

# Canadians Reliving the Civil War

By Gloria Hildebrandt Photos by Mike Davis



Cannon fire blows real gunpowder during a Civil War battle re-enactment near Milton's Escarpment.

On a very hot day at the end of August, who would want to put on thick layers of historical costumes, including long-sleeved shirts, wool pants and jackets, boots and even hats, and march in strict military formations, before taking part in a re-enactment of a Civil War battle, complete with horses, guns and a cannon shooting real gunpowder?

Or, if you're female, wearing long stockings, a crinoline, a long skirt, tight-fitting bodice, gloves and a hat? If you're a different kind of female, you might dress exactly like the male soldiers do, and do the same amount of marching, drilling, running, attacking and

fighting, only you will never want to take your jacket off.

For members of the American Civil Historical Re-enactment Society (ACWHRS), doing this is a highlight of the year. The ACWHRS defines itself as "a Canadian society dedicated to the education of the Canadian public to Canada's significant involvement in the American Civil War and its crucial importance in Canadian history." Who are its members?

"We are of all ages," explains Donna Elliott, communications officer for the ACWHRS board of directors, "from children in civilian and military roles, such as drummer boy, to over age 65. We come from all walks of life. We

have policemen, teachers, postal workers, government workers, arborists, business men and women, factory workers, all different occupations! But we all share a love of history. There are more men than women but we do have some women doing the role of military, who portray men, as some did during the Civil War. Most of the women portray civilian life between 1861 and 1865. The men do military roles, medical roles, artillery roles and civilian roles, but mostly military."

ACWHRS offers members the chance to portray people in historical units including the 4th Michigan Infantry Company "C" and the Donaldson LA Artillery,

among others. The group informs spectators that 50,000 Canadians served on both sides in the war, and around 14,000 Canadians died.

Some ACWHRS members go annually to Gettysburg to help preserve the battlefield by cleaning brush and raking leaves. "We also put Canadian flags on the graves of Canadians that are buried in the National Cemetery there to draw awareness to the fact that we also fought there," says Elliott.

In August of last year, ACWHRS put on a Civil War re-enactment at Country Heritage Park in Milton, that was open to the public. For two days, people could wander among costumed members who lived in histori-



Cavalry to the rescue.



A female re-enactor portraying a woman disguised as a soldier is dragged away. At right, a man portraying a Zouave.



The battle surgeon with a red flag approaches the wounded.

cal encampments, gave talks and demonstrations, and at 3 p.m both days, re-enacted a battle between Confederate and Union forces.

During the re-enactment days, visitors mingle freely among the re-enactors, except for during the battle, when they need to stay out of roped-off areas. You can ask them questions about their costumes, what they're doing or what's going on all around, and they'll give full answers. As their program states, "We are most eager to share our interest and experiences with the public."



Rod Holloway of Picton, Ont., as a member of the 2nd Louisiana Medical Brigade of the Confederate States of America.



On-the-spot amputation without anaesthetic.



## Canadians in the Civil War

Visitors can examine a medical tent, for example. Rod Holloway of Picton, Ont., was dressed as a Confederate medical officer and was ready to explain the historical first aid and medical equipment, including an ominous-looking saw. Amputations without anaesthesia were frequently performed to save lives that would otherwise have been lost to gangrene in wounded limbs. Sanitation and antiseptic conditions were not yet practised at the time of the Civil War.

Holloway was portraying a member of the 2nd Louisiana Medical Brigade. He's been involved with ACWHRS for four years and is particularly interested in the medical side of the war.

Then there's the battle, easily the dramatic highlight of the day. Wise spectators find some shade. The fighting re-enactors are in the heat of the full glare. There's no clear sign of the beginning of a skirmish, just the sight of military groups moving in the distance. Confederate and Union flags are seen in separate locations, held high above lush raspberry hedges. A horse and rider is seen in a barn yard, then gallops down a gravel road in the park. Occasional shots are fired; smoke floats in the still air.

Soldiers come closer, climbing over cedar rail fences. Flanks of uniformed enemies confront each other in formation on the gravel road. Union soldiers fire, Confederates move back into a large open field. The Union follows. Confederates are taking cover behind and near a wagon in the field.

There is a cannon. It works, exactly as it should, except that no cannon balls are fired. Real gunpowder is used, and it makes real explosions that are really dangerous. The booms cause a thump in the chests of the observers; some pull back away from the noise. Union soldiers advance on the Confederates.

The Union's cavalry gallops back and forth beside the battlefield. You worry about the horses, because the shots are so loud, but

you're told the horses are used to it. They don't seem to be concerned, except one horse who prances nervously when his rider slumps over realistically, having been "shot."

The worst thing about the battle is how it illustrates soldiers' willingness to line up and face their enemies' bullets. With each disciplined round of firing, some bodies drop. You begin to wonder how this is fun.

Union soldiers rush the wagon. Confederate bodies drape over the wagon and drop onto the field. At the edge of the field, the battlefield surgeon stands holding a red flag. With the Confederate flag captured by the Union soldiers who are moving off the field in formation again, the battle appears to be over. The surgeon, wearing a blood-spattered white apron, approaches the wounded.

A wounded soldier is carried back to the operating station where female nurses in civilian clothes assist in holding down the patient. The surgeon declares a need to amputate the wounded leg. With realistic cries from the soldier and the sounds of sawing, the limb is worked over. With a dramatic flourish, a bloody "leg" is held high to the delight of boys looking on, then swiftly bundled away in a cloth.

The next wounded soldier is asked to remove his jacket. There is a loud refusal and resistance and a struggle. The soldier is discovered to have the figure of a woman, which shocks and enrages the medical staff more than the amputation. The woman is led away struggling and yelling that she needs to rejoin her fellow soldiers.

Just as there was no announcement that the battle was beginning, there is no clear end. Fighting just stops, people drift away from the field and resume their camp life, taking advantage of the quiet to rest before fighting resumes. Just like in real war. ■

*For information about this summer's re-enactments, see [acwhrs.com](http://acwhrs.com).*