

# Living History

For millions of Americans,  
the era of Lee and Lincoln is still open for visiting



Karl Zinsmeister

## Time Travelers

By Eli Lehrer

Skip Coonts, a tall, gaunt man with a neatly trimmed gray beard, spends the work week installing windows and storefronts in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. But this occupation is little more than a means to make money and pass time between Civil War re-enactments. “My job,” he says, “is just a way of paying for the stuff I really want to do—which is to under-

stand the war and the life of the Confederate soldier.” Although he’s modern enough to have an e-mail address, Coonts admits he sometimes wishes he lived in the 1860s: He prefers open windows to air conditioning, and walking to driving. He can also go on non-stop for 15 minutes on the history of uniform fabrics, and the ways that Civil War soldiers kept brass buttons shiny. Given the chance, he’ll quote long stretches of war letters from memory, and wax on about minor skirmishes. Skip Coonts lives for the Civil War.

Almost 140 years after Lee surrendered at Appomattox, the

.....  
*Eli Lehrer is a TAE senior editor.*



events and culture of the Civil War remain alive. A vast, thriving subculture of living historians re-creates the events of America's most deadly war—by studying its history in great detail, then assuming the roles of soldiers, civilians, camp followers, and others who took part in the action. An Illinois tourism study estimated that Americans spend about \$1.4 billion a year on living history events related to the Civil War—more than twice the annual revenue of all Broadway plays and musicals. Tourists visiting Civil War sites and attending re-enactments spend another few billion dollars. A re-creation of the Battle of Antietam this past September attracted over 40 corporate sponsors. Replays of major battles have become so elaborate they now draw as many play-acting “soldiers” as fought in the original events.

Given its immense size and popularity, this Civil War hobby is a surprisingly recent development. A few hardy souls have been staging Civil War history demonstrations since the 1960s, but re-enacting didn't enter its current growth phase until the late 1980s, when the 125th anniversaries of many battles rolled around. Promoters and organizers created special events, and men (battle re-enactment remains a male hobby, although women take part in nearly every other part of the action) turned out in unprecedented numbers.

Today, about a million people—the great majority of them married men joined by their wives and children—take part in re-enactments each year. At least 1,000 people, most of them “suttlers” who sell nineteenth-century-style goods to the re-enactors, make a full-time living off of this. While most people get involved at the urging of friends and spouses, Civil War aficionados increasingly hook up through the Internet. In the stretch between Florida and Pennsylvania that saw most of the war's fighting, at least two major re-enactments take place each weekend from early April to late October. Although the re-enactments are most popular along the Eastern seaboard and the former Confederate states, groups in Iowa, Illinois, and even California have sprung up.

Most often, re-enactors wear uniforms or appropriate civilian garb and camp out in nineteenth-century style, but rarely assume alien personas except when they're actually taking part in a battle. Even then, they rarely imitate particular individuals. Around the firepits, one is much likelier to hear conversations about new car models, Internet sites, NASCAR racing, World War II history, and football draft picks than curses at Abe Lincoln or Jeff Davis.

Commitment to authenticity varies: Most re-enactors wear uniforms and dresses made from Civil War-style fabrics that are now for sale for the first time in over 100 years. But many use modern sleeping bags and waterproof tents. A few even bring along portable phones or laptops. (They are called profane names by hardcores like Coonts, who sleep without tents even when it rains.) Most re-enactments allow non-participating family members and curious tourists to wander through the otherwise authentic-looking campsites and battlefields—where they look

like time travelers with their drip-dry clothing and camcorders.

While most gatherings center around battle re-creations, the pastime has almost infinite variations. Weapons enthusiasts hold target shooting contests using black-powder weapons. Clothing buffs (almost entirely female) organize Civil War-era fashion shows. Christian practitioners hold camp meetings and use them as a way to spread the Gospel. Many get involved in battlefield preservation, or political issues stemming from the war. Although methodical counts are impossible to come by, veteran re-enactors estimate that a majority of the hobbyists focus on Confederate units, although most serious re-enactors play both sides.

Journalist Tony Horwitz has observed that Civil War re-enactments draw a wider cross section of society than any public spectacle outside professional sports. Yet there are certain similarities that the re-enactors tend to share.

Whatever their professions or income levels—I met participants who did everything from wait tables to perform heart surgery—most Civil War re-enactors seem to enjoy working with their hands. A disproportionate number are skilled craftsman and assemblers, while those in other careers often pursue a manual hobby such as woodworking, cooking, or car repair. Great numbers of these men even sew their own nineteenth-century garb.

A number of financially successful Civil War buffs I met had left well-paying careers for more physical labor linked to their historical interests. “I could have made a lot more money had I stayed in the high tech industry,” says Bill Taylor, a well-known

Union re-enactor who worked as vice president of marketing in a D.C.-area technology firm. “But I wanted to get out and do something real.” As an adjunct to his Civil War

hobby (an obsession, he admits), Taylor is one of the handful of Americans who currently works full-time as a farrier—shoeing horses and taking care of their hooves.

Civil War re-enactors overwhelmingly tend to have families with children. While few babies show up at re-enactments, the quest for authenticity has created important roles for children as young as 6 and 7. The drummer boys and fifers who lead most companies into battle are almost always the children of re-enactors. “The drummer was actually paid more than a private, because, well, he had more training,” notes Don Hubbard, a Confederate re-enactor who runs a field music school each summer. Most boys (and a small but growing number of girls) join the fighting ranks in their mid-teens, as soon as they are old enough to handle weapons. (Yes, they actually fire cartridges—full of gunpowder, but no ball.)

While the major battles draw the most spectators—as many as 30,000 onlookers—many hobbyists prefer smaller local events that focus on camp life, military drills, music, and other minutiae of daily life. At one typical event I attended, the actual “fighting” took up only three hours during the weekend. And people rarely “die” before combat reaches very close quarters, in order to allow participants to be part of the action as long as possible.





Even as the deep rifts over race and regional identity that sparked the Civil War retreat further from the political stage, the importance of the War Between the States within the imagination of Americans seems to be growing ever greater. Some historical events (such as the Spanish-American War) affected the lives of many people at the time, but have little emotional resonance today. Others, like the sinking of the *Titanic*, touched relatively few lives directly but remain vivid in the national memory, because they signal significant changes in attitudes or morality. Events like the Civil War retain cultural and emotional significance on many fronts. Nearly every extended family had some participant or victim, and the mobilizations in North and South changed daily life forever. After the war, national identity gradually overtook many aspects of local and state identity; people began speaking of themselves as citizens of the United States before their particular state. The vast, continental, super-powerful United States of America began to grow the day after Lee's surrender.

The re-enactors I interviewed express a strong desire to recapture the mores and feelings of an earlier American era. Many admire the personal character of that period's most prominent fig-

Atlanta (an event some Southerners still feel bitter about) hangs over his fireplace. "I'm glad that the North won the war. I couldn't imagine life any other way," he says. "At the same time, there are some things—the sense of local patriotism, of how you fight in a war—which we've lost and I'd like to understand better."

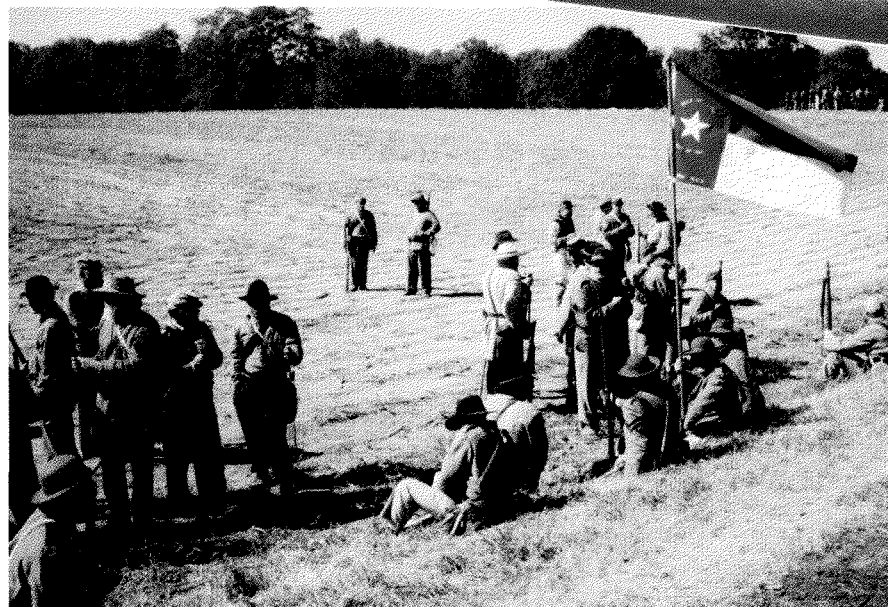
One part of the appeal for Twitchell is that he likes to put himself in a very different set of shoes. Many others likewise enjoy experimenting in different roles. Nanci Ebersoll, who accompanies her husband to re-enactments and enthusiastically participates in cooking and other camp tasks, finds these to be stimulating escapes. "If they didn't have it in the Civil War, we don't have it. It's a perfect vacation," she reports. "It's like time travel. There are no phones, no television." Others, particularly those who have served in the armed services, like the way that Civil War re-enactors informally create military-style camaraderie. "Don't tell my wife, but these guys are my real family," one man smiled at me.

**Re-enactors celebrate the chivalric notions of warfare that many Civil War soldiers adhered to.**

Of course, not every re-enactor participates in this non-ideological way. Maryland resident John Krausse, a Civil War buff who is a member of the 14th Tennessee regiment along with Coonts, sees the struggle in overtly political terms. As fights over the Confederate battle flag have raged in recent years, Krausse became one of the most vigorous defenders of the Southern Cross, and the focus of a History Channel documentary examining the flag debate through the eyes of re-enactors.

The documentary, entitled "The Unfinished Civil War," portrays white re-enactors and other defenders of the Southern cause as racially motivated bigots. Krausse, a golf course manager, says that he's "proud as a bull rooster to be a Southern man," and given half a chance he goes on at length about the distinctiveness of Southern culture, the crimes of Abraham Lincoln, and the gallant deeds of Southern enlisted men. Yet, while he denies that slavery had much to do with the war, he derides segregation as "stupid and insulting." But Krausse has actually moved away from re-enactments because he considers the political aspects of the conflict more important. Joseph McGill, a black re-enactor from Iowa who serves as Krausse's antagonist in the documentary, says that he considers himself a friend, and doesn't believe that Krausse is a racist.

A few (like a man I met who sketched the involvement of a worldwide Jewish/black conspiracy in the Civil War) clearly are bigots. The overwhelming majority, though, are too busy researching the minute details of military campaigns and enjoying the simple sociability of camp life to bother with racism. The pleasures and human qualities of the earlier period, not its thorny political issues, are what engage them. Even Union re-enactors are reluctant to discuss hard issues like slavery.



The photographs in this article were taken at the 140th anniversary re-enactment of the Battle of Antietam, staged in Maryland in September 2002.

ures. Re-enactors tend to celebrate the chivalric notions of combat and warfare that many Civil War soldiers adhered to. But few want to re-live the war's conflicts, or engage its politics.

Atlantan John Twitchell first became involved in gatherings as a result of his interest in black-powder weapons. As a Southerner, he has always played a member of a Confederate unit. "It's part of living where I do. If I lived in Massachusetts, I would join a Federal unit," he explains. Twitchell, however, has no sympathy for the Confederate cause. In fact, a heroic portrait of Sherman burning



The majority of serious re-enactors “galvanize,” or don the uniform of the opposite side whenever the peculiarities of a given recreation demand it. During an event in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, the group camped next to the 14th Tennessee, the 28th Massachusetts, sang Confederate fight songs and, in animated moments, cursed the Yankees. Unit members have a tradition of “playing Confederate” every year at this event, though most of them told me they actually disdain the Southern cause.

“I’m a Southerner, and it’s my preference to play that role,” says Texas A&M student and sometime re-enactor Andrew Gray. “But a lot of the historical interest, for me, comes when I can sit in the other guys’ place and look at it from their side. It’s how you really get to understand the war.”

The ability to live vicariously a different life for a brief period seems a major attraction. “I’ve always been fascinated with military history,” says Susan Geis, who takes part in battles as a male Union private. “The fact that I’m playing a man is, in many ways, the least of the changes that I’m making in my life.”

In the end, Civil War re-enacting has little to do with politics. Modern politics in particular seems far from the minds of most of these Americans. One man who lectured me on the details of the battle of Gettysburg and then launched into a learned debate over military strategy in Vietnam had to strain to remember the name of Secretary of State Colin Powell. For most of these men and women, the hobby is an educational escape into history—a way to envision themselves in the midst of the greatest struggle in America’s history.

## A Direct Route Into History’s Heart

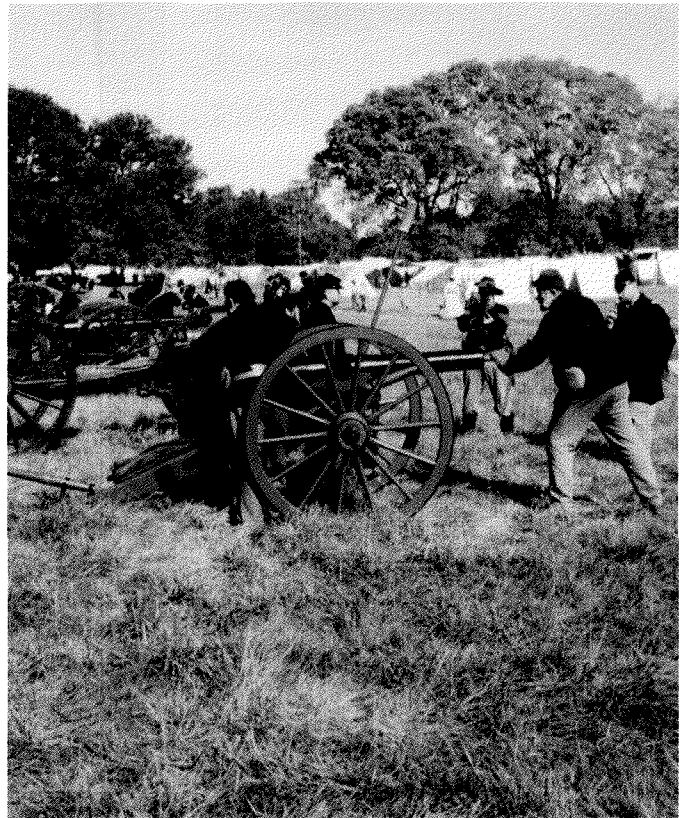
By Mark Hemingway

“You cannot have an army without music,” General Robert E. Lee once remarked. And by the musical standard, Lee and Grant commanded some of the greatest armies in history. More than 4,000 songs were produced during America’s Civil War—a treasure trove of sentiment and insight into one of our nation’s most critical periods. And among the thousands of history buffs and hundreds of historical societies devoted to the Civil War, no one alive understands this body of musical inspiration better than Robert “Bobby” Horton.

From his home in his native Birmingham, Alabama, Horton has made his work familiar to millions of Americans, even if his name isn’t. For nearly a decade now, Horton has been doing soundtrack work for Ken Burns, America’s unofficial Film Documentarian Laureate. If you’ve seen installments of Burns’ *The Civil War*, *Mark Twain*, or *Baseball*, you’ve heard Horton’s musical creations and re-creations. And in the close-knit world of Civil War buffs, Horton’s reputation as a historian eclipses even his reputation as a musician. He is the undisputed expert on music of the period.

Of course, the bearded and bespectacled Horton dismisses

Mark Hemingway, a Phillips Foundation prize winner, is writing a book on the anti-globalization protest movement.



Multiple artillery pieces are actually fired, dozens of times, by re-enactors—with tremendous noise and some real danger.

this accomplishment out of hand. He is the consummate Southern gentleman whose humility exceeds even his enthusiasm for his subject. Pressed to disclose how many instruments he plays, Horton insists “I don’t really play piano well enough to play in front of anybody... I’m no good with woodwinds”—before finally admitting to being proficient with about 60 instruments, including most horns and “basically anything with strings.” I learn that he’s been up since 6:30 on the morning I interviewed him, trying to learn to play Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” on his violin.

If one of the last acceptable stereotypes in America is that of the illiterate Southern redneck, this self-educated renaissance man is doing his part to lay that misconception to rest. His drawl transmits manic bursts of information, and fascinating anecdotes, punctuated with enough easy laughter and family stories to let the listener catch up. He recalls a day some years ago when he invited his parents to listen to him lecture on Civil War music at a local university. His father, approached for his opinion of the presentation, offered a decidedly back-handed compliment, according to Horton: “Well, you sure are good at *talkin’*.”

Horton senior, a World War II veteran, helped pique Bobby’s family pride and interest in history from a very early age. The Civil War centennial, source of a flurry of nationwide celebrations, occurred when Bobby turned nine. He was hooked when he learned that dozens of his ancestors had fought in the war—most for the Confederacy, but one Irish immigrant in a Union artillery company from New York. Ever since, Bobby has devoured Civil War books, passed time as a Civil War re-enactor, and taken an active part in organizations like the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

About the same time he was getting interested in the War

Between the States, Horton picked up his father's old trumpet. He learned a few banjo licks from his grandfather. By the time he was 14, Bobby was recording music in studios. He worked his way through college in a music store, graduated with an accounting degree, and spent six years working at an insurance company before his bluegrass and comedy trio *Three on a String* took off, allowing him to make music full time.

It wasn't until he was 33 years old that Horton's two loves came together. He'd picked up a job doing the soundtrack to a film, *Shadow Waltz*, about an Indiana farm widow who takes in an injured traveling salesman, only to learn that he's a Confederate spy. He hit upon the idea of recording traditional Civil War-era songs for the soundtrack. The trouble was, beyond "Dixie" and a few other standards he couldn't find much in the way of authentic recordings. There was an odd record from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. And an album of songs by Tennessee Ernie Ford—but they were backed by a jazz combo, which hardly made the songs feel genuine.

So Horton trekked to his local library. In much of the South, local custom dictated that every bit of Civil War arcana be meticulously catalogued. Sure enough, in his local Southern History Room Horton unearthed hundreds of pages of sheet music.

Horton wasn't really surprised to find such riches. "Back then, creative people had few outlets. Songwriting was one of them. Since the only way to make money was selling sheet music, common people had to be able to sing your melody. It had to be simple and hummable."

Horton soon realized he had more than some tunes. When these songs were lost, many of the stories that went with them were too. Even the beloved anthem of the South, "Dixie" had a hidden history. Few people knew that it was written by a northerner from Ohio—with original lyrics about a deceitful woman. There's even speculation that the author of "Dixie" stole the melody from a free black family that lived nearby. The song eventually became Abraham Lincoln's favorite tune. He even requested that a Union army band play it for him during one Presidential concert.

Horton soon found that studying its music deepened his understanding of the Civil War. "The songs reflect the realities of the period. If you know the war and the circumstances, you can look at the lyrics and pretty much tell when the song was written. Through the mood of the song, what the song tells you, the sadness—that sort of thing—you can follow the fight. As the battles go on, the music gets sadder and more realistic."

Horton believes that through the marching tunes and melancholy dirges, history can be resurrected with an immediacy and precision not possible in books. "If you don't feel affection for those who laid history out, you won't understand it," he says. And music is a direct route into the hearts of history's makers.

Horton didn't want to record the songs unless he could be true to them. He acquired some nineteenth-century instruments, consulted early string-band recordings, and then every night—after his young son was sound asleep—began arranging and capturing the tunes on an old four-track recorder, playing all the instruments himself.

He began giving out and selling cassettes. He made the covers himself, based on designs from antique sheet music. His liner notes gave brief historical sketches of each song.

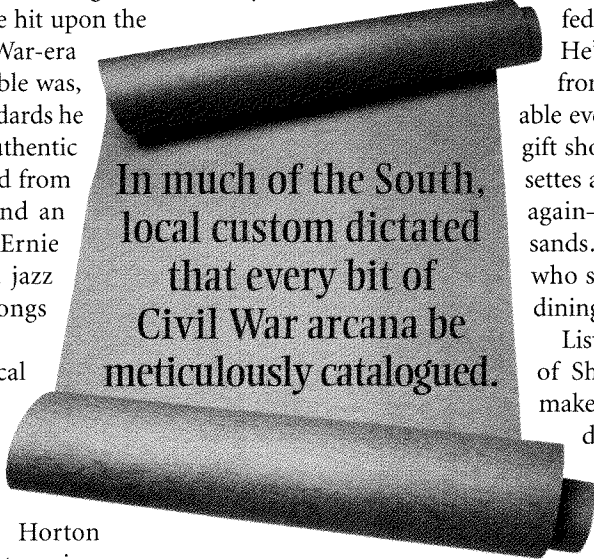
Before he knew it, retailers were calling, and the endeavor snowballed into a full-time enterprise. To date, Horton has produced six volumes of music from the Confederacy and four volumes of Union songs. He's built his own distribution network from the ground up, and his music is available everywhere from Civil War battlefields to gift shops in Europe. Ask him how many cassettes and CDs he's sold and he turns humble again—"Well, in the hundreds of thousands..."—a staggering figure for a musician who started out shipping cassettes from his dining room.

Listen to Horton's rendition of "The Battle of Shiloh Hill," and his success begins to make sense. Horton knows that the lyrics (of dying soldiers crying out to God to protect their wives and children) were written by M. B. Smith, a member of the 2nd Texas Volunteer Infantry who actually witnessed the two days of

bloody fighting in which 23,000 men died. Horton's fiddle weeps and drones. His voice bears the full import of his knowledge of the details of this titanic clash. It's this intangible feel for the music that is Horton's true genius. A lot of people could pick up a banjo or guitar and work their way through the song's simple progressions, but according to Ken Burns, "I don't think I've met anyone quite like Bobby who has the ability to understand the soul of American music."

Burns considers music to be of the utmost importance in his documentaries—largely defining the feel of the films. Sequencing still photographs to music gives a rhythmic feel to his narratives. That's why Burns often selects the music for a particular segment even before filming begins, letting the tune determine the tone of the storytelling. A haunting, plaintive acoustic guitar arrangement of *Dixie* that Horton recorded became one of Burns's signatures. The song flowed directly from Horton's heart: "I got to thinking about all those young boys who died, and it just came out of me."

In addition to spending a lot of time in his home studio, Horton tours with his bluegrass band, and gives popular concert lectures to groups ranging from history professors to riverboat cruisers. He also spends a lot of time performing, as a volunteer, in schools. When he's done playing the songs, he urges the students to be proud of their families, their heritage, their country. And he draws their attention to their opportunities. "I tell the kids we live in land where they can do anything. I'm one proof of that."



In much of the South,  
local custom dictated  
that every bit of  
Civil War arcana be  
meticulously catalogued.



# Flashback

*To know nothing of what happened before you were born  
is to remain ever a child—Cicero*

## Man Without a Country

As we walk down a rutted dirt road leading into the historic Batavia Cemetery in New York on its annual Civil War candlelight tour, we halt before a somber man seated at a desk. He wears no uniform; he carries no gun. He is Ohio Congressman Clement L. Vallandigham, who claims to be imprisoned in a “military bastille for no other offense than my political opinions.”

If most visitors have never heard of Clement Vallandigham, Dick Crozier (a Republican who has played the Democratic dissenter in re-enactments for five years) gives them something to think about. “I state that someday, decisions will be made not by local people but by politicians in distant Washington. People look at me and say, ‘Oh, that’s where it happened—that’s how we ended up with this omnipotent government.’”

Clement Vallandigham was the lawyerly son of a Presbyterian minister. A conventional Democrat of states’ rights sympathies and devotee of Edmund Burke, he was a friend neither to slavery (“a moral, social, and political evil”) nor to the Negro. Like Lincoln, Vallandigham revered “the Union,” though he wished to preserve it by conciliation (Republicans said “appeasement”) rather than bloodshed.

In February 1861, one month before Lincoln took office, Rep. Vallandigham proposed amending the Constitution so as to divide the country into four sections—North, West, Pacific, and South. Presidents could be elected and controversial legislation enacted only by gaining a majority of votes from all sections.

Vallandigham’s plan died aborning; war came. But whereas the leader of the Midwestern Democrats, Stephen Douglas, fell in behind Lincoln, Vallandigham became the most outspoken antiwar voice in Congress.

The whiskers had barely curled on the President’s new beard before Vallandigham was charging him with having launched “a terrible and bloody revolution” whose features were death, taxes, a swollen executive branch, and the erosion of personal liberties.

Threats and imprecations rained down on Vallandigham’s head. Branded a traitor, a rival in odium to Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr, he stood his ground. As his biographer Frank Clement writes, the congressman “was not one to be intimidated or bow to pressure. The insults hurled his way...only made him more defiant.”

After losing his re-election bid in a gerrymandered district, Vallandigham returned to Dayton. His timing was atrocious. General Ambrose Burnside had just been demoted from commander of the Army of the Potomac to commander of the Department of the Ohio. Smarting from the humiliation, Burnside declared that war critics in his jurisdiction would be arrested and tried in military courts.

On May 1, 1863, Vallandigham publicly denounced the “wicked and cruel” war by which “King Lincoln” was “crushing out liberty and erecting a despotism.” As if to prove the speaker’s point, General Burnside ordered the orator arrested on charges of disloyalty.

A hastily assembled military tribunal

found Vallandigham guilty. President Lincoln ordered him exiled to the Confederacy, despite Vallandigham’s protest that he was a loyal “citizen of Ohio and of the United States...banished from my country for no other offense than love of Constitutional liberty.” As a staunch Union man, Vallandigham was unwelcome in the secessionist South, so Confederate blockade-runners smuggled him into Canada.

Despite his Canadian residency, the Ohio Democratic party gave “Valiant Val” its 1863 nomination for governor. The exile’s electoral fate was sealed by Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, which deflated the peace movement.

Lonely for Ohio and the shouts of the crowd, Vallandigham returned to Dayton amidst great fanfare in the summer of 1864, almost daring the military authorities to arrest him. They ignored him, trusting that historians would succeed where Burnside had not.

History came through. Vallandigham rates barely a footnote today; he is remembered, if at all, as the inspiration for Edward Everett Hale’s short story “The Man Without a Country.”

Vallandigham died in 1871 in a bizarre legal mishap. Defending an accused murderer, he was demonstrating to a room of lawyers how the deceased had accidentally shot himself. The demonstration went too well. Vallandigham picked up a pistol he believed to be bullet-less, pulled the trigger, exclaimed, “My God, I’ve shot myself!” and that was the end of Valiant Val.

—Bill Kauffman