Civil War through the Eyes of a Child: Learning to Transition from Playtime to Wartime

Mock battle—for American children in the 1860s, it provided an escape from reality, a sense of adventure and an incomparable thrill. It was an opportunity to become warriors, without having to encounter the dangers of a true battle. Caught up in a world of imagination, children could have never predicted that playtime would be over so soon. By 1861, upon the announcement of the Civil War, they would all be pulled into a world of combat. While men and women are worthy of acknowledgement for their service during the Civil War, children deserve greater recognition for the critical roles, both on the battlefield and at home, that they assumed in contribution to the war effort.

After Abraham Lincoln's pledge against the expansion of slavery, during the Presidential Election of 1860, Southern states resolved to formally secede from their counterpart in order to preserve this "peculiar institution." With concern over the Union's integrity, Lincoln and the North were committed to keeping the states intact and to, eventually, abolish enslavement. Following the war's commencement, with the Southern Confederacy's attack on Fort Sumter, children became entangled in a dispute over the sectional differences of their relatives. The four years of battle that ensued were among the bloodiest in American history, with a death toll of approximately six hundred thousand ("Civil War Facts").

At the start of the war, young boys from both the North and South attempted to join in the spirit of patriotism. Oftentimes, since they were not yet eighteen, they were obliged by law to gain consent from parents or, more frequently, lied about their age (Liskey 11). As time persisted, the army grew desperate for soldiers, with such increase in casualties; the minimum requirement in the Union decreased from twenty-one to seventeen. Children who enlisted were commonly assigned the position of drummer boy, whose duty was to lead soldiers into battle

while relaying military instructions through a pattern of drumbeats. Since communicating orders among the confusion of gunshots was virtually impossible, boys had a crucial responsibility. When they were not performing, they searched for wounded soldiers and provided medical aid. Other times, they worked at hospitals, carrying deceased men to the "dead-house" to, eventually, be buried (Bircher 78).

Notably, one of the most popular children from the Civil War was John Clem. At the mere age of ten, he was refused by the 3rd Ohio, but persistence led him to becoming a mascot of the Union army and drummer boy of the 22nd Michigan ("John Clem"). He is associated with the events that transpired at Chickamauga, in which he shot a Confederate soldier who had called him a "damned little Yankee devil." For this demonstration of bravery, Clem was promoted to the youngest sergeant in the army. Although discharged at thirteen, after having served his three-year term, he rejoined at nineteen, following his failure of the entrance exam multiple times. This "Drummer Boy of Chickamauga" was undeniably devoted to the Union and encompassed much of what an American soldier strived to during the Civil War.

On the battlefield, the physical limits of drummer boys were severely tested. They marched twenty to thirty miles a day through treacherous weather, including extreme heat, heavy rainfall and snow (Bircher 28). Aside from the elements, they were susceptible to the overt dangers of warfare—injury, sickness and death. For instance, Edward Black, who was twelve years old, lost his left arm after an explosion, earning him the title of the Civil War's youngest wounded soldier ("Edward Black Drum"). He had joined the army four years earlier and managed to serve the rest of his term, despite the battle wounds that symbolized his sacrifice for the Union. Under these circumstances, it was also common to discover young soldiers lying dead throughout the field (see fig. 1). However, despite pain, they were expected to remain

enthusiastic. In *The Story of a Confederate Boy in the Civil War*, David E. Johnston explains, "It must not be supposed that because we were wearied, covered with mud and hungry, that we were dispirited and gloomy" (102). Boys had grown accustomed to concealing their feelings, for they recognized that a positive mindset was essential to their army's success.

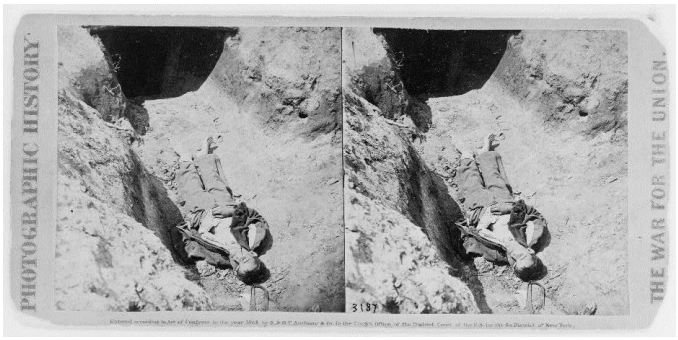

Fig. 1. A Confederate boy lies dead in the trench of Fort Mahone, photographed in 1865. Source: *Library of Congress*. E. & H.T. Anthony. 2 Apr. 1865. www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c17567/.

When night came, the day was far from being over. Without protection against the cold, they had to construct a fire, among a lack of suitable material, else risk freezing to death. Given this, warmth was one of the only commodities available. Riddled with dysentery from their daily corn meal and coffee, the boys rarely had an opportunity to rest; remaining in close proximity to the fire inevitably led to some falling in as they slept (Liskey 26). Additionally, young soldiers were only permitted to own one pair of clothing. If their "wardrobe" needed to be cleaned, it would be rinsed under water and placed on the nearest bush to dry (Johnston 137). At such a young age, children were subject to numerous painstaking tasks, solely to defend the men and women who had initially provoked this revolution.

As the war prolonged from what Lincoln presumed would be a minute "insurrection," boys grew increasing weary. They began to realize that "a soldier's life was not so fine as [they] as school-boys saw it pictured in [their] histories" (Bircher 28). Dead men piled up along the battlefield, creating an intolerable stench, heightened by the sun. The image of death was imprinted into their minds, forcing them to ponder on the agony of their men. Even the toughest were unable to withstand this amount of emotional distress. To make matters worse, the day's

repetition was especially unbearable. Homesick boys had only the arrival of mail to look forward to, and when some received letters from back home while others did not, feelings of resentment arose. In "The Letters of Felix Voltz," he compares the army campsite to a prison and suggests, "He [who joins] will regret the day that he went into the army … I have cursed the day that I enlisted for what benifit (sic) will I ever drive from being a Soldier." Certainly, what had started as a dream in search for adventure was evolving into a nightmare for these young boys.

Children at home are not to be discredited either. Although not directly involved in battle, they took on the previous roles of their fathers and older brothers. Several dropped out of school to work on the farm, where they cultivated crops, fed livestock and watched their siblings (Schwartz). To support those on the battlefield, they picked lint for bandages, labored in ammunition factories and collected supplies (Marten 2). Oftentimes, they starved so that soldiers could sustain themselves. By sacrificing time, food and education, children had undertaken a significant role in strengthening the cause of their army.

Aside from physical labor, they encountered an emotional struggle. Being a child did not entitle them to any immunity from the dangers of warfare, whatsoever. For example, Northern soldiers would rape Southern girls in front of their own families (Liskey 56). Moreover, being that many houses were destroyed, on both sides, children frequently took refuge in basements and caves (Schwartz). In a report, seventeen-year-old Emma Le Conte admits, "I have seen little of the light heartedness and exuberant joy that people talk about as the natural heritage of youth. … I often wonder if I will ever have my share of fun and happiness ("Children's Voices from the Civil War"). Instead of being able to reminisce on the pleasures of childhood, American children could only rely on the recollection of traumatic experiences as they grew up in an atmosphere of uncertainty.

Many lost their fathers, either from death or from departure for the war, and were in a constant state of apprehension, wondering whether they would return. As an illustration, the portrait, “Lincoln and the drummer boy,” depicts a heartbroken child approaching The President who, in turn, attempts to comfort him (see fig. 2). Captioned, “The boy advanced and with bowed head and timid accents said I have no Mother, no Father and bursting into tears—Nobody cares for me,” the portrait reveals how extensively children were affected by the loss of their parents during the Civil War.

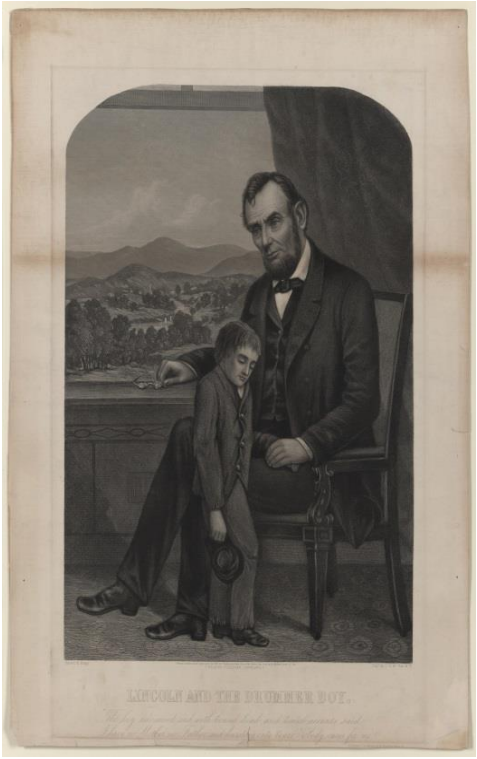

Fig. 2. Lincoln comforts boy mourning the loss of his parents. Source: “Lincoln and the drummer boy.” *Library of Congress*. 1867. www.loc.gov/ resource/ lprbscsm.scsm0653/

It was not the government’s duty to notify people on the death of family members. As such, orphanages opened at a rapid rate to take in those without parents, who then became a reminder of the sacrifices made during the war (Liskey 66). Since children confide in those around them for direction, the loss of a parent entailed making difficult life decisions. For instance, girls no longer had guidance in finding spouses, a matter of great importance as they became young adults. While in the army, John McLaughlin could only advise his daughter, “I supposed you are going to get married before I return. ... make your own choice, it is for you to live by and not me” (Liskey 46). Being raised without a father became the norm for American children, who learned to care for themselves. Thus, children at home experienced an immense amount of emotional hardship, just as men and women on the battlefield.

The Civil War also prompted a multitude of unparalleled events regarding African American children. Although not legally permitted to fight until 1863, following the Emancipation Proclamation, they became widely involved in the war effort as a method of defining their "'adulthood, masculinity, and freedom'" (Liskey 30). Former slaves typically accompanied their masters into the army and worked as personal servants, cooking and foraging for them (see fig. 3). Furthermore, in Susie King Taylor's journal, she describes her life as an African American child, secretly educated by a freed slave in Savannah. She had caught the attention of Captain Trowbridge, who came to St. Simon's Island to enlist a group of African Americans that had bravely fought off Confederate soldiers. Taylor predominantly served as a laundress and nurse in the Union army. During her free time, she readily taught soldiers how to read and write, cleaned military supplies and cooked for the men. Her position not only contributed to the North's victory, but also elevated the status of both African Americans and women.

Fig. 3. Union soldier with servant boy, photographed in 1861. Source: *Library of Congress*. Aug. 1861. www.loc.gov/item/2016652229/.

Unfortunately, the tremendous sacrifices made by children during the war remain unrecognized today. They essentially grew up overnight, exchanging what had once been toy guns for real weapons, after being drawn into a dispute between Northern and Southern leaders. By the end of the Civil War, children had become their own leaders. Yet with its countless alternative names—"Mr. Lincoln's War," "The Second American Revolution," "The War Between the States"—it never seems to be referred to as "The Children's War."

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Bircher, William. *A Drummer-Boy's Diary: Comprising Four Years of Service with the Second Regiment Minnesota Veteran Volunteers, 1861 to 1865*. St. Paul Book and Stationery, 1889. *Internet Archive,* archive.org/details/drummerboysdiary00birc.

Johnston, David Emmons. *The Story of a Confederate Boy in the Civil War.* Encoded by Jordan Davis and Natalia Smith, Glass & Prudhomme, 1914. *Documenting the American South*, docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/johnstond/johnston.html#cboy1.

Knapp. "Lincoln and the drummer boy." Portrait. *Library of Congress*, F. Heaton, Cleveland, 1867, www.loc.gov/resource/lprbscsm.scsm0653/.

"Major Luzerne Todd of Co. D, 23rd New York Infantry Regiment and Co. B, 86th New York Infantry Regiment in uniform with sword and unidentified young African American servant in front of tent." Photograph. *Library of Congress*, Aug. 1861, www.loc.gov/item/2016652229/.

Taylor, Susie King. *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers*. 1902. Encoded by Fiona Mills and Natalia Smith, 1999. *Documenting the American South*, docsouth.unc.edu/neh/taylorsu/taylorsu.html.

"This view was taken in the trenches of the rebel Fort Mahone, called by the soldiers 'Fort Damnation,' the morning after the storming of Petersburgh, Va., April 2d, 1865." Photograph. *Library of Congress*, E. & H.T. Anthony, 2 Apr. 1865, www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c17567/.

Voltz, Felix. "The Letters of Felix Voltz." Received by Brother, *Special Collections University Libraries, Virginia Tech*, Virginia Tech, 10 Feb. 1865, spec.lib.vt.edu/voltz/voltz4.htm.

Secondary Sources

"Children's Voices from the Civil War." Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, *Teachinghistory*, teachinghistory.org/files/handout-childrens_voices_from_the_civil_war_0.pdf.

"Civil War Facts." *Civil War Trust*, www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/civil-war-facts.

"Edward Black Drum." *The Children's Museum of Indianapolis,* 23 July 2013, thehistory.childrensmuseum.org/collections/iconic-objects/edward-black-drum.

"John Clem." *Civil War Trust,* www.civilwar.org/learn/biographies/john-clem.

Liskey, Amanda Catherine. "The Effect of the American Civil War on its Children." MA thesis, American Public University System, 2014. *DigitalCommons@APUS,* digitalcommons.apus.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=theses

Marten, James. "Children in the Civil War." Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, 2012, epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1076&context=hist_fac.

Schwartz, Marcie. "Children of the Civil War: On the Home Front." *Civil War Trust,* www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/children-civil-war-home-front.