



PRESENCE OF THE PAST

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

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MR. AND MRS. LYLE

In the first exposure Mr. Lyle held his rifle in his left hand. After making this exposure, Mrs. Lyle said, "I don't want the gun to come between us." Mr. Lyle changed the position of the rifle. I made a second exposure wondering how many other women have said that to their husbands.



THE UNDERTAKER

One of the less appealing roles in a reenactment is the Undertaker. Returning fallen soldiers to their families was important to both Union and Confederate Commanders. There is usually one undertaker at each reenactment. They usually walk around the perimeter of the camp. No soldier ever wants to talk to the Undertaker - even if it only a reenactment.



THREE YOUNG SOLDIERS, BENNETT'S PLACE

Authenticity in reenactments is a goal for all participants. The largest strain to authenticity is that most reenactors, save these three young men, are usually too old and too well fed to appear as convincing rebel soldiers.



THE COPPERSMITH WEDDING

Some families allow reenactments to permeate their lives. I have been to several weddings where only dressed out reneactors may attend the ceremony and reception. A simple elegance surrounds these activities befitting the times which are portrayed by the participants.



RUDY AND JIM, FAYETTEVILLE ARMORY

Rudy and Jim are stationed at Fort Bragg, in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Even though they are outfitted as Confederate Troops, they will salute officers in the Federal Army as a military courtesy.



MR. THORNTON, TENNESSEE VOLUNTEER

Most reenactors can play several roles. In addition to their participation as part of a North Carolina regiment, most reenactors will research and reproduce another uniform for special occasions. Mr. Thornton is wearing the uniform of a Tennessee Volunteer (that's how the University gained its nickname). The special occasion is a wedding where all participants were in period dress.



THE GENERAL STAFF, BENTONVILLE

Four thousand reenactors converge on Bentonville, North Carolina each year to reenact the Battle of Bentonville. These gentlemen arranged for and administered the camp site for the weekend event. Four thousand seemed like a large number for a reenactment, until one of the officers told me there were over eighty thousand troops in the actual battle.



DEAN WARRICK AND SWEETHEART

Dean Warrick reenacts with the 26th North Carolina Cavalry. Mounted Troops are not usually seen at reenactments because of the expensive accouterments required for the horses. It would be a special occasion of thirty or more mounted troops participated in a reenactment. Dean Warrick's horse is named Sweetheart. She is a very gentle horse that endures the attentions paid to her by kids from the suburbs that usually see animals only at the zoo.



KERMIT BASS, SUTTLER

Suttlers sell supplies to the troops. Kermit Bass sells Root Beer and cassette tapes of his folk songs at reenactments. At one reenactment, two participants purchased some root beer using reproduction Confederate money. Immediately behind the participants a family waited in line. With Northern accents, they asked Kermit if they could also purchase some root beer. Kermit looked at their money, and allowed that he would accept their “federal” money - but just this once.



YOUNG SOLDIER WITH RIFLE

Foot soldiers are young not only because it is physically demanding, dangerous work, but because of the indestructibility of youth. Commanders sought out these young men with a steady firm gaze, determined demeanor and a strong grip for their heavy rifle. The true test of the foot soldier comes not from facing a camera, but from facing the ranks of his foe.



THE KENTUCKY KILLERS

Friends and brothers often enlisted together to protect their family lands against the invasion of the Northerners. These friends did the same as reenactors. Before I made the image, they talked with bravado about being "The Kentucky Killers." Then I made the photograph - all joking and bravado disappeared as they became serious about the business of having their likeness captured by the camera.

THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

Things are different down South. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. It is difficult to describe in words, but life is lead with different set of priorities. A sense of pride in family is important to Southerners. People and families are known by where they lived and what their ancestors did. A lot of American History happened in the Carolinas and the interest in "local history" is keenly felt by a sizable number of people. The North Carolina historical society developed an entire year's worth of memorial activities commemorating the 125th anniversary of the end of the War Between the States (never, ever referred to as "The Civil War"). I attended one of these activities, "The Arsenal Encampment" in Fayetteville, North Carolina. My intent was to make still life photographs of some mid nineteenth century artifacts. The afternoon started out that way at least. I didn't make more than one or two photographs before a reenactor asked about having me "portray our likenesses photographically." As I began to photograph, I discovered an entirely new world.

In going under the dark cloth to focus and compose, I felt a bond with the past. It was not a world of where, but a world of when. Under the dark cloth the large camera became a time machine transporting me back one hundred and twenty five years. I can't say that I did travel in time, but I did make images of people preserving their heritage, pride and sense of individualism; traits instilled in them by their parents, and their parents before them. This belief in preserving Southern heritage and tradition motivates them to wear the same uniforms their great grandfathers wore. Instead of defending their homes and land against shot and shell, they now defend their heritage against the march of time. This final battle is the most important. Into a widening breach between the past and the present step the defenders of the past, to keep their heritage alive.

The Presence of the Past are contemporary people in dress of the mid nineteenth century, about the time of the Southern War for Independence (their words, not mine). The persons whose likenesses are portrayed (again, their words, not mine) are Reenactors, people dedicated to preserving their heritage through painstakingly authentic dress, manners, and actions. The dress and accouterments are authentic in design, if not family heirlooms. The people that reenact, are found throughout the United States, but it is not surprising that this interest predominates in the South. Reenacting military units drill regularly using tactics and formations of the time. Tactics are displayed at living history events, and in the reenactments of battles fought during the War. Dedicated Reenactors have been married in period ceremonies.

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