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Postage Due: Stewardship, Stamps and a Watch Pocket

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Abstract

Why do we forget that people are human? I've been asking myself that question more and more lately. Partially it's driven by a laundry list of things happening in the world, vitriolic attacks on humanity, both strangers and friends. I just see cruelty looming sometimes, particularly over the lowest in our society. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, stewardship

Disciplines

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Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2014

I've been gone a while. My brain has been telling me these last few week it's not just "a while," but it's in fact "too long." I'll likely explain the whys of the hiatus soon.

Regardless of the why, the short word is this: the drought is over. I can't be abjectly silent anymore. What exactly this blog is and its future is still milling around in my brain. But I need to write and think aloud; it's in my DNA. Anyways, on to today's post...

Why do we forget that people are human? I've been asking myself that question more and more lately. Partially it's driven by a laundry list of things happening in the world, vitriolic attacks on humanity, both strangers and friends. I just see cruelty looming sometimes, particularly over the lowest in our society.

But those we malign are so often the kindest hearts.

Back in high school, I was active with our Civil War roundtable in Syracuse. We met at the [Onondaga Historical Association's](#) museum each month in downtown. Like every Civil War roundtable, ours was a motley crew of local history buffs, reenactor-types, war aficionados and those desperately looking to belong to a community. To some extent, that last category covers the whole lot.

We had one stalwart figure who was at nearly every meeting. He lived at the YMCA. Syracuse is a burned-out shell of a city, a hollow form that is crumbling and dying. I suspect he came to every meeting partially because it was something to do in the evening. I also suspect that the Y being just right down the street had something to do with it too. Somewhere inside I know he was interested. During every presentation he was engaged and "there." But I suspect that we offered what we offered to any of the misfits who came through the door: community.

Our Roundtable helped to restore Onondaga County's Civil War flag collection, including the 149th New York's banner that was shattered and pummeled on Culp's Hill in 1863. We specifically adopted the headquarters flag of Greene's Brigade of the XII corps. We were determined to restore it to its former glory. And, as with every huge restoration project, there were fundraisers.



Our plucky little roundtable harnessed every event we could hitch our star to. On September 2nd, 2001, the city of Syracuse rededicated its Civil War monument, in the heart of Clinton Square just steps from where the Erie Canal once flowed.

We set up a few tables. My mom and I were helping sell postal caches. The little stamped and cancelled envelopes were a few bucks each. [Sue Knost](#), a postmaster from Albany helped many nearby roundtables pull off these sorts of fundraisers; she was a great woman, a dedicated philatelist and a rabid Civil War nut. The cancellation was a line-drawing of Sergeant William Lilly mending the flag at Gettysburg.

I remember when that man who lived just a few blocks away at the YMCA came up to our table, pushing his cobbled-together and lovingly repaired bicycle along with him. He dug around in the watch pocket of his jeans and came up with a handful of wadded up dollar bills. He bought two of the cachets and thanked us, then wandered back into the crowd.

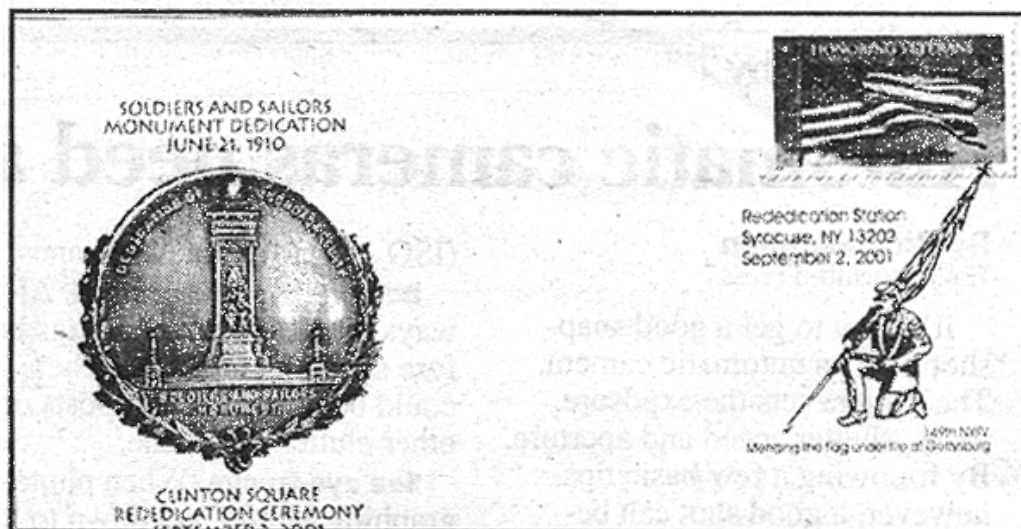
I looked to my mom. "Do you know what that meant for him?" I asked in hushed tones. She was crying. I was too.

I have no clue where my envelopes are now. They're likely in some unloved box in my parents' attic with the rest of my stamp collection.

But I will bet you every dollar in *my* watch pocket today that *he* still knows where his are.

That's stewardship.

It's also why I keep my money in my watch pocket. Every time I dig into that tiny pocket on my right hip, it's my reminder to myself that I have so much and others have so little. I remember that day and that postal cachet. And I remember that those who have so little still somehow care so much.



Courtesy of Onondaga County Civil War Round Table

About the only evidence I can find on the internet that this ever happened.

This scan of a newspaper print of a photo of the cachet is from my friend Sue Greenhagen's excellent "[New York State and the Civil War](#)" website, as much a wonderful compendium of the history of the Civil War community