

What Does a Reenactor Do?

By Mark B. Richardson

Since the beginning of my years as a Revolutionary War reenactor, I have often been asked what reenacting is all about. Anyone who is in the hobby of living history is asked this question somewhere along the line. It's really an open ended question with a variety of answers that may differ from one person to the next, but I'll attempt to give you my impression of what we do.

When one becomes involved in the hobby, their senses are bombarded with the sites, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings for another era of time. In short, reenacting is a synergy of all senses. I can still remember the sensations I experienced with my first reenactment. Sometimes it's difficult to separate oneself from the spectators, especially in Quebec City with 50,000 plus spectators surrounding the Plains of Abraham, but once the action

begins, the reenactors attention is quickly drawn to the commands of their officers. There are the sounds of fifes and drums, muskets firing in volley and cannon shots. There are the colors of various flags, uniforms and the surrounding countryside. There's the taste and smell of gun powder and smoke. There's the feeling of a hot musket barrel burning your thumb and a sudden feeling of camaraderie with your company mates around you. After my first reenactment on a small town green, which maybe numbered thirty or so men of both the American and British sides, I was truly hooked on the hobby. Somehow, as often as the sensations of that first day have been repeated over the years, they never fail to capture my attention.

Aside from the explosion on ones senses, the hobby offers a perspective on history that can take people in any number of directions. For me, I began collecting as much information as I could about the regiment I chose to recreate during the bicentennial years. After a few years and piles of gathered primary and secondary resources, I decided to go back to school and obtain a master's degree in early American history. My goal was to take the information I had collected and apply it to my graduate thesis about the virtues of Revolutionary War soldiers. I accomplished that goal in 1993, but my scholarly interests haven't stopped there. I continue to do

research and to write about the hobby and the Revolutionary War as often as possible.

Reenactors also tend to become collectors. Each of us, I'm sure, remembers what it was like to put on our first set of "period" clothes. For most of us, we chose to graduate from costumes to uniforms. However, having one set of clothes wasn't enough, so we added civilian clothes to our uniforms, then entire civilian outfits and more uniforms as we joined other units or upgraded what we had. Soon we had a collection of clothing. Likewise, our first musket was complimented with a variety of accouterments and additional firearms (a rifle, pistol, fowler, etc.) and edged weapons (knives, swords, bayonets, spontoons, etc.). For those who became musicians, artilleryists or mounted dragoons their story is the same. As time went on, they collected what they needed to portray their interests in the hobby. We all started collecting the gear we needed to travel and camp from one weekend to the next at one site or another up and down the eastern seaboard. I've often said the hobby has taken me from Maine to Georgia and from Canada to England. You can't get much better than that.

In the traditional sense of collecting, we tend to fill the corners of our homes with a variety of books, first day covers, commemorative medals, period recipes, flags and other collectibles from the places we have visited. In the modern world, flea markets and on-line auction sites are often filled with such items for sale. Many of us carry a reproduction St. Barbara's medal. While the legend of St. Barbara is well known to artilleryists, the original of that 17th century medallion, which has been recast so many times over, was found at a flea market.

For some reenactors, restoration has become their passion. Whether it's a reproduction or a true 18th century style home, a historic site or work in archeology and museum collections, the reenactor is often looking for the best ways of interpreting the past. Collecting antiques and other period objects can become addictive, and placing them "just so" around the house is important. For instance, we know that hanging a musket over a fireplace was an image probably created by Wallace Nutting in his photos. Certainly, a well oiled musket was not hung over a fireplace. The heat of the fire would only dry out the musket furniture, and a loaded musket had no place being hung over an open fire. Muskets, especially loaded ones, were best placed in the corner of a room, or perhaps close by a doorway, away from the fireplace.

Reenactors often become involved as extras in historical films, and photographs of them have been taken by thousands of people from all over the world. I have often wondered were all those pictures land when people ask if someone can take a picture of me with them and/or their children. How many of us ever get to see those photos? But, someone, somewhere, is enjoying the memories of those photos. Reenactors become town historians and fund raisers for local historic projects. They provide educational programs in their local schools, and they are involved in their communities in a host of other ways.

Perhaps the most important reason for me to be involved in the hobby is the camaraderie of friendship. When I think of all the reenactors I've met over the years and all the places we've been together, I can't think of a better group of people to be associated with. These folks have become my best friends. Time after time, how many stories have been told and retold over the light of an evenings campfire? How many new stories are added to the list each and every time we take to the field. How many times have we enjoyed the best weather under the sun and star filled night skies? How many times have we lived in the pouring rain, wind and snow, only to come back again for more? While we've all known friends who have passed away during our years in the hobby, we've also enjoyed many more births. How many colonial weddings have we attended in the hobby? How many of us have watched our children grow up in the hobby? My wife used to remind me to look after the kids. That was always easy, because as long as your kids are dressed in colonial clothes, they have a hundred "parents" looking out for them. For anyone reading this and thinking of joining a reenactor organization for the first time, I will tell you that this hobby is about family and friends, and I wouldn't have it any other way.