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Stuff White People Like #1863

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Stuff White People Like #1863

Abstract

There I sat: sun burning my neck, sweat pouring down my face, watching grown men play at death. I'd been meaning for years to get to Gettysburg to see the reenactment, and this past July, I was lucky enough to be there for the 150th anniversary of the battle. And so there I was, sitting in a grandstand in the middle of a farm in rural Pennsylvania, surrounded by fellow white people, watching a Confederate soldier get shot in the back for pretending to desert in the face of the Union cavalry. He flopped to the ground in front of the grandstand; the announcer gave us paying customers a resounding play-by-play. "They love doing that," my wife said in my ear, "Very dramatic." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, 150th anniversary, sesquicentennial, Battle of Gettysburg, reenactment, reenactor, Union, Confederate, Civil War

Disciplines

Community-Based Research | History | Military History | Sociology of Culture | Tourism | United States History

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

STUFF WHITE PEOPLE LIKE #1863

August 14, 2013

“It is well that war is so terrible, lest we should grow too fond of it.” ~ General Robert E. Lee

There I sat: sun burning my neck, sweat pouring down my face, watching grown men play at death. I'd been meaning for years to get to Gettysburg to see the reenactment, and this past July, I was lucky enough to be there for the 150th anniversary of the battle. And so there I was, sitting in a grandstand in the middle of a farm in rural Pennsylvania, surrounded by fellow white people, watching a Confederate soldier get shot in the back for pretending to desert in the face of the Union cavalry. He flopped to the ground in front of the grandstand; the announcer gave us paying customers a resounding play-by-play. “They love doing that,” my wife said in my ear, “Very dramatic.”

It was around this time that I started to realize that something was drastically screwed up with this picture.

After living in Gettysburg for four years while at college, the reenactment had taken on a larger-than-life persona in my mind. The town lives and breathes the Civil War; you can go into town on almost any random weekend and find someone walking around dressed in period clothing. The local economy depends on the massive influx of tourists that descends on the town every summer, and after awhile, you get used to seeing Abraham Lincoln's face staring at you from posters, statues, shop fronts, you name it. Ghost Tours wander through campus and town; tourists stalk the battlefield after dark with candles and cameras. Whether you want to or not, you soon grow conversant in obscure generals, know which buildings still have rifle shots and cannonballs lodged in their walls, and don't find it strange at all when your roommate has to go to DPS to pick up their black-powder rifle.

Yet none of this quite prepared me for the experience of attending the actual battle reenactment. Oh, I thought I was prepared. I knew the general details about the battles we were going to see already: where they fit into the chronology of the Gettysburg campaign, where they happened on the battlefield, who was involved in them. I even knew that the reenactment wouldn't happen on the actual battlefield — unlike many first-time tourists — but would happen on a farm some miles outside the town. (After all, the battlefield *is* a National Park.)





But when we got inside the reenactment grounds, I started to notice things that struck me as odd. Like how the grounds were essentially one giant fairground, with a very commercial atmosphere when you stepped away from stands. How the entire reenactment was treated by the main announcer as an uber-patriotic affair. How the Gettysburg Address was read before the battle, directly after the Star-Spangled Banner but with no added context or explanation. And how, quite literally, all the faces around me were white.

I can understand why the event felt like a fair; with that many people coming to the reenactment, of course there are going to be stalls there to sell things. But when I stepped out to get some lunch and investigate the stalls after watching the first battle of the day, I was hit with this intense, disoriented feeling: What the *heck* were we all doing there?

I mean, seriously. Why is Civil War reenacting a thing? After all these years, why do we keep holding them? Reenacting originally started back in the early 1900s as a way for Civil War veterans to honor their fallen comrades, while educating the public about what the war was like (at least, [according to Wikipedia](#)). While there are no Civil War veterans left, the stated intent behind the reenactments remains the same today. The announcer made a point during the proceedings to state that the reenactment was held as a way to commemorate those that had died in the Civil War, and there is certainly an educational aspect to reenactments. Schoolchildren can surely learn something from being able to explore the encampment, much like they can from any living history exhibit.

But I have a problem with that. There was no attempt made throughout the event to provide any sort of larger context to the battle, so I left the event feeling vaguely confused. Wait, wasn't this a *civil* war? Wasn't the South fighting to secede from the Union and keep slavery? By ignoring the larger historical context for the battle, it made it feel like both sides were valiant heroes fighting for America's greater good.

That's what I really didn't understand: the blind patriotism. Let's sing the "Star Spangled Banner" and "God Bless America" together; let's solemnly listen to the Gettysburg Address; let's treat the entire event as a patriotic affair — and then let's watch these men pretend to die while reenacting the bloodiest three days in the American Civil War. This should not be a moment we're *proud* of as a nation; it should be a moment we look back on with extreme regret. The fact that we needed to pick up arms against one another; the fact that we had to fight a civil war before we finally abolished slavery — this is not a proud moment in our history.

And to be blunt, the entire reenactment seemed to be purposefully trying to ignore or downplay the fact that the Confederacy was fighting for slavery. They probably want to avoid controversy, and I'm sure there are some Confederate reenactors (or Union ones, for that matter) that had ancestors in the Civil War. But by ignoring this fact, the reenactment became horribly racially insensitive. How can we pretend that slavery never happened, and that the Confederacy was fighting for something worth honoring today?

As this realization began to settle in, I began to notice that the crowd at the reenactment was predominantly white. Actually, scratch that, it was *entirely* white. I know that central Pennsylvania isn't the most racially diverse area, but people — erm, white people — traveled from across the country (and world) to come to this reenactment. The event itself almost seemed like a giant parody of the meme [Stuff White People Like](#). The connotations were terrifying: white people reenacting a battle for white people, honoring all the white people that fought on both sides of the Civil War. That isn't "remembering history"; it's bastardizing it, and only choosing to remember those elements that make white people feel comfortable and safe.

At one point, the announcer quoted the cliché quote that has appeared in every middle school history classroom ever: "Those that forget history are doomed to repeat it." And yes, we should remember Gettysburg. But we should remember it *as it really happened* — not as some white-washed (figuratively and literally), commercialized, blindly patriotic affair. When both the Union and Confederacy are treated as heroes, we ignore the fact that this was a civil war — a war where one side was fighting to preserve America, and the other was fighting for their autonomy so they could retain slavery. To even *try* and pretend any different is a sad example of white privilege: we are remembering what we want, honoring who we want, and ignoring those parts of history that make us uncomfortable all without batting an eye.

It took me some time afterwards to sort through all my feelings, but I've decided that's likely to be my first and last reenactment. I keep coming back to the quote by General Lee that started this post: "It is well that war is so terrible, lest we should grow too fond of it." Reenacting these battles does not make us more cognizant of the sheer amount of death that occurred at Gettysburg, and it does nothing to honor those that fought there; if anything, it trivializes those deaths by turning them into something we can play act for our entertainment. Add in the uncomfortable racial dynamic of the event, and it's not something I want to participate in or support.

And wouldn't you know it, Gettysburg College professor Scott Hancock, [already beat me to the punch](#). At least I'm not the only one that feels this way!

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/stuff-white-people-like-1863/>