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Individuals and Societies

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Children of The American Civil War

319,342. This huge number is an estimate of the amount of soldiers under the age of 18, that fought in the American Civil War. However, thousands more were affected every day in numerous ways on the homefront. Boys who were physically fit, fought alongside their fathers and those who were not became military drummers or worked at ammunition factories, trying to help out however they could. These children became accustomed to death and experienced people around them dying in war frequently. The American Civil War was a devastating time for children and had a negative impact on their lives.

When the Civil War started, people who fought for either the Confederacy or the Union wanted to fight for their causes and strongly believed in them. This patriotism was adapted by the children and they too, suddenly wanted to fight for their side of the war, even if it meant they risked death. These “Boy Soldiers” enlisted, sometimes illegally, and faced many hardships on the battlefield. We can see in *Figure 1*, a child that enlisted in the confederate army and died at the young age of 16. This happened often and devastated the families of these fallen soldiers who sometimes never discovered what happened to their children. In the society that these boys lived, it was incredibly honorable to die in battle. They felt pressured from family and friends to join their side’s army and sadly they were exposed to all of the harsh experiences that came with war. These boy soldiers were exposed to things that were forbidden to them back home such as tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and prostitution. The children that left for the war were not the same

ones that came home and many had emotional damage. One of the boys who fought recounted, “The horrors of the battlefield were brought vividly before me” (Schwartz, “Children on the Battlefield”). They experienced extreme Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and sometimes became heavy drinkers at an early age.

Although these children did not have to engage in any combat, The Children of the Homefront, still faced a life filled with many challenges during the American Civil War. Many of the children had an interest in political and military affairs and tried to keep up with what was going on as it affected their daily lives. Many had to step up and fill the job positions that their fathers left behind.. Most of them dropped out of school and got jobs to support their families that had relied on the fathers as their main source of income. Smaller children thought of the war as a normal part of daily life and played games that resembled the violence that was happening all around them. They played games where they would build enemy soldiers out of miscellaneous objects and pretend to brutally slaughter them. As the war drew on, food started to run out, there was a shortage of clothing, and the population suffered from diseases and a high increase in homelessness. This atmosphere was difficult on the children and had both a physical and emotional effect on them. They experienced fear regularly, with the constant threat of a home invasion or an attack on their families present in everyday life. They also lived with the hard realities of death at an early age, scarring them for the rest of their lives. One Confederate girl wrote, “Father is dead, and Harry. Mr. Trezevant lies at Corinth with his skull fractured by a bullet; every young man there has been in at least one battle since, and every woman has cried over her son, brother, or sweetheart, going away to the wars, or lying sick and wounded.” (Dawson, “A Confederate Girl’s Diary”). From this quote, we can see that she experiences much death in her life, she tells us how everyone has been impacted and it is obvious this took an

emotional toll on her. Carrie Betty, another Child on the Homefront, a 10 year old resident of Atlanta, Georgia wrote, “We were fritened almost to death last night. Some mean soldiers set several houses on fire in different parts of the town. I could not go to sleep for fear that they would set our house on fire. We all dred the next few days to come for they said that they would set the last house on fire if they had to leave this place.”(Carrie Betty). We can tell from this quote that Carrie Betty is stricken with fear from this these events and, even though she was so young, there was a constant worry for their safety. Alice Williamson is another young girl who was affected by the war and all of its brutal bloodiness. She writes, “After insulting the father, he carried his son a half mile away and shot him six times....But this is nothing new, this is the fifth man that has been shot in this way, besides numbers that have been carried off by scouts and never return.” (Alice Williamson) From this we can infer that she was used to how violent the war was and that murder was very familiar to her, even as a small girl. Similar to the others, Mary Chesnut, a teenager during the civil war also faced many challenges that no teenager should have to endure. In one of her diaries she wrote, “Today I was burning papers all day — expecting a Yankee raid. Gave some silver to Mr. Team — & two books of JC's. Shall try & get them if I go to Greenville. How I have wept this day! My poor heart is weary” (Mary Chesnut, 1999). In this quote, she talks casually about a ‘Yankee’ raid so we can infer that many of these have happened and that it was a fact of their daily lives. She also says at the end of this quote that she had been crying a lot, again demonstrating the negative emotional effects of war on children. All of these quotes highlight the many challenges that these children had to overcome.

The children of America faced many hardships in the Civil War that made that time period a difficult time for them. Boys who fought in the war, faced challenges on and off the field that greatly affected them. The children that stayed on the homefront also experienced a

devastating time with lots of work, emotional setbacks, and a newfound responsibility forced upon them. It is important to remember these brave children and to understand what they had to go through and sacrifice during this brutal war.



Figure 1 - "Boy Soldier" "Cabanas, from Texas, enlisted in the Confederate Army. He died in a northern prison camp at the age of 16."

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