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Bells on Bobtail Ring: A Cold Day in Hell

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Abstract

"Snow and sleighing," are, a correspondent in the *Franklin Repository* opined in January of 1864, "delightful words to the young, and foolish, and careless." Still, the elder correspondent was keen to, "thank time! we have outgrown such follies." [*excerpt*]

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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."

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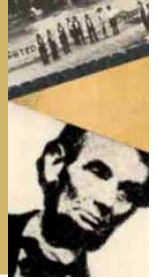
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Sleighbg, as depicted in *Harpers Weekly* in late 1864.

"Snow and sleighing," are, a correspondent in the [Franklin Repository](#) opined in January of 1864, "delightful words to the young, and foolish, and careless." Still, the elder correspondent was keen to, "thank time! we have outgrown such follies."

It's not that sleighing's attendant activities caused indigestion. "We don't in the least object to the merry laughter of the belles or cheery ring of the bells as they hurry past our window," the experienced and much warm correspondent wrote, "but we stir the fire, and do wonder how they can prefer discomfort to comfort, frosted feet to slippers, and frozen noses to genial warmth."

"We hardly think we would get *very* cold should we take a *short* ride," readers of the *Repository* read. But the one sleigh ride that the man holding the pen had taken in those first few days of January of 1864 was considerably more chilly than simple air rushing past the nose could prove. "We *have* taken one more sleigh-ride -- to Gettysburg," the Chambersburg correspondent reported, having, "once again enjoyed the luxury of frosted feet, frozen ears, blue nose," and the chill to the bone of Adams County's frosty winds.

Imagine the cold of a wind whipped January, skidding across the snow on the way down the slopes of the gaps leading down into the rolling plains which surround Gettysburg. Imagine the horse trotting along in the cold, steam rising from his skin as you hear your hair crinkling in the cold near your ears. Imagine that inexpressible cold of a few hours' tour over the South Mountains and down toward Gettysburg.

But a chill of the body could not match a chill of the soul.

"We were chilled all the more at the sight of the numerous rebel graves dotted here and there on hill-side," the correspondent recalled, "and in hollow-nameless graves where the poor fellows lie, dishonored and neglected." As the sleigh slid across the frosted battlefield, the story was laid out in front of its chilly occupants by eyewitnesses. "Each historical location pointed out with painful minuteness, but we confess the vividest impression upon our mind is that of carnage, slaughter, death."

For a moment, vile and cold January melted and thawed into a warm July of the mind. A sleigh sat in a vivid field of wheat and hell swirled beyond its runners. The jingling of sleigh bells gave way to the ear's imagining of explosions, of shrieks of pain, of ultimate and final shouts of horror or regret or sorrow.

The field becomes frozen again. "We were compelled," the editor wrote, "to believe what before we were afraid was an exaggeration." Gettysburg, and Hell, become real on a cold January day in 1864 in a small sleigh threading its way across the fields and hills.

The wind whipped the occupants on the way back west through the gaps. To one side of the highway stood Thaddeus Stevens' iron furnace, "that is the stack of the Furnace... a speaking commentary upon the chivalry of the South," the correspondent added glibly.

Chambersburg hove into view. "We were very cold when we reached home--indeed, as a Southern friend of ours used to say, cold as blazes."

