



Federal cavalry at Sudley Ford, Bull Run, Virginia, 1862

Civil War Children

TWO CHILDREN STARE across a stream at mounted soldiers, while two others sit with their hands in their laps, seemingly oblivious.

But how could they be oblivious—to war?

Like youngsters everywhere, children during the Civil War absorbed what they saw and heard and sensed—at home and school, in town and church. As historian James Marten tells us, “Children missed little of what the war had to offer, from the pageantry and the excitement to the hardships and the tragedy.”

And as children do, Civil War girls and boys mimicked the adult world. They made believe they were wounded soldiers and charging cavalry. They play-acted the war as small generals commanding troops, as little nurses bandaging soldiers, as spies, prisoners, and deserters. They cheered news of a victory and marched around the parlor with toy drums. Iowa farm woman Marjorie Ann Rogers recalled that before her husband enlisted, he “often took the boys with him if the [local] war meeting was near enough to return home that night, as they were both good singers. . . . He and the boys sometimes did all the singing. The boys caught the spirit of the times and would go through the program of the meeting at home, singing ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ and ‘America.’”

But growing up during the war was not child’s play. The war pulled away older brothers and fathers, leaving households filled with stress, uncertainty, and fear. “Do you wonder that the children of that time grew prematurely old, [fearing] the blanched face of their mother?” asked an Ohioan years after the war. “How often I [had] seen mother snatch a paper, and, without drawing a breath, scan the list of dead and wounded, and whenever we boys went for mail, how, when a letter was handed out with the well known [hand]writing . . . we would run like deer for home, to be met at the gate.”

After his father had left for the war, young Frank Rogers carried a loaded pistol in his pocket. As he explained to his mother, “Father told us all to take care of you and I will.”

Community tensions over loyalty crept into children’s classrooms. Historian Hubert Wubben tells us that teachers were fired for perceived “disloyal and traitorous sentiments.” In Jasper County, “teachers resolved that they would try to infuse their pupils with a spirit of patriotism [and] asserted that teachers who failed to properly appreciate soldier efforts to preserve the Union were unworthy members of the profession.” Although teachers taught patriotic songs and poems, they were warned not to “allow the children to sing inflammatory songs” like “John Brown’s Body.”

And, of course, there were teenagers as young as 15 who entered the war as drummer boys and then died of dysentery, or who picked up fallen flags and then took their share of bullets and cannon fire.

The war created as many as 20,000 to 30,000 soldiers’ orphans nationwide. At the Iowa Soldiers Orphans Home in Davenport, records up through 1866 list child after child whose father had died because of the war. Many of the 510 children were probably “half-orphans,” whose widowed mothers were unable, often financially, to care for them.

Surely war was the cruelest to children in the South. Food shortages weakened them, particularly slave children. James Marten writes that “their most coherent memories of northerners were . . . of bullies and bandits who left pillaged plantations and hungry slaves in their wakes.” The war’s legacy to Southern children was devastation.

In 1860, children made up a third of the U.S. population. In hundreds of ways, the great conflict of the next four years affected them. “Their innocence was challenged,” Marten states, “and their naiveté blasted [as the war] shoved them into the world of their parents.”

So that is why this special issue on the American Civil War begins with those who had little voice and no authority—the children.

by Ginalie Swaim, editor