

Time tr

Civil War reenactments bring history to life in Gettysburg, Penn.



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By Sarah Johnson



At a gas station on the outskirts of Gettysburg, Penn., I saw a man, fully dressed as a Confederate soldier, filling his Ford Explorer.

This encounter was after seeing a woman portraying a Scarlett O'Hara lookalike whose lips were dark blue from the slushie she was eating.

At the 150th anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg, these folks were simply participating in a reenactment, a form of living history that's become a huge hobby. →

➔ Nearly 11,000 reenactors and 60,000 spectators endured a sweltering July weekend in 2013 to commemorate the battle generally regarded as the turning point of the Civil War.

I flew into Philadelphia, so the 2½ hour drive gave me time to reflect on the juxtaposition of how these beautiful rolling green hills once ran red with blood.

It was here (about two hours northwest of Washington, D.C.) that our country stood on the brink of self-destruction more than 150 years ago.

The packed anniversary schedule ran from Thursday through Sunday with two battles each day, culminating with Pickett's Charge on Sunday afternoon.

Founded in 1995, the Gettysburg Anniversary Committee organizes this yearly event – set to celebrate the 153th anniversary in July 2016.

It cost me \$90 for an all-inclusive ticket. (Three-day advanced-purchase passes for the 2016 event are \$69.)

Big crowds, high heat

The temperature all weekend was stifling – 95 degrees and sunny with high humidity. It was indicative of the actual battle when temperatures in July 1863 were in the low 90s – and uniforms at the time were made of wool.

The National Park Service doesn't permit commemorations on the actual battlefield so the reenactment was held about three miles north of town in an open field.

You could either drive and park on the grass, said the woman at the visitor's bureau, or you could park at the high school and get dropped off at the entrance by a free shuttle.

"I highly recommend the shuttle," she said. "And feel free to take an extra water before you leave."

As I was waiting for the shuttle, a middle-aged female volunteer sitting under a tent said she'd lived in Gettysburg her whole life, but had never seen bigger crowds.

Of course, the people in attendance that weekend didn't come close to the tally of the actual battle – about 170,000 Americans fought here, and more than 50,000 were killed or wounded. Nearly 570 tons of ammunition were used and the fighting left 5,000 horses and mules dead.

Such overwhelming statistics are hard to comprehend and remind me why this little hamlet at the junction of 10 roads continues to fascinate.



▲ The next Gettysburg Battle Anniversary Reenactment will be July 1–3, 2016, to coincide with the days of the original Battle of Gettysburg on July 1–3, 1863. Photos courtesy of Destination Gettysburg

Meeting Robert E. Lee

When I stepped off the shuttle, the "Confederate camp" was to my left – neat, white canvas tents assembled for hardcore reenactors who've given up modern conveniences to drink gritty, black coffee out of tin cups and get their only light from hanging lanterns with candles. Nothing "farby" here – a reenactment term for anything not typical of the period.

The event is open to all ages and dress ranges from those ➔



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The 153rd Gettysburg Battle Anniversary Reenactment will be July 1–3, 2016, to coincide with the days of the original Battle of Gettysburg on July 1–3, 1863. See gettysburgreenactment.com for more information. Learn more about the nearby Gettysburg National Military Park and many other attractions at destinationgettysburg.com.

➔ “in period” to spectators like me sporting tank tops, shorts and tennis shoes. Some take their hot dogs and French fries over to the activities tent to listen to Matthew Brady tell the story of Civil War photography or to hear General Hancock discussing his plans for the next day’s battle.

If you miss one of the lectures, you can catch up in the Living History Village, where I got my picture taken with Robert E. Lee. (He doesn’t look very happy in my photo, but I guess that’s to be expected; he did lose the war after all.) There are also educational booths set up focusing on certain aspects of the war – a middle-aged man dressed as a doctor passed me a card for The Field Hospital of the One Hundred and Seventeenth Regiment of New York Volunteers – “organized in Rome, N.Y., in August 1862 and Mustered Out in June 1865,” it said.

Ready for battle

“Sutlers,” merchants who followed the troops during the war, sell everything from hoop skirts and bonnets to hardtack and period

children’s toys. I walked past one tent teeming with authors signing copies of their books. Another area allowed visitors to sign a banner for troops overseas that said: “The Gettysburg Reenactment Staff and Visitors Thank You for Your Courage and Service.”

Soon an announcement over the loud speaker asked attendees to take their seats for the “battle” and people started streaming into the grandstand or staking out spots on the hill.

I felt the ground shake and saw smoke rings form as the event kicked off with an artillery brigade. (I wished I’d brought earplugs.)

No detail was too small: A horse-drawn ambulance in the distance assembled while a single bugler played *Dixie*.

A cavalryman’s sword near me glistened in the sun as his horse’s tail whipped back and forth in anticipation.

The voice of a man with a Confederate flag T-shirt cut through the air: “Come on boys, ol’ Virginia is over here!”

Even though the outcome is known, the tactical maneuvering was nonetheless fascinating – and this kind of living history engages the senses. The crackle of gunfire and the periodic “ping” of saber upon saber erupted as the smoke entered my nostrils.

The “battle” lasted about 30 minutes with men falling and writhing on the ground.

▲ The 153rd Gettysburg Battle Anniversary Reenactment will be held at the Gettysburg Movie Site overlooking the Round Tops and historic Sachs Mill Covered Bridge, adjoining Gettysburg National Military Park. Photo courtesy of Destination Gettysburg



◀ All clothing worn by Gettysburg Battle Anniversary Reenactment reenactors must accurately represent the fashion and style of 1863, including natural fibers and period cuts and colors. Modern plastic glasses frames are not permitted, nor are modern shoes and sneakers.

After the gunfire stopped, limping men ambled off the battlefield while others could be spied going through the “dead” men’s pockets, scrounging for anything valuable.

At the end of the weekend, I decided I’d never been sweatier in my life and my legs were caked with a mix of sunscreen and dirt.

But even with periodic comments that sometimes jolted me out of this time travel – I heard one woman asking a volunteer for directions to the outlet mall – touring the actual battlefield where Pickett’s Charge took place and then seeing thousands of men marching forward in a straight line toward certain “death” is something you just can’t get from reading a book.

Sarah Johnson is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer who covers history, sports, food and travel for a wide variety of publications.



▲ Camp tents at the Gettysburg Battle Anniversary Reenactment site serve as reenactors’ homes during the event as well as significant pieces of living history enjoyed by reenactors and visitors alike. Photo courtesy of Destination Gettysburg