

Living History

By Philip Schreier

Tricking Out Your Civil War Impression

July of 1976 changed my life on many levels. I had been a life long Civil War buff ever since my grandmother told me I was a great grand nephew of General P.G.T. Beauregard C.S.A. The movie *The Outlaw Josey Wales* came out the month before and CBS brought live 4th of July



coverage of the re-enactment of the battle of Gettysburg into my living room. Hearing Walter Cronkite give a play-by-play of the battle was unreal. It was my first inkling that there was such a hobby as re-enacting. Months later, as a freshman in high school, I was introduced to an upperclassman who knew all about re-enacting and gave me a Dixie Gun Works catalog and a flyer from McGee Industries. I was completely overwhelmed that such neat toys could be had by calling a 800 number with a credit card. Within months I was a proud member of a local Artillery Battery and having the time of my life.

My first uniform was something of a joke. It was a converted military academy parade jacket with tails. I looked somewhat like one of the little cadets in the film *The Horse Soldiers*. It was not long before I "upgraded" to something more respectable and correct for the impression I was trying to portray. Back then the gossip column in *The Camp Chase Gazette* was all about "Authentic" vs. everyone else in the hobby. The

"Authentic" were supposedly the guys who had their impressions correct and didn't look like "farbs", a euphemism for a re-enactor with no clue. Today the hobby is still laden with those who are trying to do it "right" and those who still don't have much of a clue as to what the soldiers of 1861-1865 looked like.

Its not that hard to make a correct and distinctive impression from what you already have and a few things that you can pick up along the way. Here are some tips that may help you along the way to a better looking portrayal.

UNIFORM

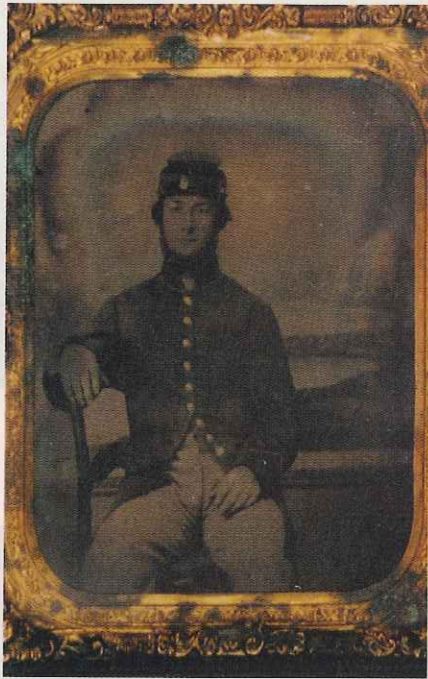
The most distinctive part of your impression is your uniform. It is what most people see first and can make or break your overall impression. There are a lot of sutlers out there that are more than willing to sell you something you don't need and/or would look completely silly in. First rule about buying from sutlers is, check with your unit leader. Don't show up for a battle completely outfitted looking for a unit to join. It is best to find a unit close to your home that portrays the impression you want to join and find out the kind of uniforming standards they have.

If you buy your uniform "off the rack" at a sutler's, there are a few things you can do to make it look better. First thing is to remove the button hole stitching and replace it by hand. Look at any uniform in any museum and you will note that the button holes and top stitching is all done by hand. Yes, I know that sewing machines were invented before the war and they saw great use, however the fact remains, that the sewing machines of those times had their limits and stitching button holes was one of them. Its not hard to do and you can finish the task while watching TV one evening.

How do your buttons look? Bright and brassy? A mid-war impression would portray buttons that were probably mismatched, replaced and defiantly not bright and brassy. Remove your buttons and soak them in some lacquer thinner. Most buttons are coated in a lacquer that prevents tarnishing and keeps them shining. A quick bath in thinner should remove most of the lacquer and put them well on their way to affecting a convincing tarnish. You can accelerate the tarnishing process buy soaking them in a jar of... well how shall



Battle shirts were common uniforms during the opening year of the war amongst many confederate units and they are easily enough made by hand if you have a pattern and some patience to make your own stuff. This grouping of men of the Southern Guard demonstrate musket drill a-la 1861 at the Harpers Ferry National Park.



Photographic evidence is the best way to select authentic impression details. Shell jackets, frock coats, kepis, cups, pipes, shirts and shoes are all visible in these three ambrotypes. Can you tell which photos are period (1861-1865) and which one was taken in 1998?

we say it... re-cycled beer? Get the picture? Just don't leave the jar sit in the house while you are doing this science experiment, best leave this project in the garage for a week or so.

Are you a Confederate soldier wearing sky blue Yankee kersey trousers? Well unless you are portraying a soldier from Jackson's division during the Sharpsburg Campaign, go sparingly with the Yankee uniform parts. Confederates were surprisingly well uniformed and very proud of their appearance. The "tattered and shoeless" myths have been mostly dispelled by historians in the last 30 years or research. A few units were lacking in proper clothing during short periods but did not exhibit the generalized impression that they were all slovenly and in tatters. Issue jackets and trousers were the norm, not the exception, for Confederate soldiers.

Is your impression that of a dismounted cavalry trooper? Please stop. Don't do it. It's a hideous impression that makes you, and the hobby, look silly. Get a horse, and if you can't do that get a rifle and learn *The School of the Soldier*. Theodore Roosevelt lead the only charge of dismounted cavalry (Cuba, 1898) that I have ever read about so just stop embarrassing yourself.

Most southern troopers wore home-made shirts, so your shirt should be somewhat homespun and completely hand-sewn. Yanks also wore homespun, but sported U.S. issue white muslin shirts as well. Try to make your impression more personal by wearing something a little distinctive.

If you want to invest in quality goods

and are looking for a near perfect impression then consider the products from Charlie Childs at Country Cloth. Charlie was the first to make "jean" cloth for the re-enactor in the early 1980's. Jean is a material comprised of cotton and wool, interwoven, producing what they called jean cloth in the 1860s. It's a near equivalent of modern day Levis. Looking at the famous Confederate "sleeve" that is on display at the Antietam National Battlefield Park, you can see an original sample of jean cloth and Charlie's inspiration for weaving his own material. Today Charlie makes patterns and supplies the jean cloth for you to make your own uniforms and shirts. A close friend of Charlie's is Chris Daley of CJ Daley Historical Reproductions, Inc. Chris has in stock many items, all of top quality and hand sewn, that will do your impression wonders.

Hats are another impression breaking or making item. Yankees have no problem here, although there are certainly good and bad forage caps out there, it's still pretty hard to mess up a kepi. Confederates have a lot of room in their impression for some distinct headgear. A good slouch hat, or civilian hat, can really make you look the part. A hand-sewn sweatband with a custom plaid liner and a manufacturer's stamp works well too. Even though no one can see your custom liner, you will know its there and that thought alone will add just a little spring to your step as you go along. If you want to go further, set your iron to "steam" and fill it with water, holding it close but not touching the iron to the hat. This will allow you to soak the brim



When on the march, a bed roll or soft pack are essential to a proper portrayal of an infantryman. Note that the canteen and haversack are shortened to a point just at the wearers elbow to keep these items from swinging and bashing the soldier as he marches and advances at the double quick.

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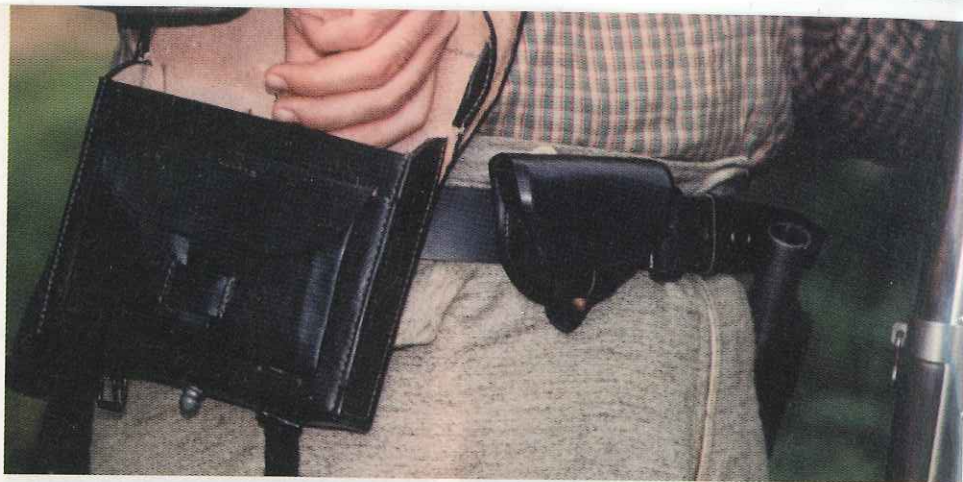
and crown with enough steam to re-shape it, if you want to put that little unique touch to it. If you have fallen into the crowd that saw one photograph in a book and decided to add a hanging tassel to your hat, stop now. It really looks ridiculous to wander about with a pullcord from a sitting room drape swinging around your eyes distracting you and everyone who looks at (or like) you. If you visit Gettysburg on a tour soon, make sure you stop by Dirty Billy's Hat shop and look at the great collection of hand made hats he has for sale. "None better," as the old trade saying goes, and Dirty Bill is as close to an original as you are likely to find.

EQUIPMENT

If you have the inclination and time, re-cover your canteen with some scrap jean cloth to give it a nice look. If you can bend your drinking cup with your fingers like a beer can, trade it in on a serious and authentic piece of tinware. If it's thick and strong like steel, then you have a keeper that will last years of hard campaigning. Just be careful when you attach it to your haversack, it will break your hip if you fall on it when you "take a hit".

Nothing disturbs me more than seeing a group of new guys, and many veterans, marching around with their canteens and haversacks low around their knees. Shorten up your canteen sling so that it rests comfortably under your arm where your elbow touches your torso. Your haversack should also be shortened up somewhat to the point where the flap is right under your belt. If you ever move out at the quick step, you will be grateful that these items are not banging around your knees and bouncing against you while you run.

Belts can be another source of distinct equipment. The typical "US" and "CS" brass ovals are common, for the confederate re-enactor many other styles are available. The square frame brass buckle with a forked tongue is a personal favorite as well as the British snake buckle. If you like the snake buckle, try an Enfield cartridge box as well. Most English goods were imported in sets and the snake buckle and cartridge box were issued together in most



Decent leather equipment is also essential to an accurate portrayal, remember it is best to invest in quality goods at the start of your hobby than to pay for the same item numerous times as you replace sub-standard products. This set of equipment is all hand stitched and made from original patterns.



Kepris (front row) and slouch hats are one area of personal expression that separates you from the vast sea of blue and/or gray. Numerous custom makers can outfit you with a shape and style that matches your physical build and impression.

cases. Too, many state seal buckles abound for both sides. If you opt for one, just make sure it's appropriate for your chosen unit.

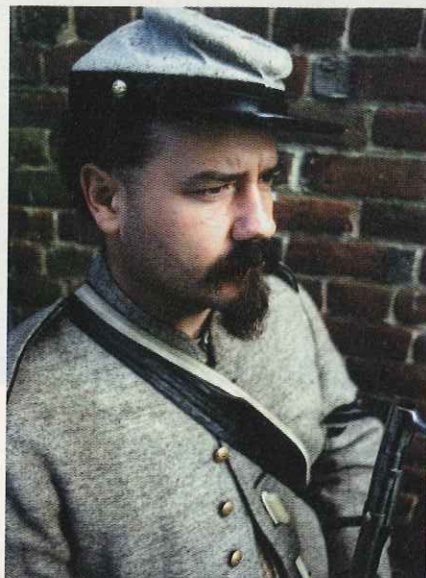
ARMS

Well, the guns of the Civil War were my first attraction to the hobby, and the \$79.95 Colt 1860 Army revolver that I bought by mail from McGee Industries still has an honored place in my gun cabinet. Before you buy any firearm, make sure it's appropriate for the impression that you are doing. An 1803 Harpers Ferry is alright for a First Manassas impression but not for anything else. Pattern 1853 Enfields were not imported until late 1861 and few were available until mid 1862. The 1855 and 1861 are great for all periods of the war but the 1863 did not make its debut until mid-1863 so it's off-limits for those Manassas and Sharpsburg impressions. 1842 Springfields and Austrian Lorenz muskets are always distinct and fun to re-enact with. If you have a musket or rifled musket consider having it de-

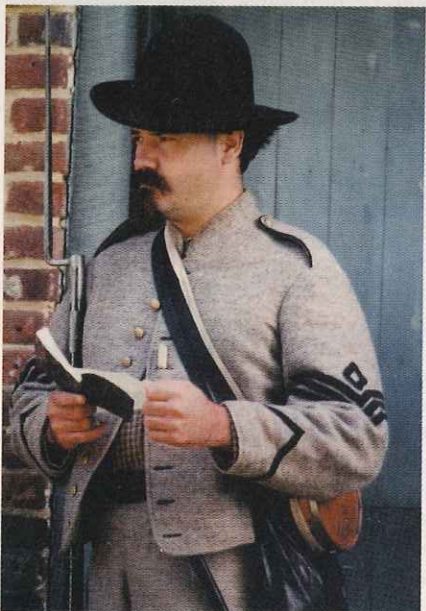
farbed. De-farbing your musket consists of removing the Italian proof marks and other non-period stampings. John Zimmerman of Harpers Ferry, WV worked in the Harpers Ferry Armory for years as a National Park Service interpreter and for a fee he will make your Italian gun look period with original proof marks. (See MCI # 2 for a story on the various patterns of Enfields and their marks.)

CONCLUSION

Do some research, and I don't mean sit in front of the TV watching re-runs of *Rio Lobo* to get your impression details down pat. Pick up a book... Okay, I scared some of you didn't I? The thought of reading has you gun shy, huh? Well not to worry, I want you to look at THE PICTURES! That's right, study the pictures and look closely at the uniforming and equipment that the men are wearing. Some of my favorites are *Echos of Glory: Arms & Equipment of the Confederacy/Union* (Time- Life 1996). This three volume set has amazing full



A distinctive kepi or slouch hat can make or break your impression. This hand-made kepi with its black band denotes a style common to militia use early in the war. Note the kepi and shell jacket are made from identical jean cloth. Confederate uniform suppliers often issued uniforms in complete sets and it is not unusual to find a soldier wearing the same fabric in his hat, jacket and trousers.



Note the hand stitched, tape style chevrons that this first sergeant sports. They give a much better appearance than the mass produced variety that most sutlers sell.


color photographs detailing every little bit of equipment and uniforming that soldiers on both sides carried and used during the conflict. *Confederate Faces* by William A. Albaugh III (2nd Ed. Broadfoot, 1993) and the sequels *More Confederate Faces* by Albaugh, *Even More*



Small personal items such as pipes and tobacco pouches can add to your collection and provide you with something to do during the "hurry up and wait" periods of most re-enactments and/or living histories. A horse hair toothbrush with a bone handle, slipped in-between the button holes, can be a useful and authentic touch.



Although Yankees do not get a lot of ink in this look at impression building, many of the same ideas still apply to a Union impression. Though thought to be somewhat generic by confederate standards, the "blue suit" can be made with better materials and lining than the standard off the rack styles offered by most sutlers.

Confederate Faces by William A. Turner (2nd Ed. Old Soldier Books, 1993) and *Still More Confederate Faces* by D. A. Serrano (Metropolitan Co. 1992). These four books offer invaluable photographic evidence of uniforms and equipment of the confederate soldier. No better information exists on how they looked and the clothing they wore. 

SOURCE GUIDE

- **John G. Zimmerman**
Dept. MCI, P.O. Box 1351 (1195 Washington Street), Harpers Ferry, WV 25425; (304) 535-2558;
www.edsmart.com/jz
- **CJ Daley Historical Reproductions**
Dept. MCI, 105 West Green Street, Middletown, MD 21769;
(301) 371-5792;
www.erols.com/chrisdaley/index.htm
- **Country Cloth, Inc., c/o Charlie Childs**
Dept. MCI, 13797-C Georgetown Street, N.E. Paris, OH 44669;
(330) 862-3307; cntyclth@bright.net
- **Dirty Billy's Hat Shop**
Dept. MCI, 430A Baltimore Street, Gettysburg, PA 17325; (717) 334-3200; Mail Orders: 7574 Middleburg Road, Detour, MD 21757; (410) 775-1865, www.dirtybillyshats.com
- **Navy Arms Company**
Dept. MCI, 815 22nd, Street Union City, NJ 07087; (201) 863-7100, Fax: (201) 863-8770,
www.navyarms.com
- **Dixie Gun Works**
Dept. MCI, Box 130 Union City, TN 38261; (731) 885-0700,
www.dixiegunworks.com