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If You Want to Go: History Is, as History Was

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If You Want to Go

History Is, as History Was

SONNY FULKS

If you want to see history like those who saw it first, take a good photo reference, learn the facts, and find those same historic scenes today. Your imagination will do the rest.

Among all the impactful scenes on the Gettysburg battlefield . . . among all the century-old images from Gardner, Brady, and O'Sullivan burned into our memories . . . there is one moment of inspiration that stands out to me in the manner of what each of those photographers must have experienced when they first saw the field in July of 1863.

It happened many years ago . . . twenty-five, perhaps. I cannot remember exactly, but I know it was somewhere in the early to midthirties.

A young photographer at the time with a 35 mm Leica, a tripod, and a pocket full of Fujichrome, I approached the Gouverneur K. Warren monument on Little Round Top to make my own iconic exposures of that simple, but poignant, reminder of service.

Only, someone had beaten me to the idea. Perched in the exact spot where I wanted to work was a man with something far bigger than 35 mm. He was making exposures with what's called a field camera . . . large format work. And he was obviously very experienced, shucking one sheet of what appeared to be four-by-five-inch transparency film after another through what was probably a Linhof, or maybe a Deardorf, the Cadillacs of such cameras.

I waited for what seemed to be a half hour, thinking to myself that this guy is either phenomenal . . . or a fool! For the amount of film he was using, he was amassing quite a tab.

Finally, he finished, breaking down his equipment and tripod and storing them in a large wooden case that sat just below his position on a flat,

secure surface. As I approached to set up my own shot, he looked at me and nodded, noticing the shiny M model Leica hanging from my neck.

"That's a beauty," he offered, motioning to my camera.

"Yours, too," I said, returning his compliment. "Big stuff you have there . . . a more expensive hobby than mine."

"Just making some test exposures," he said as he picked up his coat and prepared to leave.

And then I looked down and saw the nameplate on the top of his camera box. *David Muench*, it read. David Muench, the famous landscape photographer from *Arizona Highways Magazine* and anything else in America worth photographing.

Like the line in the old skit with Garth and Wayne from *Saturday Night Live*, I probably said something like, "I'm not worthy." I have that much respect for Muench's work and reputation. He nodded a quiet "thank you" and walked down the hill to a waiting van, where he stowed his equipment, and then drove off.

For me, it was a modern-day epiphany on the battlefield, seeing a master at work on a selected scene, watching how he placed his camera, how he used the available light, and how he made his inspiration work.

And in the years since, I've thought about that day and relate it to what Alexander Gardner, the great Scottish photographer and protégé of Matthew Brady, must have recognized when he walked up to the scene of the dead sharpshooter above Devil's Den after the battle and saw an opportunity of his own.

It is one of those postbattle images from Gettysburg that for generations has become etched in the

Modern view, without fallen Rebel, of the scene Alexander Gardner made famous days after the fighting.
Courtesy of the author.

Blood stains on original plank flooring of witness houses make it easy to mentally re-create the history in those dwellings. Courtesy of the author.

minds of those who wanted graphic historical proof from the field on July 1, 2, and 3.

Now we don't know exactly what Gardner saw, outside of opportunity. People have long debated whether he photographed what he found untouched: Did he stage the shot by moving a dead Rebel soldier in the foreground of his shot? And just as conveniently, did he use a rifle and other available accoutrements as props, for added perspective and impact?

Over the years, I have read this account and that one. And it could have been just as we see it now when Gardner arrived at the scene. Or not. Like a David Muench, and other battle photographers of the day, did he immediately start shooting, or did he wait for even better conditions and favorable light? There are no apparent shadows in the Gardner photo, which tells me it was done either with an overcast backdrop (the sky appears white in the background and without definition) or at high noon, with the sun directly overhead.

The point is, what did history look like as seen by Brady, O'Sullivan, and Gardner? We will never know, outside of the images they made, preserved for present-day publication . . . scenes from the Rose farm, Devil's Den, and the Round Tops. Time changes nature's perspective, for certain, which is why the National Park Service initiated the timbering of the battlefield some years ago, to preserve how it looked 150 years ago. I have been asked a number of times on the battlefield by other photographers where iconic images so familiar to us now were made back then and how they could find the spot.

The answer, of course, is research, and books like William Frassanito's *Gettysburg: Then and Now* are excellent resources. But there are other means of seeing, and feeling, Gettysburg today as it was in 1863. And I have done it by simply asking inhabitants presently living in witness homes to roll up their rugs, in dining rooms, bedrooms, and even attics. Here's why.

Several years ago I was a guest in a home south

of Gettysburg, a house that was inhabited during the battle and was known to be used as a field hospital by the Union Third and Fifth Corps. The question was asked, is there any remaining evidence? With a smile, the owners motioned to me to follow them into the living room, where they began to rearrange the furniture so as to avail a large area rug that covered the center of the room. As they began to roll up the rug, large blue spots were immediately revealed beneath, and at the center of the room an obvious pool of what appeared to be dried blood, turned blue with age, was clearly evident.

"This is the original plank flooring," the woman of the house assured. "It used to gross me out when we first moved here, but after a while we wanted to know more about the stains. We had them checked out professionally, and the findings concluded that this is definitely human blood, aging to the time of the battle. I can only imagine the scene in this house at the time." The splotches all about the room were consistent with the mental image I had of a number of bodies arranged on the floor. And this house is not alone, as numerous dwellings in and about Gettysburg still bear the stains of battle and the suffering of those from whom the blood dripped. How it looked then can easily be imagined by mentally changing the colors . . . from blue to red.

Next, I have always been fascinated by the fact of time and how some things in nature and material seem to transcend the ravages of aging. So it is with the Trostle farm, east of the Emmitsburg Pike, and the specter of the holes created by artillery fire in the upper south side of the barn. To first-time tourists on the field, it has long been one of the most compelling, and most photographed, scenes on the battlefield. In 1998 I led a photo tour for Nikon and stopped at the Trostle farmstead, only to lose an hour of schedule due to the fascination tour members had with actual evidence of battle on the buildings.

And the Trostle buildings are not alone, either. Years ago, while visiting the battlefield with guide Walter Powell, I asked him how many buildings still had evidence of armament embedded in their walls. "Oh sure, there's a few," Powell said. "Let me show you a good one." And with that, we hung a left and drove a couple of blocks to a large two-story brick dwelling on the east edge of Gettysburg. Getting

out of the car, we walked around back of the house, which appeared to be uninhabited at the time.

"Now, look up," he directed.

At that, I did scan up the side of the building, looking at first laterally for some sign of puncture.

"Check under the soffit," he directed.

There, tucked beneath the down spouting, was an intact cylindrical case shell, rusted but otherwise like the day it was fired and embedded in the brick.

"How many of those are there around town?" I asked.

"Not many, but enough to be an attraction if people knew they were here," Powell answered. "The locals know where they are and keep still about it. The tourists never suspect. If they did, we wouldn't be standing here by ourselves."

Now imagine the inhabitants of this house 150 years ago coming back to their home on July 5 or 6 and finding an undetonated shell stuck in the wall of the house. Who do you call to come check it out? There were no bomb squads in 1863. "Some simply packed up and left . . . found another place to live, I guess," said Powell. "I'm sure a lot of people were traumatized by the fighting and shelling. No one expected it, and no one had ever experienced it."

Finally, one of the spots that I frequently visit is the area adjacent to and east of Little Round Top, where Walter Morrill and Company B of the Twentieth Maine hid and waited to spring their surprise attack on the Fifteenth Alabama at the height of the fight on July 2. Since first seeing it with the late Bob Younger thirty-five years ago, it has become a favorite of mine. The site is about a hundred yards removed from the Twentieth's well-known granite marker, and few people bother to find it because it is down in the woods and the mosquitoes and ticks are brutal during the summer months. But how must that scene have looked back then? What was it like for Morrill and his sparse company of men as they watched wave after wave of Confederate attacks and Union repulses? How could they have known, without the communications of today, when to attack and how to coordinate? How would Morrill and his men have had the discipline to wait and the instinct to act at precisely the right moment?

Well, I think those very thoughts every time I walk back into those woods. There is a small stone

The site of Walter Morrill and Company B of the Twentieth Maine . . . the best seat in the house on the evening of July 2.
Courtesy of the author.

wall built that I suspect is a remnant of an original stone shelter. I have looked west from behind that position, toward the fighting, and tried to picture the Alabama troops fighting up the rocky hill in front and recoiling backward under the bayonet charge of Chamberlain and his men. I have never seen wartime photos taken from that position. To-day no one has any idea if the forest is more or less dense than it was back then. But to have been there then, the action would have been right before your eyes. The same scenes are depicted today through the research and imagination of artists Mort Kunstler, Don Troiani, and Gettysburg's own Dale Gallon. Several years ago I spent the better part of a day with Gallon as he shared at one site after another his own vision of the history that he paints today.

If you want to spend a more interesting day at Gettysburg, take a photo reference from the time of the battle and find some of those same positions today. Look at the work of Gardner and Brady and for

fun re-create them with your own camera. It will slow you down a bit, but that's okay. Take the time. Believe it or not, as Dale Gallon says, once you know the facts and get the proper perspective, your imagination will do the rest. Suddenly you'll see history as history was, as Alexander Gardner saw it. You might even meet one of America's best trying to do the same.

It's there. I've seen it. *If you want to go!*

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Sonny Fulks is photo editor and a direct descendent of three Union Civil War veterans. A great-great-uncle, Joshua Kite, served with the Second Virginia Union. And great-grandfather Nicholas Simpson, along with his brother Robert, saw duty in the Battle above the Clouds on Lookout Mountain in November 1863 with the First Ohio Heavy Artillery. Fulks is a graduate of Ohio State University, a former professional baseball umpire, and a lifelong student of Civil War history and Civil War photography. He has two grown children and lives with his wife Mindy in Covington, Ohio.

Gettysburg artist Dale Gallon describes his vision of history to a guest on Little Round Top. Courtesy of the author.