

EXPERIENCES OF A CIVIL WAR COLLECTION

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As a long time collector of Civil War items, perhaps the most frequent question asked is how did you get started? My Father was responsible for my early interest in the Civil War. He was a rare combination of an armchair historian and a field researcher. He had the ability to make history live, and some of my earliest memories are of visiting battlefields with him. As a teenager, I was more interested in what battlefield relics I could find than in any detailed history of the events that took place. His love of history was not lost on me however, and like him, I soon began to blend collecting with history. In time, I began to develop a deep interest in all items pertaining to the Civil War, particularly those not found on the battlefield. This was followed by the third and inevitable step of making a serious attempt to round out various phases of the collection and acquire all variations of given items.

Perhaps the uniqueness of the collection is that although accumulated by a native southerner, it is impartial as far as the North and South are concerned. Unlike many collections, it has no defined limits and delves into all areas of the Civil War field. Through the years, I have acquired good, solid representative collections of all normally accepted items, such as weapons, uniforms, swords, military accouterments, artillery projectiles, stamps, both battlefield and non-battlefield relics. For this reason, it is probably somewhat unusual in its completeness. The sources of a collection such as this always have some appeal. As far as the battlefield relics themselves are con-

cerned, a great majority of these were recovered by me over the years. This was a result of considerable research and expenditure of physical effort. The non-battlefield relics, of course, came from a number of sources. Many of the unusual and fine items were purchased from dealers of all sorts throughout the entire country and even in Europe. Many choice items came as gifts from individuals, families, and, in some cases, institutions who wished to have these items preserved but did not have sufficient interest to retain them. Friends and fellow collectors have also been quite helpful in steering me to leads and contacts. Behind this, of course, is the deep desire of the collector to accumulate, his sincere interest in the field he collects and untiring effort which somehow seems to remain constant.

Over twenty years of serious collecting, I have had many experiences which I thought might be of interest, so without any thought as to particular order or sequence, I would like to share a few of them with you.

My first major Confederate sword was acquired in Columbus, Georgia, approximately ten years ago. One of Columbus' wealthy citizens had died, leaving a rather large estate. The family took their choice of all items and the remainder was sold at public auction. Since I did not know about the auction in advance, I arrived just as it was over and only a few items remained. One of these items was described as a Masonic Lodge sword with the numerals "83" cast in the guard of the sword. The auctioneer seemed anxious to leave, so told me that I could have this sword for \$5.00. From his vantage point looking down on the guard, the "83" did seem to be correct. From my vantage point looking up, it was "CS" written in the famous Haiman script, who, as you, of course, know was one of the famous makers of Confederate swords by contract in Columbus, Georgia. Needless to say, the transaction was closed without any further discussion or explanation as to why "83" was really "CS."

Perhaps the most interesting sword in the collection is the one owned by General Howell Cobb. Among my acquaintances was a Great Nephew of General Cobb. During casual conversation, I learned from him that the sword presented to General Howell Cobb by the Confederate Congress in token of their appreciation for his serving as its President had been in the family, but had been presented to an institution by his Mother. It developed that no one had seen the sword in ten years and, as a result of our conversation, he promised to find out where it was located. A short time later, he gave me the name of the institution that had been given the sword and a diligent search by me failed to turn it up. The following day the Curator asked me to join him in a search as he now was concerned. Fortunately, the sword was found in a box with several other items stored in the attic. The institution was not particularly interested in Civil War items and the owner of the sword was

quite disturbed. The end result was the sword was returned to him. Two years later, much to my delight, he brought the sword by the house to be placed with the other relics.

A most unexpected bonus along with the sword was the Confederate uniform of General Cobb's aid, his brother, Lamar Cobb, a Major in the Confederate Army. The buttons on this uniform are extremely rare and are large Firmin English made Georgia seals.

The value of an item is a relative thing and collectors tend to over value an item based on their knowledge of its rarity. Several years ago, while visiting a part-time dealer, I was amazed to find among a box of Minie balls that there were two bullets that had met in mid-air, head-on. When I asked if he would sell them, he replied yes, but the price was so outrageous that he would rather not quote it. After much conversation, I finally persuaded him to name the price, which he did reluctantly. To my surprise, it turned out that his idea of an exorbitant price for this extremely rare item was \$5.00. As I left his shop, he was still apologizing for having charged me such a high price for a small item.

Most collectors know that one of the challenging things in collecting is to be able to take full advantage of your specialized knowledge. An example of this is the Confederate canteen, a number of which are in the collection. One of the drum-type canteens purchased was sold for a dollar as a boy scout canteen. I bought this one too quickly and the dealer followed me out to the car and asked to know how big a mistake he had made in selling this canteen. Unfortunately, I have never been able to get any other canteens from this dealer at less than market price. A large number of Confederate canteens, particularly of the wooden type, are sold as militia canteens. One of the rare ones I own, a Confederate engineer's canteen, was sold in New York as a flower vase. The owner had undoubtedly used it in the living room to contain flowers, as it had been painted blue with bird and flower decorations. Others have been sold as gun-powder containers, kerosene bottles, etc. This is no wonder, as the average dealer has no guide upon which to base his knowledge.

The unexpected is always part of collecting. About five years ago, I was on the track of a Union drum. After considerable effort, I located it in the hands of an antique dealer. It turned out to be a nice, but not unusual, Union drum and was priced on the high side. When I attempted to negotiate a lower price, the dealer became irritated and retorted that if I wanted a cheap drum that he had one in the back that I could have for practically nothing. To my utter amazement, the drum he brought out was a hand-made copy of the Union drum. It obviously was a Confederate drum which he sold as a junk drum complete with the hand-made sticks. With a little effort, it cleaned up beautifully and had the dogwood flower of the State of North Carolina painted on the side and the name of the individual who carried it through the War. As far as I know, the Union drum is still in the hands of the dealer.

On the other side of the coin there is always the possibility that you can know too much. A dealer once mailed me a pair of gray cavalry gloves with a floral design. After carefully studying them, it was quite obvious to me that these were too fancy to ever be used by the military. Two weeks later, I had an occasion to be in Richmond, Virginia, and dropped by the Confederate White House. To my consternation, I noticed four identical pair of these gloves worn by General Stewart, Johnston, Wheeler, and Hill. In a matter of minutes, I was on the long-distance phone to the dealer. I told him I had changed my mind about the gloves and if he still had them I would take them. He replied that he was glad to hear it and that he had not been able to sell them and would knock a third off the price.

What motivates individuals to dispose of items is a completely separate study in itself. Approximately two years ago, a young man came by my office with an old cardboard box which he said contained some sort of Confederate plans. To my astonishment, they turned out to be six of the original drawings for the Confederate powder works in Augusta, Georgia. The architect was C. Shaler Smith, originally from Philadelphia, who had come to Augusta to design some public buildings. Like many of our good northern friends, he became a converted southerner. Since he was more of an artist than an architect, his drawings for the machinery were truly excellent. The owner went through the not unusual procedure of not knowing whether he wanted to sell, not knowing how much, or what to do. After a fruitless hour, we had reached no conclusion. Two months went by and I had given up on the plans. Late one Friday afternoon, he came by the office, very much agitated, and informed me that I could have the plans for the last note due on his car. Since the amount of the note and the value of the plans, in my opinion, were more than reasonable, I helped him pay for his automobile.

In 1962, a friend of mine built a very large building in Atlanta and as part of the opening ceremony, asked me to lend a few items for exhibit. This produced a phonecall from a lady stating that she noticed I did not have a Confederate flag on display. I told her this was true as, at that time, I did not own one. She said she would like very much for me to display the flag her Father carried, who belonged to the 63rd Tennessee Regiment. It turned out to be a beautiful flag and, needless to say, she had no difficulty convincing me that it should be displayed. As soon as the exhibit was over, she asked me to keep it in my home. She would neither give it nor sell it to me. After repeated attempts over several years, I failed to purchase the flag. One cold winter day, I received a call from the lady. She told me she had a most unusual proposition. The bottom had rotted out of her hot-water heater and she would let me have the flag in return for a new heater. The heater was installed by a plumber, although I must admit I would have been glad to do the job myself, if necessary.

The most interesting Confederate flag I own is that of the 18th Georgia. This came to me through a phone call from the daughter of the owner, who stated her Mother wished to sell it to the highest bidder. Somehow I couldn't reconcile the daughter's statement with the fact the flag had been owned by her Mother for seventy

years. I drove to North Georgia to meet the Mother, and found out, as I suspected, she was very firmly attached to the flag, had no intention of selling it and was quite irritated with her daughter for calling me. It took some while to overcome her antagonism, and I finally was able to extract a promise that if she ever disposed of it I could have it. Three years later, circumstances changed, no one in her family was interested, and I received a call to come get the flag. Not only is this a very authentic one filled with several bullet holes, but it has a lock of the hair sewn in the seam, of the Yankee Sargent who was the only one to capture the flag during its entire existence.

As everyone probably knows, Confederate uniforms do not usually come in bunches. Fortunately for me, in 1963, I did obtain a bunch of Confederate uniforms - four to be exact - along with six swords, General Stonewall Jackson's scarf, and two plates from Jeff Davis' camp chest, to mention a few very fine items. One evening I received a phone call from a friend in Athens, Georgia, that a very elderly lady had these fantastic items and had just instructed her lawyer to place in her will instructions that all these be destroyed on her death. The story seemed so fantastic that I did not react for several weeks. Finding myself in Athens on a business trip, I decided to call on the lady who owned these uniforms. She was not in too good health and couldn't see me. Over the next few months I wrote and talked to her, and finally met her. When I arrived, she had the material spread out on her dining room table. She told me her father had been a Captain in the Confederate Army and that his uniform and sword were on the table. Being familiar with Confederate swords and insignia, I quickly identified the sword and uniform. This was the necessary key to the door, and over the next few months she very graciously gave me all these items.

Once again, I found out that an institution had been the indirect means of acquiring these items. She had offered them to a certain institution, who replied they had no means to display any such items, but would prefer books or other articles rather than uniforms. One item I did not obtain was the original flag of the Oglethorpe Light Infantry. This she was determined to be returned to Savannah, Georgia, her birthplace. At this time, she was ninety-six years old and had no living relatives. This I promised to do for her and made arrangements in Savannah, delivering it there in person. I was able to inform her that the flag had been placed in safe hands in Savannah and, to my sorrow, learned that she died four days later.

A lady such as this deserves a great deal of credit for preserving irreplaceable items such as these and taking the pains and care to carefully identify them.

One other uniform which I own has a remarkable history. This Uniform I first saw in the window of an antique shop on display. It was not for sale and the antique dealer refused to give me the name of the owner. Fortunately, I knew several people in Americus, Georgia and was able to find the owner. After much correspondence and several months, they agreed to let me have the uniform. Along with the uniform came a very fine extra. The extra was a McElroy sword, made in Macon, inscribed L. S. Carter on one side, and the motto "Freedom and Right" on the other.

The Carter sword belonged to the second husband of the widow. Her first husband, the owner of the uniform, Captain A. C. Jones, was killed at the Battle of Second Manassas. Present with Captain Jones at this bloody struggle was his body servant. When he learned that his master had been killed, he spent the night roaming the battlefield between the lines. He finally located Captain Jones' body among several other dead, recognizing him from his boots. The heel of the left boot had been burned off the night before in a campfire. The body servant carefully removed the coat and sword, wrapped them in a burlap bag and walked from Manassas, Virginia to Americus, Georgia to deliver them to the family.

One uniform from Athens presented quite a puzzle. It was a beautifully made uniform, with English cloth and Confederate staff buttons. The record of the owner had been lost, but legend had it that it belonged to the best friend of the father of the present owner, and the Major who wore it was killed somewhere in the vicinity of Atlanta. After carefully researching the rosters, it was determined that only one Major belonging to his Company had been killed in Georgia. The Major was Major Holcombe who had been mortally wounded at the Battle of Jonesboro, dying three days later at a field hospital. The uniform had been given to the Major as a wedding present, as he had been married a week before the Battle. On his death bed, he asked his friend to take the uniform, keep it for his own, and use it. Because of the sentiment attached to it, Captain Branch carefully wrapped the uniform up and sent it home to his Mother. It remained in the family for over one-hundred years.

One other extremely interesting story in connection with a uniform is that of the one belonging to Sanford Branch. This, undoubtedly, was a Confederate gray uniform that, like so many, has now faded to a greenish-gray. Sanford was severely wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg and left on the field for dead. He was picked up by the Union forces, sent to a field hospital, and staged a miraculous recovery. Approximately a month later, Mathew Brady came through taking some pictures of army life. Sanford asked him if he would be kind enough to take a picture of him and send it to his Mother in Savannah, Georgia, as he was sure he had been reported as being killed. Brady obliged and both the picture and uniform have survived to this day.

Undoubtedly, the most used instrument for battlefield relic recovery is a metal detector. Unfortunately for those of us who love the hobby, the diminishing number of relics and increasing number of relic hunters has made this a more and more difficult area in which to work. Fortunately, I was one of the first, buying my detector in 1947. For the first five years, very little interest was displayed and the field was practically mine. For this reason, I was fortunate enough to have some experiences that probably will not be duplicated.

In fact, today you are lucky to find as much in a day's search as you used to find in a matter of an hour before. It is impossible to explain many things that happen and I will only comment on a few.

One of the most interesting finds was made about ten years ago when I discovered my first torpedo or land mine. At the time they were found, there were three of us working an area. The mines were laid out in a regular grid pattern. For some unexplained reason, I found all seven of the mines while the other two with me found none. All of this was in a matter of less than forty-five minutes.

The largest find ever made by me was an ammunition dump near Savannah, Georgia. Apparently, the Confederates, in abandoning one of their gun positions before leaving Savannah, had thrown all of the ammunition into the marsh, which is adjacent to the gun position. This dump contained over 165 shells and took two of us two and one-half days to fully excavate. Between the tide, marsh, heat and mosquitoes, I am sure we suffered as many hardships as the Confederates who were there one-hundred years before us.

The largest single item I have ever recovered was a 400 pound shell. Finding it was the least of my difficulties. Due to the weight, it could not be pulled straight from the hole, so this involved a long, slanting channel, the help of two colored gentlemen, a number of two-by-fours, and about five hours of hard labor.

One of my earliest and most exciting finds, and a record I am sure will never be equalled by me, was the locating of the remains of thirty-eight rifles in one day. The rifles were in the top of a trench not on a map, and in an area that one would not suspect would contain so many relics. They were scattered in great profusion along the top of the parapet, several with fixed bayonets, and mostly damaged in one form or another. After much speculation and research, we have concluded that this was the nearest sheltered area from the scene of an abortive attack by the Union troops. Obviously, the wounded fell behind the trench. Anyone familiar with combat knows that one of the most useless items to a badly wounded soldier is a heavy rifle and, undoubtedly, this accounts for the number.

Serious relic hunters do not believe in extra-sensory perception. A number of things happen, however, that sometimes make you wonder if there is not some basis for such a belief. On numerous occasions I have been with individuals who have stated in advance that they were sure a certain relic was in a very small area. It can't be explained, but in many cases they have been right. A number of years ago, while searching a battlefield, I had a very strong feeling that a Georgia cartridge box plate was nearby. Shortly thereafter, I got an indication and told this friend of mine to dig up the Georgia box plate. To his utter amazement and mine, we unearthed my one and only Georgia box plate.

There are some real interesting facts about use of metal detectors which I will give you for what they are worth.

Statistically, the use of a metal detector is almost an impossibility. If you consider the amount of land involved, the size of the detector, and the size of the items involved, the amazing thing is that so much is found. Just think of the possibility of finding a button the size of a dime in an area one acre square. The odds are astronomical, but the fact is these items are found.

Another interesting thing is that a good operator will usually find 60% to 70% of the relics the first time he is in an area. The second time perhaps 20%, and each time thereafter a diminishing number. No one would be so foolish as to say that anyone could find all the relics, but usually two to three trips reduces the number drastically.

One unexplained item is that relics are usually found in what are referred to as hot spots. They are seldom scattered uniformly throughout an area, but are usually grouped or bunched. If you find one item, your chances of finding one or two more very nearby are good. Not only are they grouped as far as items are concerned, but usually they are found in a group time-wise. If you look four hours, probably your entire find will not encompass over 15% of the time involved.

One real mystery to relic hunters is the phenomena of being what is termed "hot or cold." On certain days, one individual will find the majority of the relics, and another person working side by side will find practically none. The next day, the reverse could be true. Some days you can't miss - and other days you can't win. No one has ever given an explanation of this. I suppose that like any other hobby, it has its peculiarities.

One item of interest to all serious collectors in all fields is the matter of fakes. Fakes will fall into two categories: The deliberate fake, and the fake sold by the unknowing who lack the knowledge. Recently, I had the pleasure of examining 168 uniforms owned by a private collector, all of the Civil War period. Of these, eighteen were Confederate and of the eighteen, six were authentic; the rest being costume or reunion. Of the remaining 150, all Union, probably 70% were correct.

Uniforms come in amazing varieties. A number of uniforms, particularly Confederate, are military academy uniforms. Federal law prohibited the use of uniforms by the Confederates for a number of years after the War. In the 1880's, when reunions began in earnest, a great number of Confederate soldiers had uniforms made to wear. Perhaps 80% of the so-called Confederate uniforms date from the late '80's. There was a great interest in the Civil War in the '80's and '90's, and the 1900's, and many plays were written. Costume houses produced these uniforms in profusion, and they are reasonably good copies. This is a source of a great number.

In deliberate fakes, the variety is endless. One recent fake involved a World War I Austrian Sargent's coat which had been altered and Virginian buttons added. There is no sure way to identify an authentic uniform, except by seeing enough of the genuine ones to get a feel of what is right and what is wrong.

The same goes for Confederate flags. Probably five percent of the total flags represented as Confederate are genuine Confederate. One test, of course, is the type of material from which the flag is made. Obviously, many of the crepe flags were too flimsy and not at all designed for battlefield use. A large number of flags were made for the reunions, and although hand-made, have machine stitching, are light weight and would not be suitable for field use. The UDC Chapters had a great number of these flags, as did the Sons of the Confederate Veterans. Many were made for decorations, parades, and other uses.

The area of buckles has produced an astounding number of so-called guaranteed authentic buckles. Bannerman & Sons still owns the original Confederate buckle mold used in the Atlanta arsenal, and has been making these buckles since the late '80's, and sold as reproductions. These fakes are fortunately easy to tell because of the color and type of brass. Even some of these reproductions are now eighty years old. Kirk Stokes in Philadelphia made a number of these buckles for costume use. The Canadian Police have been a constant supply of so-called Confederate snake buckles, and with modern treatment the number of reproduced and doctored reproductions are legion. Someday, someone will probably write a story of the fakes and, in itself, will be a very absorbing study.

To have any real meaning, in my opinion, the collector and the collection must join hands with history. It is the background of history that gives meaning and life to the collection. The articles themselves, although of great interest, have no real meaning without the history, character, and the contribution of those who used them. This country was built and has been carried forward on American character, beliefs, and traditions. If we are to continue our forward progress, we must follow this same path.

In a sense, all the efforts of collectors, such as myself, would be lost or have no meaning unless we can point to some tangible results. Fortunately, these tangible results are found in our history and the meaning of our history.

The American Civil War was unique among wars; wholly American, fought by Americans on American soil for American ideals and beliefs. No other nation was involved nor did any foreign influence prevail. This lengthy and bitter struggle ultimately led to a new unity and strength within our nation.

This difficult time in our history revealed the basic traits of American character. Although for more than four years our country was divided by a wide gulf of differences, basic concepts, and philosophies, the character of Northerner and Southerner was the same.

Acts of bravery and courage . . . a sense of humor and adaptability were common to both sides . . . a true sense of justice and compassion was present. The typical American ingenuity, drive, and refusal to give up in the face of overwhelming odds were demonstrated constantly. It was as though an inborn self-confidence sparked every man. The driving force of greatness was the possession of firm and deep beliefs. . . and the willingness to die for these beliefs.

The American character conceived, built, and carried this nation forward. These are the qualities we commemorate and preserve. Our past was built by this character and our future depends on its perpetuation. The collection in its way is a tribute to the men who fought the War Between the States . . . those men whose sacrifice welded this country into the nation it is today.

Wars are fought by the common man . . . and the American Civil War is a remarkable demonstration of this. The average Northern or Southern soldier received little reward in the material sense. Most possessed no wealth. Neither victory nor defeat would alter their situation. Nevertheless, these men fought four years of bitter war, suffering untold hardship or death.

The motivating force which justified such sacrifice could be only one of principle and ideals. The cause . . . so strongly believed. . . was the right to individual beliefs and a right to an individual way of life. These rights, so recently gained for this nation, are the foundation upon which this period of our history was built. The fact that General Lee so completely typified the Southern view and ideas and that President Lincoln so completely embodied those of the North is remarkable.

The strategy and tactics employed . . . the color, dash, and bravery displayed . . . the romance of this age of vanishing chivalry . . . the complete involvement of all in this country . . . gripped the imagination as few wars have done.

The meaning of it all can be found in the character of our ancestors who lived, fought, and died during this period. If only a part of this character can be caught by us and passed on to future generations, our efforts will be amply rewarded.

The collection in a small way is a tangible way of preserving our past and, it is hoped, of some value in making the past live.