

[Back to index](#)

Civil War Reenacting: Uniforms, Equipment and Attitudes

**by Mike Garant
(University of Helsinki)**

This paper examines features within the communication and discourse of American Civil War reenactors. A popular internet forum for enthusiasts in this hobby was monitored for 19 months in order to analyze repeated themes and topics. Results suggest that the community studied reflected main stream American cultural traits including volunteerism, self-reliance and disrespect for authority. Specialized vocabulary that only in-group members can understand was common among the discourse used. Further, argumentative communication styles were evident as indicated by 'flame wars' and insult contests which sometimes occurred on the forum.

Recently, there has been wide interest in the United States in their Civil War period. Reenacting and living history, or dressing up and acting like people who lived during the period, is a concrete manifestation of this interest. Around 15,000 reenactors participated in the 135 Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1998 each with their own musket, uniform and equipment (Annon. 1999). Certainly, not everyone involved with the hobby attended the event which suggests that many 1000s more are out there each of whom have invested one to two thousand dollars in uniforms and equipment, unless they own a cannon or horse which costs more. There are thousands of Civil War related sites on the World Wide Web many of which get thousands of visitors every day. Men, women and children participate in this pastime which has become a multi-million dollar business. How did this develop? What does this say about American culture? This paper will discuss the cultural phenomenon of Civil War reenacting and living history in the United States in relation to insights it may provide into American culture and communication styles.

A Brief History of Civil War Reenacting

This section of this paper will concentrate on trends in Tennessee and Georgia. The histories from other areas of the country may vary slightly and may have had key figures or trends that are not mentioned in this paper because this brief introduction is meant to serve only as an overview history of the hobby. It is based largely on my memories as a reenactor and National Park Service (NPS) volunteer and seasonal park ranger from 1973-1990.

Following the actual conflict, Americans were sick of war. They demobilized. The Indian Wars were fought with around 20,000 soldiers in the entire regular army (Rickey 1957). This was less men than were lost in most of the major battles of the Civil War. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and its Allied Orders: Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, Woman's Relief Corps, and Auxiliary to the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War were formed in the north in the South (SUVV 1999). The United Confederate Veterans (UCV), United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and Son of Confederate Veterans were formed in the South. The latter organizations still go strong in the United States.

Encampments and reunions were held during the immediate post war period were perhaps a way of reconciling the conflict and dealing with the trauma veterans had experienced in their youth. In addition, many probably felt the need to pay respects to their fallen comrades. The organizations also acted as lobby groups to ensure that just pensions were awarded, initially to widows and war orphans and later to veterans themselves.

Early recreations of the war appeared in movies such as *The Birth of Nation* (Griffin 1915) based on Thomas Dixon's (1903) *The Klansman* which has been condemned for its historical distortions. *The General* (Keaton 1927) and *Gone with the Wind* (Flemming 1939) also presented interpretation of the war. These and other old movies are interesting to reenactors and antiquarian historians because they tended to use original uniforms from the Civil War through the Spanish American war period.

Reenacting as people think about it today, began in the 1950s. Early reenactors were very authentic, mainly because they were using original uniforms and equipment which were considered war surplus at the time (Sullivan 1999). What are considered valuable antiques today were available then for very little money. In the 1960s, the Centennial of the War cause a great boom in reenacting. During that period it was common for someone to take a blue or gray Sears work shirt and sew brass buttons on it for a uniform. Then get a shotgun and go play war. It was unregulated and sometimes dangerous. Ear injuries at the 100th Antietam reenactment resulted in a no battles on the National Parks rule (Sullivan 1999). Sometimes, people made cannons out of sewer pipe which, on occasion, exploded injuring and/or terrifying all those in the vicinity. There was one incidence that I know of during this period where two untrained cannons blew off most of their hands because of un-safe practices. Another older reenactor that I knew had a steel plate in his head from the explosion of a 'sewer pipe gun' during the centennial.

The 70s brought about a better understanding of the Civil War period, both in the National Park Service and among reenactors. An understanding of the common soldier based on first person accounts including letters, diaries, journals and memoirs was sought after. Company Aytch (Watkins 1997), Hardtack and Coffee (Billings, et.al. 1993) and other books were and are mandatory reading for serious enthusiasts in the hobby. The technology of the mid- 19th century had been almost completely forgotten and replaced by a glorified and often incorrect version this great catastrophe in which 3 per cent of the population was killed. The 1970s was a time of re-discovery. United States Park Service historians including Dan Brown who made jean cloth uniforms for Kenesaw Mountain Battlefield, Ron Gibbs who developed artillery programs, Dennis Kelley, Bill Kaye and others deepened the understanding of the period. In Tennessee, reenactment groups such as Cleabournes strove for authenticity.

For reenactors and living historians during this period, authentic uniforms and equipment were a hit or miss affair. Often, one had to compromise because correct cloth was not available, cobblers who could make correct shoes did not exist or other such limitations. This mood gradually shifted from one of not knowing what people wore and did during the Civil War, to one of knowing but not being able to replicate it, to limited replication within the limits of existing materials and finances.

During the Bicentennial of American Independence (1975-1981) there was a boom in Revolutionary War reenacting. In the early 1980s, many Revolutionary War reenactors switched into the Civil War creating a boom in the field. Demand for uniforms and equipment out stripped the supply which lead to the mass production of Civil War goods which were produced as far away as Pakistan. Needless to say, quality ranged from pretty correct to not very correct at all.

In 1986, Charlie Childs and others began producing correct cloth and patterns for Confederate uniforms which led to greater authenticity among reenactors. In the National Park Service at this time there was a trend to hire law enforcement personnel or people with high grade point averages in any subject who lack training or interest in the Civil War to work at Civil War battlefields, parks and museums. To complicate matters, museum collections like the one at Gettysburg have fallen into such poor condition that the family who donated it wants it back (Carveth 1999). This sometimes leads to friction within the hobby between amateur reenactors-historians who may see professional government historians as charlatans who do not necessarily know what they are doing.

Ken Burns (1990) video series inspired a new birth of interest which also led to a flood of incorrect uniforms and equipment on the market. What had once been the realm of enthusiast who produced reenacting and living history gear because of interest now became a place where entrepreneurs could make a quick buck selling whatever they could get their hands on whether it was correct or not. This led, in the mid to late 90s to what is known as the Progressive movement, sometimes referred to as hardcores, which has gone back to copying original items as was done in the 70s (Sullivan 1999).

Unlike in the 70s, much of the exploration and re-discovery has already been done, so more time has been spent on manufacturing correctly. Technology has improved as well as the amount of money Americans are willing to spend on their hobbies. Industrious hobbyists weave cloth, sometime on original looms, and sew them correctly producing a quite correct appearance. Many Civil war reenactors are meticulous researchers especially in regard to the life of the common soldier of the war. It is not uncommon for them to memorize large portions of the Official Record or the Great War of the Rebellion, diaries, letter and journals. Further, they are often highly knowledgeable about the clothing and other trapping of the period. This leads, as it always has, to conflict between 'authentic' and inauthentic sometimes referred to as 'farbs'. Civil War reenacting and living history appear to be steaming along into the 21st century. What then does this say about American culture? In the next section of this paper, I will examine features within the reenacting community as they relate to American communication styles.

Method

The discussions on the Civil War Reenactors Forums (Szabo 1999) were monitored over a period of 18 months. They were then analyzed in order to suggest what cultural features were present in the reenacting sub-culture. A sub-culture or co-culture is a smaller unit within the larger culture whose members' behavior may often seem strange to members of the larger, mainstream culture (Samovar and Porter 1991). Sub-culture groups may feel the need to distinguish between members and non-members. This paper will examine lexical features in the data which do this. Frederick Jackson Turner's (1893) Frontier hypothesis argued that many aspects of the American character are shaped by Western expansion on the frontier. Jackson's theory was criticized when it was introduced (Careth and Metz 1996). Still, it has been a major way of explaining American culture even today. Rather than try and include the entire theory, this paper will concentrate on how the control group exhibited mobility; self-reliance, persistence, initiative; suspicion and distrust of authority and volunteerism. Tannen (1995) suggests that American communication styles are becoming more and more confrontational. This paper will discuss examples of this that appeared in the data collected from the reenactor community.

Subculture Attitudes

In order to provide concrete examples of the cultural features present, a sample text from the data will be discussed.

Table 1.1 Trooper Osborne's Six Degrees Of Reenacting**Level One: Complete Farb**

Sunglasses, wristwatch, fires a BB gun, eats at nearby fast food joint, sleeps in motels.

Level Two: Farb

Holds rank of private, but sleeps on an aluminum cot in a wall tent by himself, cooks his steak on his hibachi.

Level Three: Mainstream

Sleeps in an A tent with a buddy or in a dog tent alone, in a disguised sleeping bag or bedroll, bolsters hardtack and coffee with chicken and apples.

Level Four: Semi-Hardcore

Sleeps in a dog tent with a buddy, sleeps in uniform, eats rations, sometimes breaks character to answer questions.

Level Five: Hardcore

Sleeps under stars on a blanket and ground cloth, boils chicory, repairs uniform in the field with period implements. Answers questions in first person at all times.

Level Six: Complete Hardcore

Makes his own uniform from authentic materials by regulation patterns, sleeps in the rain, kills something while walking to the event, may have masochist tendencies.

(Osborne 1999)

Specialized Lexis

In-group and out-group membership recognition is often signaled by the specialized vocabulary that group members use in order to distinguish insiders from outsiders. Table 1.1 contains several examples of words that reenactors would recognize while outsider would not among them, wall tent, A tent, dog-tent, hardtack, chicory, farb, mainstream, semi-hardcore, hardcore and complete hardcore.

Wall tents are large white officer's tents with a peaked roof and wall around the sides while A tents are smaller and completely enclosed. Neither were in mainstream use among enlisted men during the last half of the Civil War. A dog tent is a shelter half similar to what was called a pup tent during World War II. Only a group member with some experience and knowledge of the Civil war would know this.

Chicory and hardtack are food items. The Oxford English Dictionary (1995) defines chicory by saying that the root of this plant ground and roasted is an addition to, or substitute for, coffee. Hardtack is a hard cracker made of flour, salt and water which was a staple for soldiers during the war. Again, most people

Farb, mainstream, semi-hard-core, hardcore and complete hardcore are different classifications for different types of reeactors. The word farb has been mentioned before. In relation to Table 1.1 one may begin to understand the negative connotations associated with the word. Mainstream are a bit mo