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Walking Out on the Meaning: Dedication Day 2011

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Walking Out on the Meaning: Dedication Day 2011

Abstract

I am a nerd. Last year on November 19th I was stuck in Las Vegas, attending the NAI conference (the same one Jake and I have been grouching about for the last two weeks). This was the first Dedication Day event I had missed since first coming to Gettysburg in 2003. I was upset. I was disconsolate. I trudged the strip dejected. I toured the Atomic Testing Museum, which was fascinating but unfulfilling. I am one of those dorks who doesn't understand how anyone can schedule *anything* other than a trip to Gettysburg on November the 19th. The glitz of Vegas only underlined this cold fact. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Dedication Day, Civil War to Civil Rights

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

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."

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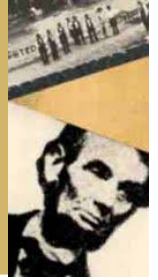
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Walking Out on the Meaning: Dedication Day 2011

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2011

A Wednesday "Extra!" for you about this past weekend's events in Gettysburg...



I am a nerd. Last year on November 19th I was stuck in Las Vegas, attending the NAI conference (the same one Jake and I have been grouching about for the last two weeks). This was the first Dedication Day event I had missed since first coming to Gettysburg in 2003. I was upset. I was disconsolate. I trudged the strip dejected. I toured the Atomic Testing Museum, which was fascinating but unfulfilling. I am one of those dorks who doesn't understand how anyone can schedule *anything* other than a trip to Gettysburg on November the 19th. The glitz of Vegas only underlined this cold fact.



Like a scene out of the best Ray Bradbury short story ever: *Downwind from Gettysburg*.

made some excellent connections and tried to delve into a deeper meaning of that place. It certainly was not the typical exercise in expounding how little appreciation young people have for history, something which not only comes off as holier-than-thou but is often preaching directly into the choir loft when directed at a Dedication Day crowd.

But I noticed something. When Lang finished, what happened to that massive crowd? About 1/4 of it vanished, trickling away from the cemetery. Next, after a few other pieces of business, Jim Getty was introduced portraying Abraham Lincoln. Jim does a fine job as Lincoln, although I personally find his reading of the Address a bit flawed (my problem has to do with syllabic emphasis, and points out just how pedantic my knowledge of this stuff can be sometimes).

What happened after Getty closed? Another chunk of the crowd evaporated into the cold November air, streaming away. What was left looked like a typical Dedication Day crowd. Only about half of the people in the audience as there ceremony began were still there.

But why does this matter? Simply because of the deep meanings and resonances which unfolded next, after so many had left. The final activity of the day, before the Gettysburg High School band played "America the Beautiful," was a simple ceremony. Sixteen members of the audience were asked to stand as their countries of origin were announced: Armenia, Canada, China, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Germany, India, Kenya, Somalia, Thailand and the United Kingdom. Then Philadelphia district director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigrations Services Tony Bryson rose and approached the podium. He asked the candidates to raise their hands. He swore them in as citizens.

But why was this so meaningful?

This year, I was excited to once again be in Gettysburg on a chilly November day to celebrate the speech Lincoln gave 148 years ago. The crowd was massive, larger than a typical Dedication Day. This was almost certainly due to the fact that the event fell on a Saturday this year and ended up as a double-bill with the popular-if-gaudy Remembrance Day. I have deep problems with R-day. But I have deep reverence for Dedication Day. It was nice to see some different visitors exposed to the solemn events in the cemetery and not simply the pompous ones along Baltimore Street.

A massive crowd saw Stephen Lang speak.

Surprisingly, Lang's speech was good. I thought he made some excellent connections and tried to delve into a deeper meaning of that place. It certainly was not the typical exercise in expounding how little appreciation young people have for history, something which not only comes off as holier-than-thou but is often preaching directly into the choir loft when directed at a Dedication Day crowd.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=9gEX7oLmU3o

Why does this video an audience member uploaded to YouTube abruptly end after Jim Getty speaks?

Tony Bryson is black. He is an African American. His administration of the oath followed Lincoln's admonition to the nation that it should bloom with, "a new birth of freedom." We were at a commemoration of a speech which helped to redefine a national war fought so that men who look like Mr. Bryson were not held in coffles but were seen as citizens. This man who 150 years ago would have been looked upon by a majority of the American populace as sub-human and inferior, as something less than a citizen, was administering the oath of citizenship to new Americans of every stripe. That is the fundamental definition of an American revolution.



No better definition of the meaning of the Civil War...

Lincoln's dream of a, "new birth of freedom," was palpable in the cold November Saturday morning. If only more people had bothered to stick around to see it.