

DEMONSTRATING THE OBVIOUS: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROGRAMS BY REENACTORS

By Kim Allen Scott

Dear Mr. Scott: Thank you for coming and showing and telling us all about the Civil War. I can't tell you what I like the most because I loved it all, even the coffee bean. It was good too. Some people have eaten some of thathardtack. Some say it is pretty good, but others made a face. I hope you come again. From the person who liked it the most. . .¹

Ask any Civil War reenactor why he participates in the hobby and you'll likely hear, "I'm helping educate the public!" Usually the more defensive a reenactor feels about enjoying sham warfare the more strident will be his argument claiming its educational value. While it may be entirely proper to question the level of historical enlightenment gained by the average spectator who watches scores of TBG's² shooting blanks at one another, the purpose of this essay is to encourage reenactors to engage in a different teaching activity. I'll present a few hints on how to teach the personal aspects of the Civil War effectively and present some evidence of that effectiveness like the letter I received above. Giving school classroom presentations to ten and eleven-year-old children is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done in a wool uniform (aside from being an extra in *Glory*, which re-

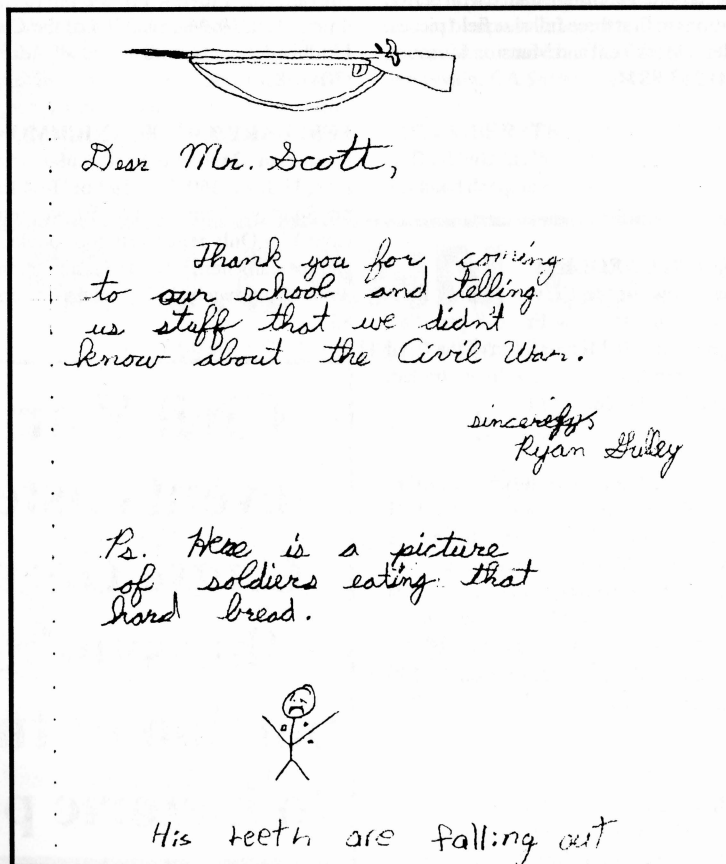
warded me to the tune of fifty bucks). Fifth grade kids are inquisitive, generally polite in a classroom situation, and delightfully literate. At every presentation I have made to children in this age group, I have received reams of "thank you" letters that help me bolster my own claim to be "educating the public." Aside from the obvious humor in these letters, they really demonstrate the level of comprehension gained by the children. For example, this young man obviously got some enlightenment from my talk; if nothing else, an appreciation for his modern diet:

Your speech was very interesting, specially about how the men were skinny and short because they didn't have junk food, calcium, and all that other good food. I also thought it was smart to bake the Hard Tacs so long that they're too hard for bugs and worms to get in them. I think it was a good idea to put the bayonet on the end of the guns, it would sure scare me off if I was a Rebel. I think the hat you had on was not that great. The water out of that canteen must of tasted the worst with all that rust.³

This girl even managed to pick up the rudiments of Civil War infantry tactics, apparently much to her own surprise:

Thank you for coming and teaching us about the souldiers and their equipment. It was very interesting the way they fought in lines. I never was told about that.⁴

In recent years educational researchers have published a bewildering array of jargon-laced studies on children's perception of time and how it relates to historical understanding. One of the more readable research papers uses fourth graders as an example by presenting the youngsters' "fanciful elaboration in historical reconstructions."⁵ (That's "funny answers" to those of you who speak English.) Like the dozens of "thank you"



letters in my collection, the children's answers in the study were sometimes incomplete, often confused, and always funny, but they also show that even really young kids are capable of logical and creative thought in their understanding of the past. The only thing children lack is grounding their historical thought in an experience-based framework, primarily because of the obvious fact that they haven't lived very long. When teaching history to young kids, then, one must always try to relate the message to *their* limited experiences. My own methods, and the responses I have received, seem to bear out this conclusion.

I usually begin my lecture on the life of the average Civil War infantryman by appearing in front of the class in full uniform and pack, slowly divesting myself of accoutrements as the talk progresses.⁶ My standard speech begins with a short anti-war message, usually conveying to the children that the horror they have seen on television news reports from Bosnia and elsewhere is a good example of the so-called "glory" of warfare.⁷ Starting from the forage cap, (which I explain as a design based on fad and fashion, much like kids these days who wear their baseball caps backwards) I work my way

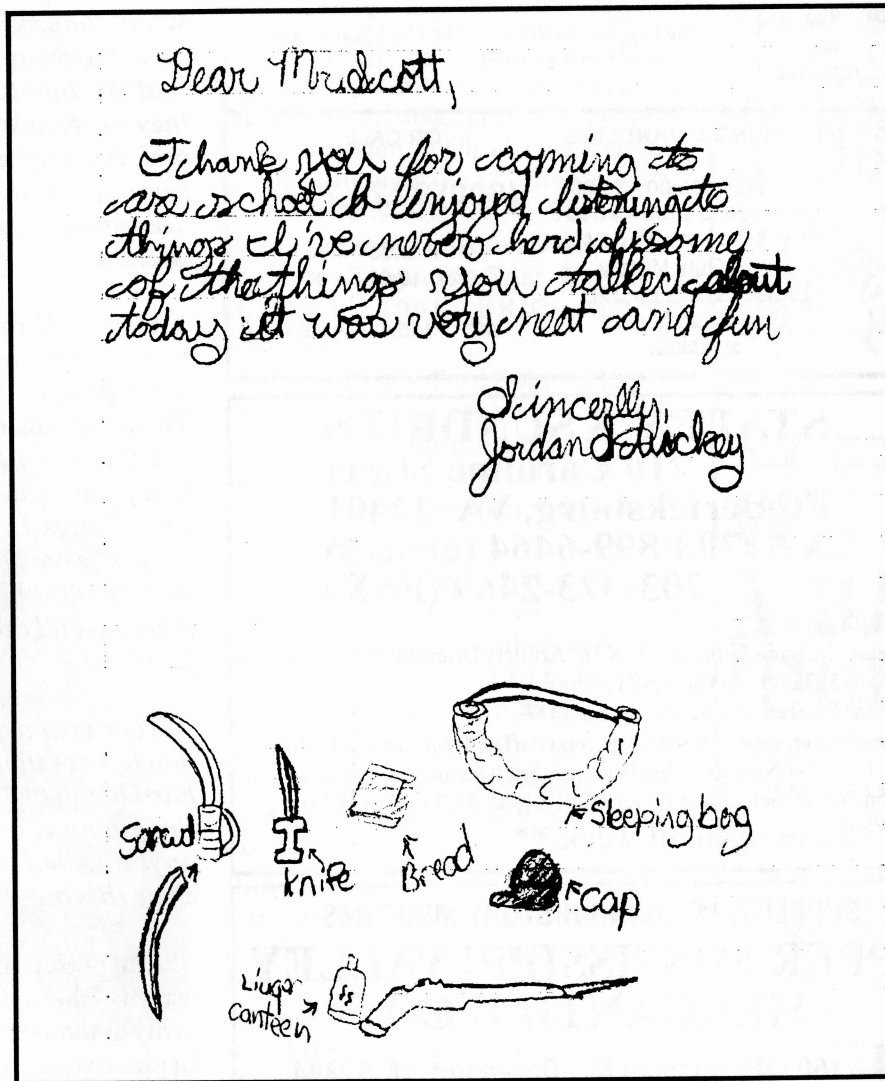
down to the sack coat and blanket roll. One of the most popular parts of my demonstration is the examination of the haversack, and I always pass out an ample supply of coffee beans and hardtack fragments on

my tin plate to the kids as a sort of Civil War sacrament. To illustrate the average soldier's love of music I also carry a tin whistle, reminding the kids that the thing is very much like the plastic recorders that they use in their music classes. After the playing of a simple tune like "Battle Cry of Freedom" (which never fails to generate spontaneous applause from those currently struggling over "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star") I produce some of the darker forms of a soldier's struggle with boredom in the form of a pipe, a deck of cards, and pocket flask. Explaining sub-

ing about the weapons, I always start with the cartridge box and bayonet. The cartridges are merely paper wrapped around cotton—I do not carry a speck of powder—and the caps are all previously fired and pounded back into shape. To illustrate the latter I have sometimes held up a strip of those red plastic toy gun caps so the kids can make the connection without having to dry fire the musket. The bayonet I flourish in my hand for a moment, allowing the length of the sticker to make an impression on the kids before explaining that its real use in battle

proved to be more psychological than physical. Only after all of this preliminary work do I produce the musket. Now here is where you can get into a heap of trouble. We have all heard the news stories about the poor fellow arrested in Maryland for carrying a weapon in school, and of another TBG of criminal ineptitude who accidentally fired a live round in the middle of his talk. I have already explained how to avoid the latter pitfall by carrying no powder or caps. To avoid the former problem I have always asked that the school invite me to the classroom in writing, stating clearly in their letter that they expect me to bring the musket

as a part of the program. Aside from this precaution, I always bring the musket into the classroom within a modern gun case, fully zipped. I only take it out during the time I am actually talking about the gun, and I put it right back as soon as I am



stance abuse to children is quite easy these days in light of the current "just say no" hysteria, and I also show a tintype of my family to underscore a possible reason for a soldier's turn to a chemical diversion.

When I finally get around to tell-

work my way down to the sack coat and blanket roll. One of the most popular parts of my demonstration is the examination of the haversack, and I always pass out an ample supply of coffee beans and hardtack fragments on

COMMAND : POST

Books and Videos on the Civil War, including the Role of Women. Unit histories available. All other conflicts, both United States and Foreign, may be found in our *FREE CATALOG*.

Listed below are titles on which Command Post has special pricing for readers of the Camp Chase Gazette. Our special prices are listed in *Italics*.

THE CONFEDERATE FIELD MANUAL

*Confederate Ordnance Bureau
Reprint of the 1862 Edition.*

HC (*\$13.25*) Reg. \$14.95

SMALL ARMS 1856

*U.S. Ordnance Department
Reprint of the 1856 Edition*

HC (*\$13.25*) Reg. \$14.95

THE IMAGE OF WAR

*The Pictorial Reporting of the Civil War.
by William F. Thompson*

SC (*\$11.50*) Reg. \$12.95

See below for Shipping & Handling.

IOWA VALOR

A compilation of Civil War combat experiences from soldiers of the state distinguished as the Most Patriotic of the Patriotic.

by Steve Meyer HC (*\$33.00*) Reg. \$37.50

GETTYSBURG (Video)

The film that finally captured the three days in 1863 that became the bloodiest battle ever fought in North America.

Approx. 254 Min. (*\$22.50*) Reg. \$24.95

MARY BOYKIN CHESNUT: A Biography

A biography of the woman who kept one of the best known diaries of the Civil War period.

by Elisabeth Muhlenfeld SC (*\$8.75*)

Reg. \$9.95

FOR A FREE CATALOG
YOU MAY WRITE:

COMMAND POST
DEPT. CG
P.O. BOX 141
CONVENT STATION, NJ
07961 - 0141

SHIPPING & HANDLING

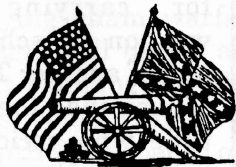
Less than \$50.00 - \$3.00
From \$50 to \$100 - \$4.00
Over \$100 - We Pay S&H
Active Duty Military
Personnel pay no S&H
charges on ground
shipping.

OR CALL:

(800) 722 - 7344

M - F 9:30 - 5:30
SAT 10:00 - 4:00

MC / VISA / AMEX



STALEY'S SUNDRIES
710 Caroline Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401
703-899-6464 (orders)
703-373-2469 (FAX)

3 Catalogues available at \$1.00 each:

1) Flags, Music CD's/CS's, Hats & Insignia, Gifts - 2) 13" X 16" Artillery Drum with Federal Eagle (New) Reduced from \$766.00 to \$575.00 - 3) Clothing Patterns

Also: auto tag holder "Civil War Reenactor" - \$2.25 or 2 for \$4.00.

Civil War Flag Set: 12" X 18" polyester, sleeve mounted on wood staff with gold spear top. Bonnie Blue Secession Flag, Stars & Bars (1st National), 2nd National, 3rd National, Navy Jack, Polk, Van Dorn, 35 Star 1835 Union. \$2.50 each or \$18.00 for set of 8 (plus \$3.00 U.P.S. S&H).

****Store open all week.****



SUPPLIER TO LIVING HISTORY MUSEUMS
UPPER MISSISSIPPI VALLEY
MERCANTILE CO.

1607 Washington St. Davenport, IA 52804
Phone 319-322-0896

Uniforms • Tinware • Tents • Leather Goods
Shoes • Handforged Ware • Camp Furniture • Etc.

**SEND \$3.00 FOR ILLUSTRATED
100 PAGE CATALOG**

done. No one has ever touched the piece but me, period. If you will follow these simple warnings you should have no trouble with a school's paranoia over armed playground punks. So how effective are these teaching methods? I present the following items for your inspection. The relationship of military fashion to modern fads clearly sunk in to this young lady, as well as some basic realities of military tactics:

*I learned a lot from you...I know now that the soldiers ate salty baken, hardtack, and coffie beans. Another thing is that soldiers had to shoot and load a gun three times a minute. What amused me is that soldiers used bayonets not to kill the other soldiers but to scare them off and they wore the hats because they were cool. Another thing is that I thought carrying all the supplies that they needed was a task that not everybody could do.*⁸

How well did the music and the tactile experience of handling (or tasting) Civil War food get across? These responses are quite typical:

*I think you can play that whistle real good. When you showed us all your things I thought the gun was neat. The only thing I didn't like was that bread. I had to break it and try it because if I didn't I would break my jaw.*⁹

*Your visit was very nice. I learned much more than I knew today. That hard bread tasted like a dog bisket so I'm giving it to my dog. He will eat anything but I'm not sure he can chew this one.*¹⁰

And of course there is one in every crowd—the know-it-all. Since most of my demonstrations have been done in places near battlefield parks some of my material is as stale as a hardtack cracker to experienced kids:

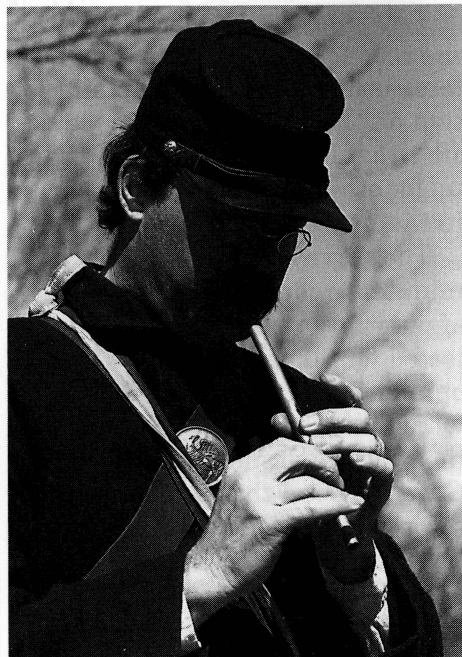
*I learned a little.... I have been to so many Civil War battlefields since my brother is a Civil War buff. I still learned some things about the Civil War. I didn't know that they can use a half of a canteen for a frying pan.*¹¹

This brief essay has been an attempt to convince reenactors who have the time and the talent to take their self-proclaimed mission of education seriously and do it in a setting that is more likely to have effect than the sham battlefield. We have looked at historical teaching and what the experts have said, and we have presented a few ideas about how to fit a history lesson into the experiential terms a child can understand. But perhaps the most valuable lesson, explaining that war is not fun (even though we do have fun recreating it,) is the easiest to teach in the classroom.

This final response may refer to Vietnam, Korea, or even World War II, but its simple eloquence speaks volumes to anyone who would attempt to teach the realities of the Civil War to a child:

Thank you for coming to our school. I learned a lot. My favorite part was the gun.

*My dad's dad was in the war. He died in it.*¹²



Behind the byline: Kim Allen Scott recently moved from Fayetteville, Arkansas to Bozeman, Montana, where he is Special Collections Librarian at Montana State University. In addition to his school programs, he tries to keep in touch with the three other Civil War reenactors who live within 300 miles of him.

NOTES:

¹Eric Chitwood, letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, May 18, 1993, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.
²Tubby Bearded Guys. Someone in our brotherhood needs to confirm the origin of this term for its eventual inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary. I believe the thanks go to Jonah Begone for coining the most significant reenactor slang term since the inception of "Farb."

³Carla Cauvillian, letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, February 25, 1994, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.

⁴Rachel Crawford, letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, May 17, 1993, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.

⁵VanSledright, Bruce A.; Brophy, Jere, "Storytelling, Imagination, and Fanciful Elaboration in Children's Historical Reconstructions." Elementary Subjects Center Series No. 38. Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, East Lansing, Michigan, 1991. ERIC number ED337407.

⁶A friend of mine, Paul Dolle of Rogers, Arkansas, has a neat twist to this method. He begins the talk as a Rebel, divests himself of equipment and jacket as he proceeds, and then redresses as a Union soldier.

⁷My strong feeling is that we in this hobby, who have so much fun in its practice, have an ethical obligation to discourage youngsters from thinking that war is or was ever "fun."

⁸Jessica Hickerson, letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, February 25, 1994, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.

⁹Lindsey Palmer, letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, February 25, 1994, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.

¹⁰Jenny Lewis, letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, February 25, 1994, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.

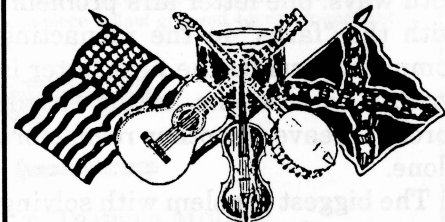
¹¹Stephen O'Brien, letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, February 25, 1994, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.

¹²"Jason," letter dated Fayetteville, Arkansas, May 19, 1993, to Kim Allen Scott. Author's collection.

FAVORITE CAMPFIRE SONGS & CIVIL WAR NORTH & SOUTH AS PLAYED & SUNG BY THE

2ND SOUTH CAROLINA STRING BAND

VOL. I WE'RE TENTING TONIGHT



VOL. II WE ARE A BAND OF BROTHERS

We're back this season with the best collection of Civil War music to be found any where on two tapes!

Contained on these two volumes are 30 of the most popular songs of the era performed in the rousing style of the 2nd South Carolina String Band! Both of these classic albums—normally sold at \$10 apiece—can be yours for just \$18 Yankee dollars. Join us now for a foot stompin' evening 'round the campfire. Send check or money order plus \$1.75 for shipping and handling to:

2ND SOUTH CAROLINA STRING BAND

P.O. BOX 6186 • HOLLISTON • MA • 01746

A portion of sales will be donated to preservation efforts.