

## BEGINNERS' GUIDE TO THE CIVIL WAR

*by Bruce Catton*

Pulitzer Prize-winning Author of  
*A Stillness at Appomattox*

**A leading authority tells how to join America's most popular army—the Civil War Buffs**

■ IT IS HARDLY going too far to say that the Civil War is attracting more recruits now than it ever did when it was hot. None of the present day enlistees will ever do either side any particular good—after all, the war has been over and done with for nearly a century—but the Grand Army of Civil War Buffs does keep growing in the most fantastic way.

Just to get the definition straight: the Buff is a Civil War enthusiast who fights bygone battles over again, stumps about the old battlefields whenever he gets a chance, and follows the old leaders to the last full measure of a sentimental but binding devotion. As often as not he fights on both sides at once, or alternately; loyalties run deep, but they are a bit more all-embracing now than they once were, and it does no one any harm to follow Stonewall Jackson today and William Tecumseh Sherman tomorrow.

The requirements for becoming a Buff are very simple. All you need is the desire to join. If you are interested in the Civil war, you're in. It does not necessarily cost you anything at all, although there are Buffs who, between taking long vacation trips (with a battlefield tour involved in each one), buying cameras and films, and laying out money on Civil War books and pamphlets, do manage to spend a good deal on it.

The whole business is a fairly recent growth; a development, actually, of the last ten years or less. Until late in the 1940s, the Army of Buffs was a small, rather exclusive group. To a few people the Civil War was a subject of vast interest; to all the rest, it represented a closed chapter from the half-forgotten past. Each year one or two Civil War books would get published—very scholarly affairs, most of them, going deeply

## the Civil War Buffs

into abstruse matters of strategy, tactics and what-not—a few thousand people would read them, and that would be that.



Then, for no reason anyone has been able to define, things changed. Civil War books began to come out more often, until what had been a trickle became a flood—a tumultuous and frothy one around the edges, all too often. Radio and television producers discovered the Civil War; or discovered that they would attract more listeners and viewers by presenting bits and pieces of it.

Now, with the centennial of the Civil War just a few years ahead, the move is in high gear.

Yet with all of this going on, the whole affair strikes a good many people as rather confusing. Suppose you want to join the throng: just how do you go about it, anyway, and what do you finally get out of it? Should there not be some sort of basic training program for the new Civil War Buff?

Obviously, there should be. What follows is an attempt to provide one.

Bear in mind, to begin with, that there is nothing to join (except for the various Civil War Round tables, which we'll come to presently) and nothing to do; no dues to pay and no obligations to assume. You begin in the simplest way possible—by reading up on the subject.

That, of course, is where the shoe pinches. Dozens upon dozens of books keep coming; where on earth does the new recruit begin? He can't just plunge into the middle of it, starting to read at random from the nearest item on the best-seller list.

To go in cold and unprepared is apt to make the confusion all the worse: it would be like plopping a real-life recruit into battle before he had been around long enough to learn the difference between a corporal and a major general. (That did happen, now and then, in the Civil War, and the results were never very good.)

There has to be some place to begin.

The best place, probably, is with a very brief re-orientation about the background of the war itself. What was going on in this country then, anyway, how did the war begin, what was the line-up and (in general) what was the shooting all about?



THE BROAD outlines are probably familiar to everybody, but most of us have a way of letting what we once knew about American history get just a bit hazy. A quick refresher will do no harm. Borrow a high school text book, if you wish, and read the Civil War chapter; tackle such a book as Richard B. Morris's *Encyclopedia of American History* (you can find it in almost any library) and run through the 40 or 50 pages dealing with the war and the immediate pre-war years; or pick up any standard work on American history—the two-volume *Growth of the American Republic*, by Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager, is a good one.

Maybe you don't need a refresher. If the general situation as it existed around 1860 is tolerably clear to you, you are ready to begin your basic training.

Bear in mind that this is not a course in self-improvement, or a studied attempt to improve your cultural or intellectual standing. This (if you are to become a true Civil War Buff) is just something you're going to do for fun. What you want is something interesting, something that you will go on studying simply because it fascinates you. You will find this interest, probably, in the details, and the field is a broad one.

Where were the battles fought, for instance, how were they fought, and who fought them? Who were the leaders—both generals and politicians—and what were they like?

Where did the enlisted men come from, what was on their minds when

## the Civil War Buffs

they enlisted, how were they housed and clothed and fed and trained, what were their weapons like, how did army life in the 1860s differ from army life today, and how did they behave when they got into serious campaigning?

How were navies built and operated in those days? What happened at places like Gettysburg, Chickamauga and Wilson's Creek? How do you get to the battlefields today and what do you see when you get there? Where can you examine Civil War uniforms, weapons and cooking implements? What sort of medical care did the soldiers get? What songs did they sing, what games did they play, and what did they think about the whole business anyway?

These are a few of the details which you are very likely to find absorbing—because although the story in so many ways is utterly unlike anything that could happen today, in its basic elements it is all very much the same. Wars differ in their non-essentials, mostly; discipline, boredom, discomfort, danger and the occasional thrill of great deeds nobly done do not change very much down through the passing years.



One of the rewarding things about studying the Civil War is that sooner or later you feel that you actually knew the men who were in it; indeed, the veteran Buff is apt to get the feeling that he himself was in that war, somehow, even though he has no scars or battle ribbons to prove it. Anyhow—

Anyhow, a good way to begin is to read some first-hand accounts of the war, by actual participants. Some very fine material is available. The best place to find it, to my notion, is in a famous collection known as *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*.

A one-volume abridgement of the original four-volume set edited by Ned Bradford was recently put on sale; if four volumes look too weighty, or too expensive, you will find the best of the collection in it.

### the Civil War Buffs

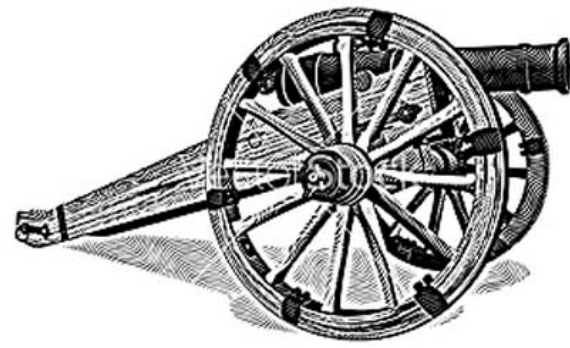
Pictures help, too. The Civil War was the first war to be extensively photographed, and the old photographs are thrilling. The classic collection is the 10-volume *Photographic History of the Civil War*. Here, too, a more readily available reprint has recently been published. For a comprehensive smaller selection, you might try David Donald's one-volume *Divided We Fought*. An excellent running text accompanies the pictures.

Whether you skim these collections or go through them on a cover-to-cover basis, you will almost certainly find any number of incidents that will draw your interest and lead you on into particular parts of the broad general field. Somewhere along the line you are very likely to want to get better acquainted with some of the generals.

Civil War generals were a mixed lot. A few of them were about as good as generals ever are, and some of them were about as bad as generals ever are, and most of them fall somewhere in the middle; but practically all of them were interesting men, some inspiring, some deplorable, but all very human.

Best known of the lot, probably, is the Confederacy's Robert E. Lee—a self-contained gentleman of exquisite breeding and culture who also was one of the most daring gamblers ever to wear a uniform and one of the most enthusiastic of close-range fighting men. He has been done, once and for all, in Douglas Southall Freeman's massive four-volume biography, *R. E. Lee*. And there are plenty of shorter works: Earl Schenk Miers' brief *Robert E. Lee*, which is both easy to read and authoritative, or Sir Frederick Maurice's *Lee the Soldier*.

With Lee, naturally, goes Stonewall Jackson, whom the Yankees never did learn how to handle, whose biography is available in several excellent versions (the one by Col. F. G. R. Henderson, a British army officer, is the enduring classic in this field). Jackson was as fasci-



nating a soldier as you are apt to meet anywhere.

## the Civil War Buffs

Then there were Jeb Stuart, the Confederate cavalryman, and hard-boiled Bedford Forrest, the self-taught soldier whose definition of strategy is still perfect: "Get there first with the most men." (Not, by the way, get there "fustest" with the "mostest"; Forrest definitely did not say it that way, no matter what the Sunday supplement stories say.)



EQUALLY INTERESTING men fought on the Union side, among them U. S. Grant and William T. Sherman. Grant wrote his own memoirs, and oddly enough they are highly readable. You don't ordinarily expect a lieutenant general to be an entertaining writer, but Grant was one.

Grant was a shy, rather slouchy, wholly unmilitary little codger—as unlike Lee, against whom he fought so hard, as anyone you could imagine—but in his own way he was all soldier, and when you get to know him, you see that he was by no means the stolid butcher of legend.

And Sherman—well, he was a figure out of hell to most devout Southerners, but at the end of the war he almost ruined his military career by giving a beaten Southern army terms that were altogether too liberal for the government at Washington to swallow, and one of his stoutest admirers was the Confederate General Joe Johnston who had fought against him.

But you won't be doing it *all* with books. One of the essential steps in the Civil War Buff's basic training is the battlefield tour. Visiting a battlefield (and there are dozens of them) and standing where the men stood when the fighting was going on can be a very moving emotional experience.

Perhaps the archaic monuments and markers that have been put up help; whatever it is, to stroll around a place like Gettysburg or Chancellorsville is somehow to get in touch with the men who fought there and

## the Civil War Buffs

to gain a feel for the war and the men who were in it that can be gained in no other way.

There is a very helpful book available here, by the way: a slim little item called *Decisive Battles of the Civil War*, by Lieut. Col. Joseph B. Mitchell. The chief virtue of this book is that it provides battlefield maps with the modern route numbers, which makes the task of finding your way around ever so much simpler.



One of the best things about visiting Civil War battlefields is that the National Park Service maintains museums on most of them, with courteous, well-informed officials to answer your questions and, usually, with exhibits of weapons, uniforms and all the rest that you can study at your leisure.

The weapons themselves are, to many a Buff, the best part of the whole business. For some strange reason it is fascinating to know that the standard Civil War rifle was a muzzle loader, with a cartridge that was simply a tube of paper with a lead slug in one end and a charge of loose powder in the other. To load, the soldier bit off one end of the paper tube, poured the powder down the barrel, threw the paper away (or wadded it up and sent it after the powder), inserted the lead slug in the muzzle, and then shoved the whole works down with a limber metal ramrod. After this he pulled back the hammer at the breech of the piece, stuck a little explosive cap exactly like the one Junior puts in his toy pistol nowadays in the proper place, and was ready to fire.

It took a good man to get off two shots a minute then, and it all looks pretty cumbersome. But they used to do terrible execution with those weapons in spite of their awkwardness, and the man who was hit got hurt just as badly as the man of today who gets in the way of a bullet from a Garand.

SO THERE ARE campaigns and bat-

### the Civil War Buffs

bles to read about, first-hand experiences to read and re-read, biographies of generals to study, battlefields themselves to visit, weapons to examine, all kinds of absorbing by-paths to follow. (Food, for instance; it comes as a shock to learn that from first to last no Civil War army ever enlisted a man as a cook. All of the cooking was done by amateurs and most of it was inexpressibly awful—which is probably one reason why twice as many Civil War soldiers died of disease as were ever killed by battlefield action.) And out of the whole of it you get—precisely what?



Standing as a Civil War Buff, to be sure. You may get to the point where you want to join a Civil War Round Table. There are two or three dozen of these highly informal curbs in existence now—most large cities have them—and they are nothing more or less than little groups of enthusiasts who meet once a month, during nine months of the year, to have dinner, talk about the war, and listen to a speech on the subject.

But beyond that, what do you get?

For one thing, you get a much better understanding of your own American past. The Civil War looks very romantic and picturesque at this safe distance, but it was actually a very grim and desperate affair, fought by men who were very much in earnest.

They accomplished more than they understood at the time; they hammered out the shape of the American future, in blood and agony and weariness, breaking through the shell that was compressing the American spirit and preparing the way for the nation's future greatness. It is good to get in touch with them, to know what the America of today cost in human terms for people who stood under the gun and had to pay the price, to feel something of the nobility of spirit that kept men fighting for lofty intangibles through four mortal years of warfare.



### the Civil War Buffs

Last of all, you go out of the present and into the past. You join a genuinely great set of soldiers—the Federals and Confederates who followed Grant and Lee and all the rest—and, in a sense, you live with them. You put yourself into a great era of American history; if you share emotionally in some of its agonies you also touch a romance and a pageantry which put a new and revealing light on the landscape.

Commonplace words like Appomattox and Antietam and Perryville take on a new meaning for you; a good deal of the monotony and routine of modern life somehow evaporates, as you escape into a period of profound and haunting significance.

All in all, it's quite an experience. Welcome to the Army! ■■

