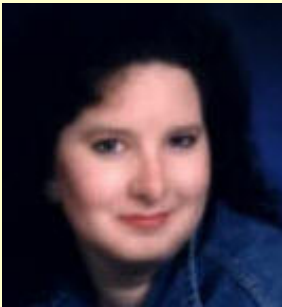


Stepping into the Past

By Graceann Maciolek



I first visited Gettysburg, Pennsylvania when I was 13 years old, as part of a family vacation. I paid very little attention to what I was seeing because it was being forced on me as an “educational experience,” and I resented this. I went to school nine months out of the year, enduring “educational experiences” as part of my daily routine; why must I be subjected to them during my all-too-short summer? I was bored and crabby, and being “quizzed” by my mother as we drove through the town didn’t improve my mood.

It wasn’t until six years later, when I returned with my husband after having done some reading (and some growing up), that I truly appreciated what a magnificent place Gettysburg is. It is one of the most pristine of the Civil War battlefields, and it is remarkably easy to get a sense of what it must have been like in July 1863, even if you are wearing appropriate summer clothing rather than heavy wool, and even if the heaviest thing you’re carrying is a camera, as opposed to an 80-lb pack.

The last time I visited, in July 2002, I planned for two full days exploring the town, the battlefield and the surrounding area. I could have easily spent a week. On the morning of the first day, I started at the Visitors Center, where I was able to purchase tour passes that allowed me access to the full-length battlefield tour and the tour of the Eisenhower home. It was a murderously hot day, and even as I was being transported back in time, I was deeply grateful for the modern convenience of air conditioning at the Visitors Center and on the tour buses. Every time we got off the bus to view something more closely, we would let out a collective groan as soon as the furnace-blast of summer air hit us. The guide would say in response, “Just imagine how it would feel if you were wearing a wool uniform instead of a tank top.” After asking us what part of the country we were visiting from, he tailored his information as to which troops fought at which locations, and on what day or days of the Battle. Since I am a Wisconsinite, he pointed out to me that the heaviest fighting for “my” troops, then called *The Iron Brigade*, took place on the first day very near the Seminary. A soldier’s remains were discovered there in 1996, and based upon where the poor man was found, it seems likely that he was from Wisconsin.



Later, we visited the Eisenhower Historic Site (which is accessible only by guided bus operated by the National Park Service). This is where “Ike” spent as many weekends as possible during his Presidency, and where he retired afterward. The house is comfortable and homey – not ostentatious at all. The curators have done a marvelous job of making it seem as if Ike and Mamie have just stepped out to get you a glass of lemonade, and will be returning momentarily. Sitting in the shade of the trees,

and looking out over the spectacular view offered us a chance to relax and regroup. It was so quiet and comfortable there that I would have been content to curl up with a book.

I must take a moment to praise the rangers who serve the National Military Park and adjacent Eisenhower Historic Site. These are not people who take this occupation on as a summer job and who learn a script from which they never stray.

The training regimen for the rangers is rigorous and time-consuming, and the wealth and variety of minute details they are able to offer is mind-boggling. Whether you are interested in a general overview or in hearing the “nitty gritty,” they’re ready for you.

We reserved the second day of our visit for a self-guided driving tour of the battlefield, with emphasis on the events of July 3. We started along the Confederate line and looked out over the field toward the copse of trees which was the goal set by General Lee. I had a terrible time imagining what it must have felt like to start out over that 1,000 yards and to see that field of blue uniforms waiting. My companion and I didn’t speak; we were deeply lost in our own thoughts. Then we drove around to the Union side of the Charge and had the same problems imagining what it must have been like to stand and watch so many men marching in. We stood at the “High Water Mark of the Confederacy,” which is the farthest North that the Confederates reached before being overcome. I am a Yankee born and bred; my family has always lived in the North, but I felt no pride in this experience, only sadness that so much blood had been shed here, sadness for the boys who never went home and for those who were never the same.



Many history buffs focus on Chamberlain’s saving the day at Little Round Top on July 2, and Pickett’s disastrous charge on July 3. The story that has always moved me the most, however, is that of Jennie Wade. She is the only civilian killed during the Battle of Gettysburg. She was baking bread for Union



soldiers, at the worst possible time to be doing such a kind deed. Her home was between Union and Confederate lines, and was struck by bullets repeatedly during the course of the battle. One side of the house has over 150 bullet holes, and in the second story, a 10-pounder “Parrott” artillery shell blasted a hole through the center of what had originally been a two-family home. The bullet that killed Jennie penetrated two doors and struck her in the back. She died instantly. The rest of the family removed to the cellar of the home, taking Jennie’s body with them, and in a very eerie tableau, waited out the rest of the battle in the dark. When I visit that cellar, it still gives me chills.

Even if you aren’t terribly interested in studying the Battle, there is plenty to see and do in this lovely village. There were so many options for delicious meals that I lost count, and lodging choices feature everything from Victorian bed and breakfasts to the most modern of hotels. Ghost tours, shopping, people-watching, hiking - all are here for your pleasure.

One of the many amazing things about Gettysburg is its serenity, especially given how close it is to some major metropolitan areas. It’s only a little over two hours to Philadelphia, and about 90 minutes to either Washington, D.C. or Baltimore. It can be a very busy place in the summertime, and especially so during anniversary commemorations each July: but even so, the National Park Service does an admirable job of making each guest feel as if they are privately communing with history.

Suggested Reading:

Killer Angels, by Michael Shaara

Stars in Their Courses, by Shelby Foote

The Jennie Wade Story, by Cindy L. Small

At Gettysburg: Or What a Girl Saw and Heard at the Battle, by Tillie Pierce Alleman

Suggested Viewing (All available from greystoneonline.com):

Jennie Wade of Gettysburg

Tillie Pierce of Gettysburg

Michael Shaara: The Soul of a Writer



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