

RE-ENACTING LEE'S SURRENDER

By Randy Koch



An actor portraying General Grant leaves the scene of the surrender re-enactment.

Provided photo

Driving through Virginia's predawn darkness the morning of April 9, a bushel of memories bounced through my mind. While the commonly acknowledged commencement for the Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration began with the 150th anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter during the spring of 2011, mine originated eighteen months earlier with the commemoration of John Brown's

October raid in Harpers Ferry. Despite attempts to imply otherwise, had there been no slavery — there would have been no Civil War.

That morning though, my thoughts focused on the symbolic culmination of the fighting just prior to Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Throughout the commemoration, the National Park Service opened the window to the past with "real time" programming, placing visitors in the footsteps of those fighting 150 years earlier, often precisely to the hour. Blending living history and interpretive programming, along with cultural presentations provided an overwhelming experience.

On Oct. 19, 2009, almost 300 of us joined a ranger departing the Kennedy Farm for the five-mile trek to the "Ferry" in forty-degree drizzle, weather conditions mirroring those John Brown experienced 150 years earlier. Instead of marching to the rhythmic clip-clop of the horse drawn wagon as had Brown's eighteen men, moving ever closer to their places in American history, we marched to better comprehend their actions.

My other real-time experiences included traveling back in time to battlefields at Antietam, Stones River, Vicksburg and Chickamauga National Military Parks, along with the lesser known, but oh so important, Monocacy. Commemoration of the Third Battle of Winchester, Champion Hill and Raymond, made possible in part by preservation efforts of the Civil War Trust, along with a State of Tennessee Signature event at Franklin, enriched the commemoration. Although not on anniversary dates, visits to Shiloh, Corinth, Forts Donelson and Henry, Parker's Crossroads, Fort Pickens, Mobile and annual treks to the Civil War mecca of Gettysburg further enhanced the sesquicentennial.

April 9 would be the commemoration of Lee's surrender, culminating with the deaths of nearly three quarters of a million soldiers over the four-year war, although sporadic fighting in other regions would continue. Was it only four years ago, when I stood in front of the Old Courthouse in Vicksburg, reliving the commemoration of Mississippi's secession from the Union, followed by a trip to Ohio's statehouse several months later for the recreation of the governor's call to arms to put down the rebellion?

Both events took on the naïve aura of a pep rally before an athletic contest, with each side exuding overconfidence in a speedy victory.

The concerns of men in uniform April 9, 1865, may have been similar to any other day preparing for combat, not unlike those facing American servicemen throughout the ages. “Will I survive? Will I see my home and loved ones again? Will I return whole?” Yet this April day in 1865 was different for the 100,000 gathered near Appomattox, because of an unnerving question—“will this nightmare continue indefinitely, or will this be the last day? If so, will I yet be required to make the ultimate sacrifice on the final day?” Hindsight tells us for many it would be the last day of fighting — and for almost 800, their last day on earth.

History enthusiasts encountered during the commemoration added a unique richness to the experience. Faces grew familiar, like the gentleman from Kentucky who retired in 2010 so that he could absorb all the commemoration offered. By the Franklin anniversary in November 2014, he had observed 140 events, many of them real time. A couple from Charlottesville, Virginia, and Jim from Massachusetts, also resurfaced continually. There were also numerous one-time encounters, each with people with a story to tell, usually of an ancestor who fought and died in the conflict.

Just as rewarding have been local experiences. Some were one-time events, like the reenactment of the inter-prison baseball game within the confines of Johnson Island last August, and Clyde’s commemoration of James McPherson’s tragic loss, although no more heart wrenching to loved ones than the death of a long-forgotten private on the front lines. The array of programming presented by the Sandusky Library, Follett House Museum, Ohio Veterans Home Museum, Maritime Museum and monthly articles published in the Sandusky Register touched many area residents. During the sesquicentennial, Erie County’s initial site was listed with the National Park Service National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. New sites continue to be added as we record our heritage for future generations.

If the commemoration fades away leaving only images of a grand celebration, it will have been a failure; if we carry the memories forward, gifted with a better understanding of how this tragic conflict evolved, complete with humanity’s best and worst examples, and linked with the successes and failures of the healing afterwards, this 150th experience has indeed been a success. As noted historian James “Bud” Robertson said during his April 9 address, “History is the greatest teacher that we have” Much has been written about the dynamic military leadership of Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant during the war. Too little has been written of their desire to mold a lasting, meaningful peace. Though not privy to all that transpired during their two meetings in April 1865, we can assume that while neither acquiesced to all of the other’s wishes, each listened attentively to the other’s unique perspective, a lesson for us today.

Six percent of the combined population of the Confederacy and Union perished in the American Civil War. Hundreds of thousands of servicemen have since given the “last full measure of devotion” Do we not owe it to them that while preserving their memories that we also strive to understand why they fought? Acknowledging why others think as they do, and respecting that freedom of thought is even more precious than freedom of speech, in no way mandates that we condone their perspective. In the least though, it shall allow us to bridge the dangerously divisive gaps widening in 2015.

As the ceremonial stacking of arms took place three days after the anniversary of Lee's surrender, the curtain dropped on the CW150 commemoration. In many ways, Appomattox served as a memorial service, complete with numerous eulogies for the life of the Civil War commemoration, if in fact so much death can have a life. That gathering for a final remembrance, with thousands of strangers, interspersed with a scattering of newfound friends, did provide a fitting conclusion.

Moving forward, it now falls upon those of us blessed to have observed the commemoration to ensure, as Abraham Lincoln so eloquently said, "that these dead shall not have died in vain" and that we the living, "take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion" to shape a better America.

Randy Koch is the president of the Erie County Historical Society, and a Civil War expert. In this piece, he writes about attending a re-enactment of Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses Grant, effectively ending the Civil War, and the recent commemoration of the Civil War's 150th anniversary.