

Books, Battle, Butterfly Weed

Like the farm boys who walked away from home for the first time to enlist in the army during the Civil War, I too am here, far from home on my first battlefield. Having just completed a course in Civil War literature, coupled with my own widespread reading, visiting the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park is vividly real yet hauntingly surreal. Always before I'd had to envision the scene; then, despite the snow drifting down in uniform lines outside the window I was transported to the heat and confusion of faraway battlefields. Now, headed south on my first vacation outside of a book, I find myself standing in the midst of the action.

The hot Georgia sun beats down on us, scorching our tender Western New York skin like hot dogs left too long on the grill. We are pink and ready to pop even though it is early in the morning. So my boyfriend Darrick and I are the first to crowd around the young tour guide standing under a spreading oak tree near the museum headquarters, waiting for the rest of the group to materialize. He holds a large map and looks slightly ridiculous wearing his large Smoky-the-Bear ranger hat, in spite of blue eyes and soft southern drawl.

"His name is Leslie," Darrick whispers derisively in my ear, noticing my gaze fixed in the guide's direction.

"I was looking at the map," I protest, laughing.

Darrick doesn't quite share my enthusiasm this morning, but he is happy to let me indulge my interest. And he is always willing to learn.

When the group is all assembled, Leslie the tour guide begins telling us background information about the battle of Chickamauga while pointing to various places on his map. Fighting commenced in this place over the strategic importance of Chattanooga, just north of the battlefield. Both armies coveted the many railways that converged in that city and the North saw it as the gateway to the heart of the Confederacy. Listening carefully to the guide's words, I can hear cannon booming in the distance and see the first wisps of smoke clearing the treetops.

Air conditioning on full blast, we join the caravan of cars snaking along the trail. The air is hazy outside, the heat stifling. Unlike most Civil War battles, which were fought in open fields, Chickamauga was fought mainly in the woods. A fact for which I am glad as the tour stops in shaded areas, but

which drove the Generals crazy. The terrain made keeping track of troops difficult, and commanding them almost impossible.

It was this confusion that caused the Union defeat at Chickamauga. Federal Brigadier General George H. Thomas's corps, fighting behind log barricades, was under vicious attack. General Rosecrans sent reinforcements to the spot, weakening the Federal right flank. Later that autumn morning of September 20, 1863, Rosecrans received a false report that a division was out of position. Believing there was a gap in the line, he ordered troops to shift and fill the supposed hole, thereby creating an actual one. Just as the hole was made, the Rebels, under Longstreet, attacked and smashed through the Union line.

Pausing a moment before climbing back in the car I can hear the bone-chilling Rebel yell ringing in my ears. The monuments here mark where Union Brigadier General John M. Brannan's division fought, mostly regiments from Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and one each from Michigan and Minnesota. These boys were indeed a long way from home. As I read the names inscribed in stone, I can see the faces of those men: confused, scared, determined, dying. Hearing footsteps crunch behind me, I whirl around. Dark through the haze of heat and smoke I come face to face with a soldier, his complexion caked with sweat and grime, eyes wide and bloodshot, rifle aiming at my chest. But then the smoke swirls away and Darrick is walking toward me with the water bottle.

If this war had been fought one hundred years in the future, I would be the desolate woman left alone whose sweetheart faced the enemy line. I would be one of the generation of sisters who stayed home and waited for someone who would never come. And I wonder how, when it was all over, General Rosecrans could live with himself, with the knowledge that his innocent mistake had lost a battle. Had lost someone's brother, husband, father, son. Had lost life.

Finally, we make the last tour stop on Snodgrass Hill, where General George H. Thomas earned the nickname "Rock of Chickamauga". The Union troops, their line collapsed and broken, had fallen back to this hill, where Thomas reorganized them. A small detachment of the Federal army dug in and defended the hill, some continuing to fire until they were captured by the Rebels. Their stubborn bullets gave blue-clad comrades a chance to retreat under cover of the approaching darkness. I see them. A whole army of men running across a large field toward the cover of the woods beyond, their dark uniforms melting into the trees until there is no one left.

As the tour caravan breaks up and drives away, Darrick leaves me to

linger alone on the hill, unwilling to leave this place. I wander around, reading the inscriptions on the monuments marking where each division fought. My fingers trace the letters engraved in the cold stone. The silence here is thick and heavy, as if the noise of so many years ago has to be smothered with a blanket to prevent it from exploding in our ears once again. Quivering light sifts down through the trees, reminiscent of light shining through stained glass windows in church. Delicate, ephemeral, spiritual. This place has been sanctified, not with the blood of Christ, but with the blood of men.

Atop the hill stands a cabin that belonged to the Snodgrass family. Thinking of my own little house on a hill far away from here, surrounded by the fields and hills that I love, I wonder where the Snodgrass family went during the battle and if they ever came back to see what became of their home. Peering in the windows it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. I run my hands over the wooden outside walls imagining bullets splintering the boards as the conflict continues to rage outside, virtually on the doorstep. Clouds of smoke billow through the treetop beside the cabin as I take a look around the small, square, one-room home.

During the battle, the cabin was used as a field hospital. Shadows of surgeons performing amputations and men screaming in agony flit before my eyes. The men squirm on the blood-soaked floor and overflow out onto the field, oblivious to everything but the relentless thunder of cannons, pain, heat, and thirst. I step around them, tasting salty sweat on my tongue as I lick my parched lips. The mournful dirges of insects and the wounded mingle together while I walk out through the maze of bodies strewn in all directions from the Snodgrass cabin. Blood, smoke, horses, death linger heavy in my nostrils as I stand at the crest of this hill and turn full circle in the hot sunshine.

In his *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Winston Churchill says “Thus ended the American Civil War, which must upon the whole be considered the noblest and least avoidable of all the great mass conflicts of which till then had been recorded”. The brochure I picked up at the museum headquarters says that Chickamauga was one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. Confederate losses totaled more than 18,000 out of 66,000 soldiers engaged; Union losses were 16,000 out of 58,000. A testament to the high price of fighting a war with modern weapons and outdated tactics. Running straight into a line of rifle fire—noble? Perhaps. Avoidable? I’m not sure. But even I cannot imagine that many dead men lying on this ground.

The defeat here at Chickamauga forced the Union army to retreat into Chattanooga, where the Confederates held them under siege for several

months. But as long as the city remained in Federal hands, the Confederate victory at Chickamauga was incomplete. In fact, the Rebel army never gained control of Chattanooga, though they created a stranglehold around the city and the soldiers encamped within its borders. Reinforcements were sent to Union General Rosecrans late in October and the next spring, General Sherman used Chattanooga as the base for his march to Atlanta and the sea.

Looking out over the field to the woods where the Union army disappeared in that long-ago purple September twilight, I am stunned by the absurdity of this war. Being on this battlefield, so close I can see the armies of men outlined in the haze, triggers a crinkly feeling along my spine. I know that the Civil War was fought for good reason—to end slavery—despite the modern day historical fallout that tends to say otherwise. Yes, the Civil War was fought for state's rights, but the right that the South was fighting for was that of continuing and expanding the institution of slavery; of preserving their way of life. Chickamauga was the result—a total of 34,000 dead men and an incomplete victory at best. Despite the idealistic rationale behind the fighting on both sides, the carnage and futility of this battle still don't make sense to me over a hundred years after the fact. The indecency of one nation fighting amongst itself, brother against brother, has become clearer with each inscribed name that I read.

A hot breeze caresses my hair and rustles through the long grasses out in the meadow. Flames of orange butterfly weed blaze along the slope of the hill, sparking a stab of homesickness. I am here after a battle: tired, hot, scared, and far from home. Standing on this ground, I have been in communion with the soldiers who fought here in some inexplicable way. But I have come too close to something, something that is better left to silence.

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