slain. The axle underneath and the railing that ran round the car were bespattered with clots of blood thrown up by the horses' hoofs and from the tires of the wheels; but the son of Peleus pressed on to win further glory, and his hands were bedrabbled with gore."

It's over rather quickly. The titular heads call for a vote. Both sides decide to do it again and the second time it is even more dramatic.

Silence ensues and then the strangest occurrence. I see women dressed in period clothing wandering the battlefield. My hearing slowly returns. They are calling out, "Where's Harry Roebuck? Have you seen him? Where's my Charley? He is my only son..."

This endnote makes me realize how much more this is than a re-enactment of history; it is living theater with an amateur cast of thousands. It makes me respect these men and women for their allegiance to history and their willingness to personally keep it alive. Universal exhaustion finally settles in.

During those two days at Shiloh Church in Tennessee in



UNION FORGE CAP COURTESY STEVE FIELDS

April 1862, total American casualties exceeded the

American Revolution, the War of 1812 and the Mexican War combined. Of the hundred thousand men engaged, one out of every four was killed, wounded or captured. Shelby Foote, in his monumental three-volume *Civil War*, declares Shiloh "...the first modern battle. It was Wilson's Creek and Manasses rolled together, quadrupled, and compressed into an area smaller than either. From the inside it resembled Armageddon."

I slog back to my car. Farmers with tractors show up and begin pulling hundreds of vehicles from the quagmire.



Safe and unfettered travel for so many is a relatively new experience in the history of humankind, but it

was this travel and unavoidable interaction between northern whites and mid-Atlantic slave holders that became the foundation for the abolitionist movement. There is a lot of talk in liberal circles about tolerance and multiculturalism, but there are some cultural practices where one might be justified in being less than tolerant, and slavery is surely one of them.

It is this idea of free association that I fear we now take for granted. We are guided to see the sights and experience cultures not our own and perhaps in doing so, have become less companionable with those cultures, less connected with what we are not. Have we become too much the tourist? Too much the grand mobile experiencing audience?

Inside the door panels of my automobile, there are still clods of that red clay cemented to the paint and to this day I have never been inclined to wipe away their stain. □

Robert Olmstead is a professor of English and creative writing director at Boise State.



CHUCK SCHREIBER PHOTO

Robert Olmstead