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Conflicting Memories on the “River of Death”: The Chickamauga Battlefield and the Spanish-American War, 1863-1933

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While *Conflicting Memories* is a welcome addition to the mountain of works dealing with the US Civil War and its effects on this nation, the book is less about the battle of Chickamauga as it is about remembering and enshrining the battle. The result is much more than a history, as interesting as that history is; rather it offers insights and raises questions as to how we remember and shape history and what happens when different histories occupy the same ground.

The battle of Chickamauga, fought between 19 and 20 September 1863, was a bloody affair which pitted the talents of Confederate General Braxton Bragg against those of Major General William Rosecrans, commanding the forces of the Union. Other notable figures from both north and south include Lieutenant General James Longstreet, who, with his Corps, had been temporarily detached from Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and Major General George H. Thomas, whose determined defense of the Union line at Horseshoe Ridge would make him a national hero. Although the battle ended in a Confederate victory, all rebel gains would be lost by November as Generals Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan won the battles of Lookout Mountain and Lookout Ridge, and ended the siege of Chattanooga by rebel forces. As a result of these operations, Grant would rise to command all Union Armies and the heart of the Deep South would be open to the Union advances of 1864 and Sherman’s “March to the Sea.” Chickamauga was the second most costly battle of the Civil War—the first was Gettysburg—and has been the subject of many books, of which Peter Cozzens’s *This Terrible Sound* may well be the best.

Thirty five years later, Chickamauga experienced another seismic historical event, one that could have potentially supplanted or at least could force a sharing of historical pride of place with the civil war battle. In 1898, as the United States prepared for and fought a war with Spain, Chickamauga served as a vast training camp for many of the regiments earmarked for service overseas. Although the leading wave of these forces passed through Chickamauga in reasonably good shape, those who followed them were ravaged by disease with attendant death tolls that exceed any combat casualties. The memories of these deaths with concomitant allegations of government incompetence and malfeasance were potential competitors with those recollections of Civil War heroics and sacrifice. A war of sorts—a war of memories—would be fought and although the Civil War narrative would prevail, the story of needless deaths of thousands of newly recruited volunteers for the Spanish American War would not be completely silenced.

Keefer does a commendable job showcasing how efforts to create a military park at Chickamauga played out against a national backdrop where southern proponents of the romanticized “Lost Cause” were

countered by the increasingly politically powerful membership of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). At stake was the place of veterans and the units in “the national memory,” and in the case of Chickamauga the most determined veteran was Henry Van Ness Boynton who would make preserving the battlefield and its “lessons” his life’s work.

As Keefer relates, establishing a Chickamaugan narrative satisfactory to north and south, the hundreds of regiments, batteries, divisions and other units that had fought there, and to leaders, many of whom bore great antipathy toward one another was no easy task. Battle lines had to be recreated, and one common version of events agreed upon. Creating the park also required congressional approval and the support of local communities. At every turn, new issues arose. Which units would be the most prominently featured? What requirements if any, would be applied to memorials and monuments? How accessible would the battlefield be to tourists?

It took Boynton and others until 1895, but at last the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park was dedicated and officially opened. The park would celebrate “American valor and sacrifice,” serve as instructional terrain for students of history and future military officers and, as Gettysburg had done in the east, to “sanctify” the ground upon which so many had given their lives. In a marked difference from Gettysburg, Chickamauga would also boast Camp Thomas, an army installation, for the park was also intended to serve as a site for military training and maneuvers.

Camp Thomas, as it turned out, was instrumental in initiating a series of events which resulted in the greatest challenge to Boynton’s vision. As war with Spain loomed, militia and volunteer units flocked to the colors and Chickamauga was selected as a logical training facility where regiments would be brought to fighting trim and then deployed to the war. To some degree the martial display of thousands of men preparing for war fit nicely with the story of the Civil War battle and the depiction of American, vice northern or southern, heroism. However, predictably, the less noble pursuits of young soldiers, including drinking and frequenting of bordellos that sprang into existence near the camp, caused friction with local authorities and did not fit as well with the narrative. Such issues in themselves could likely have been dealt with—except for the shockingly high mortality rates that resulted from a variety of illnesses associated with putting vulnerable populations of young men together in close proximity with insufficient sanitation and a lack of modern medical knowledge.

It was perhaps inevitable that the illness and death at Camp Thomas became intertwined with other Army “scandals” of the day. In particular, there were allegations the Army’s tinned meat rations were toxic, and that Army medicine as a whole was deficient. The response of senior medical and Army officers at Camp Thomas was that the War Department failed to provide adequate resources, Chickamauga was an unhealthy locality in general, local water supplies were tainted, and there was a lack of hygienic discipline among the volunteers.

Boynton mounted an interesting defense of the Army and the military park. He blamed certain senior officers for falsely attacking the War Department to excuse their own failings while at the same time

implying the volunteers themselves were not made of the same tough and manly material as their Civil War forebearers. This defense of the War Department was clearly over the top. As Graham Cosmas, in *An Army for Empire* brilliantly recounts, the War Department and the Army, although not as ill prepared as popular recounting would have it, were not ready for the demands of the Spanish-American War and subsequent Philippine insurrection, and this lack of readiness was reflected in a medical department that in many ways was far inferior to that of the Civil War.

In the end, however, Boynton prevailed. Chickamauga remains to this day primarily a Civil War battlefield, with memories of Camp Thomas relegated to marginalia. Chickamauga's memories are martial, its sagas of sacrifice, courage, and eventual national reconciliation. What Keefer has done, and done exceptionally well, is to remind us that such commemorative landscapes do not simply appear as much as they are manufactured and negotiated and that the story of that creation and bargaining is not only essential to understand the evolution of such national historic shrines but important in itself.