


Besides getting a healthy dose of history, visitors to a Civil War reenactment also enjoy plenty of beautiful scenery and lots of old-time fun .

**CAMP BELINGTON**  
Union troops under Brigadier General T.A. Morris, advanced from Philippi on July 7, 1861 and established a fortified camp near this site. Battle of Belington took place July 7-11. Confederates were two miles to east at Laurel Hill.





# An Unlikely Soldier

Story by Brad McElhinny  
Photos by David Fattaleh & Ron Snow

A desk jockey trades his cubicle for a weekend in a Civil War camp.







**T**he first thing I learn about going to a Civil War reenactment is there are parades in which people clad in Union and Confederate garb hurl candy at you.

This portion of history was new to me, but I cheer nonetheless as the Blue and the Gray pass grandly through the streets of a small West Virginia town while whizzing Tootsie Rolls, Double Bubbles and Dum-Dums at my feet.

“Hurrah for the Civil War!” I yell at a passing rebel, and he responds in kind by exclaiming “Hurrah for Jeff Davis,” an admirable historical figure who I took to have been the era’s chief confectioner.

But the pageantry and sugar high aren’t enough for me. I came here to fight. Candy merely strengthens my resolve.

A Civil War reenactment seems pretty exciting – with all that saving or destroying the Union and all – so I thought I might like to take part in one. You know, get away from my usual desk jockey job, head for the mountains, put on a uniform, fire off some volleys, maybe get killed – and return safely to work on Monday. All that, plus the opportunity to better understand the war’s significance and gain a new respect for those who work hard to preserve it.

West Virginia was forged out of that war, and the early battles that took place here shaped the outcome of our entire nation. For once, I want to be right out there on the battle lines.

But where does a guy like me even get started? Where can you get a Union or Confederate uniform for the weekend? Should you hook up with a particular regiment beforehand, or should you just head out to battle and improvise?

## Choose Your Battles Carefully

**I** start by picking my battle. The Battle of Laurel Hill took place July 7-11, 1861, in the Tygart Valley of present-day West Virginia near the town of Belington. The battle is celebrated annually with a vivid reenactment, which I desperately hope won’t be so vivid as to include real bullets.

As I’m sure real Civil War soldiers did, I hopped right onto the Internet to find out more. There at [www.battleoflaurelhill.org](http://www.battleoflaurelhill.org) I learn that not only would I possibly get to wage war, but I also might be able to experience a “lads and lassies pageant,” Civil War-style 5K run, vintage car show, silent auction, a cotillion ball and scads of flying candy.

I also wander down to the library and check out a book, “Rebels at the Gate” by W. Hunter Lesser, an archaeologist and historical interpreter who lives in nearby Elkins. His book tells about the often-overlooked early battles of the Civil War, the first campaign that allowed West Virginia’s formation and shaped the rest of the war to come. I read through 86 pages, which gets me through the Battle of Laurel Hill, but then get impatient and decide just to call him up so he can tell me the rest.

“These battles are small, but politically they’re really important,” Lesser says. Then he patiently explains what happened a century ago.

As war brewed that spring in 1861, both armies set their eyes on western Virginia. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, which ran right through the state, was a vital supply line. Union troops were under the command of George McClellan, a public relations genius who ordered the construction of telegraph wires as a way to trumpet victories. The Confederates were under Robert Garnett, Robert E. Lee’s right hand man.

One of the places they wound up clashing was at Laurel Hill, a broad valley near the town of Belington. That June, McClellan aimed 5,000 soldiers at Laurel Hill and federal troops kept Garnett busy there with skirmish after skirmish.

Garnett finally slipped out of Laurel Hill at midnight on July 11, slogging through the mud and chucking supplies along the way – the sort of thing that happens nowadays at a really bad staff meeting. Before it was over, though, he was shot dead along the Cheat River,

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**“You want to try it?” he says with a hint of surprise.  
“I’ll bring my uniform. I’ll even bring you some guns.”  
I thank him and prepare to die.**





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a fate that most mid-level managers like me manage to avoid, although sometimes just barely.

My pal the author, saving me another 250 pages of reading, goes on to tell me why it was all so important.

"The first campaign of the war has often been overlooked," Lesser says. "But this was really a proving ground for early leaders of the war. There are soon-to-be famous people who got their start here in the mountains of western Virginia. These battles established a federal presence, which allowed the creation of West Virginia."

Then he makes a pitch for people like me who might want to visit the battlefield to get a taste of it in person: "It all started here at Laurel Hill and Rich Mountain. You can only go to battlefields like Gettysburg and Antietam so many times."

I'm sold, but I still don't know the first thing about how to participate.

## The High Cost of War

**I** go back to that excellent Civil War resource, the Internet, to check out the West Virginia Reenactors Association at [www.wvra.org](http://www.wvra.org). These guys suggest that a beginner like me shouldn't unload his savings account into Civil War gear. A uniform might cost about \$200, a tent \$175, and Lord knows how much a cannon might go for. Instead, they say, beginners should borrow a small amount of gear from an existing unit before whipping out the credit cards.

So I place another call, this one to Larry Corley, a former coal miner who helped establish the Battle of Laurel Hill reenactments in 1996. These days he runs a farm around Belington. For years, he admired the beautiful valley and tried to start the reenactment as a way to demonstrate the area's importance in history.

"That's what I wanted to do, was to recognize this location and preserve it," Corley said. "I still think it should be taken care of. It hasn't really changed hardly at all."

That's all fine, but pretty soon I interrupt to explain my interest in putting on a uniform and making a gun go bang.

Corley, who had served in the army as a younger man, appreciates my sensibilities. "You want to try it?" he says with a hint of surprise. "I'll bring my uniform. I'll even bring you some guns."

I thank him and prepare to die.

## Fightin' – A Family Affair?

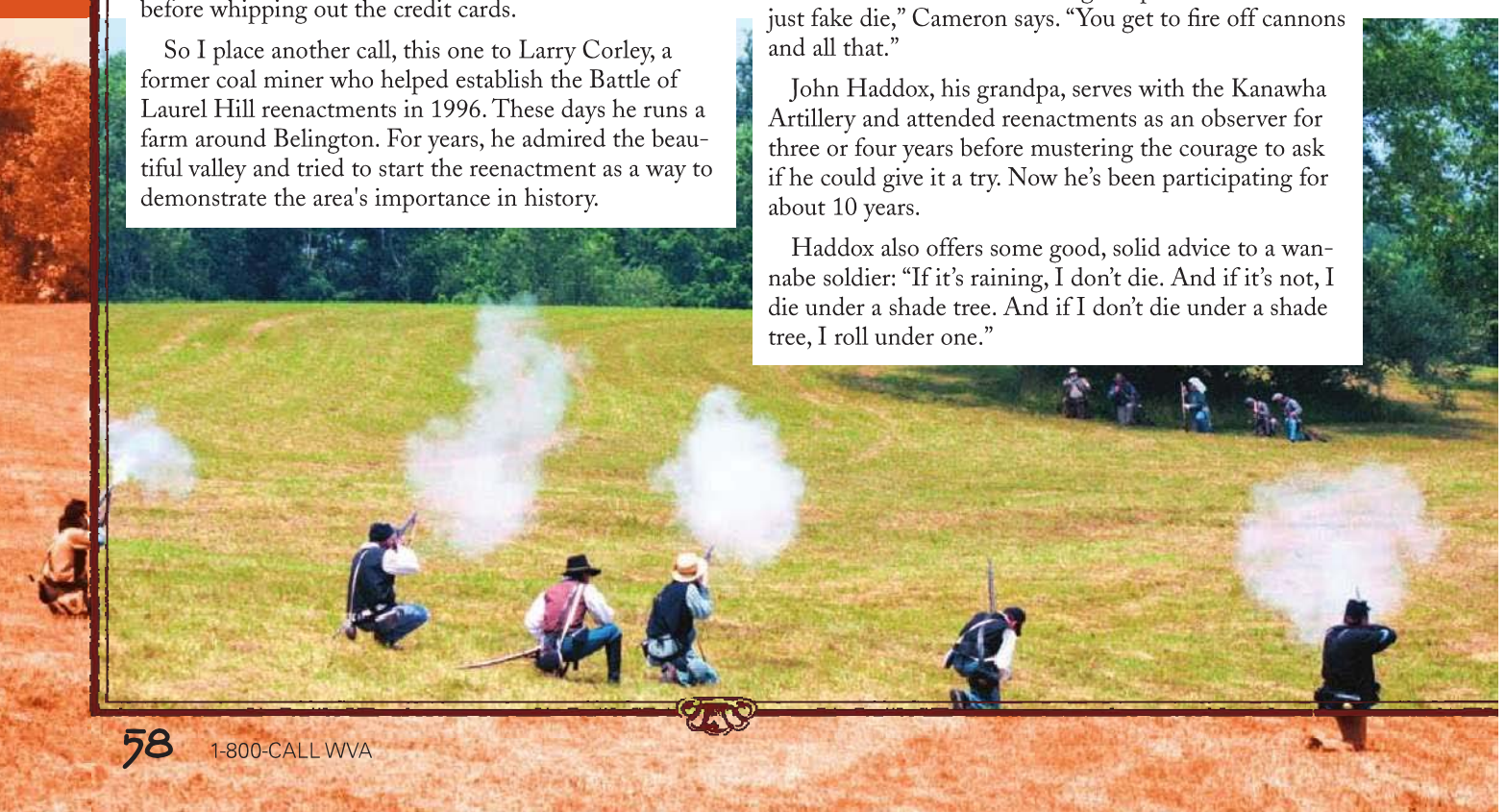
**F**or such an event, I naturally bring my family – two little girls, the wife and her parents, Linda and Steve. Steve is a Civil War buff who actually got his history degree from, no kidding, Gettysburg College. As our base of operations, we rough it at the Days Inn in Elkins and take our war-time meals at Bob Evans and Applebee's.

Before the battle, Steve and I go on a little reconnaissance mission, where I seek out the biggest, meanest soldier I can find. That guy turns out to be an 8-year-old kid named Cameron who, donned in a Confederate uniform, chews on a fruit rollup as he imparts his wisdom.

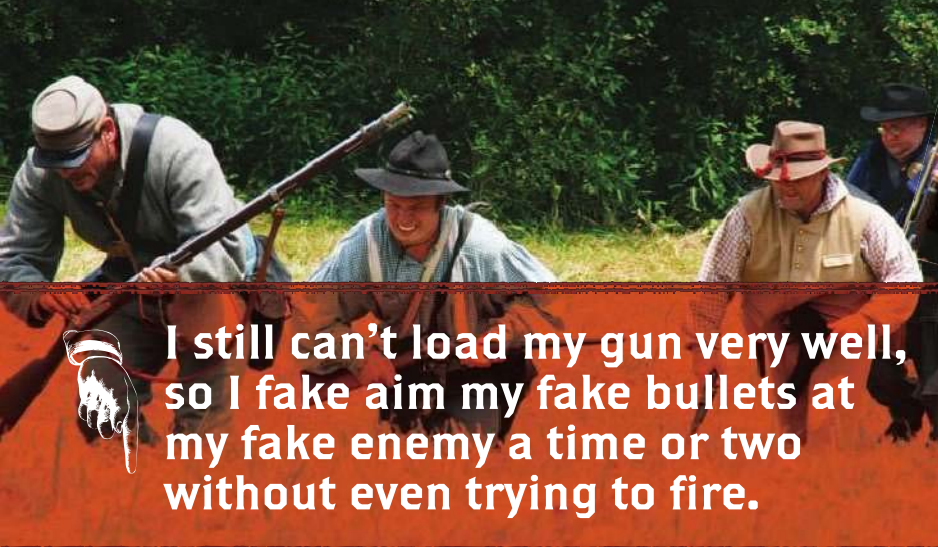
Cameron, who lives in St. Marys, started attending Civil War battlefields with his grandpa. "I died once – just fake die," Cameron says. "You get to fire off cannons and all that."

John Haddox, his grandpa, serves with the Kanawha Artillery and attended reenactments as an observer for three or four years before mustering the courage to ask if he could give it a try. Now he's been participating for about 10 years.

Haddox also offers some good, solid advice to a wannabe soldier: "If it's raining, I don't die. And if it's not, I die under a shade tree. And if I don't die under a shade tree, I roll under one."







**I still can't load my gun very well, so I fake aim my fake bullets at my fake enemy a time or two without even trying to fire.**



I make a special note of that because it's just about time for the shooting to begin.

From my new buddy Larry Corley I obtain what passes for a Confederate uniform – long-sleeve cotton shirt, blue pants, black boots that flopped on my feet, a gun belt, some gunpowder, a pistol and a rifle. I tell you, that man is a regular Wal-Mart of Civil War equipment.

Larry also explains how to use my weapons. Trouble is, I don't understand a word he says. I have a sinking feeling I might not survive this fake battle.

Just the same, I go out behind an RV at the camp site to change. My borrowed boots, about four sizes too big, flop like duck's feet. The rest of my uniform bakes me as the sun beats down. Sinking feeling and all, I catch a ride to the battle on the back of a pickup truck, just like in the olden days. Charge!

Up on the mountaintop, my 8-year-old buddy Cameron immediately catches a whiff of my inexperience and finds somebody to actually teach me to shoot my gun. I try to get out of it by pleading that I want to be a pacifist anyway, which given my current location is sort of like being a vegetarian at an all-you-can-eat steak buffet.

Nevertheless, I get a quick lesson. The gunpowder comes in a paper packet, so you have to bite off the end of the paper and dump it down into the barrel of your rifle. Then, with your nervous, trembly fingers, you have to put a cap on the gun for the hammer to hit. After that, you pull the trigger.

Pow!

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## **A State Born Out of the Civil War**

In a strange way, West Virginia owes a debt of gratitude to the Civil War. The Mountain State, along with Nevada, is one of only two states formed during the war, and West Virginia is the only one to form by seceding from a Confederate state.

Even before the Civil War, there was already lots of conflict between eastern and western Virginia. Western Virginians, where the population was largely rural and working class, believed the eastern part of the state had an unfair representation advantage in state government.

The crack broke wide open on April 17, 1861, when a convention of Virginians voted to submit a secession bill to the people. Led by John S. Carlile, a lawyer from Clarksburg, a group of western Virginians walked out of the Secession Convention, vowing to form a state government loyal to the Union.

All parties got together for a series of their own conventions in Wheeling. They first formed the Restored, or Reorganized, Government of Virginia, and on Oct. 24, 1861, residents of 39 counties in western Virginia approved the formation of a new state.

From there, the issue went to Congress, where it turned a little complicated. The Constitution says a new state must gain approval from the original state. Well, Virginia wasn't really in a giving mood.

Here's where a little Constitutional rationalization comes into play: Because the Restored, or Reorganized, Government of Virginia was considered the legal government of Virginia, it granted permission to itself to form the state of West Virginia.

On June 20, 1863, the State of West Virginia was officially created.★





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I actually make the gun go off. The big bang is followed by the sweet, sickening smell of hellfire. I can fake kill enemy soldiers after all!

Except once I get my job description, it doesn't look like I'll get the opportunity to shoot much at all. Instead, I have to snatch a round of ammunition out of a powder box, stick it in a satchel and advance it to a firing thingy that I believe is a mortar where some other guys load it and make the loud noise. But I know it is an important job because Cameron, age 8, has the same duty.

I accept my work with gusto. As cannon fire echoes over the valley, I engage in a bit of trash talk. "Eat it, Yanks!"

And then – a promotion! As smoke billows, cannons boom and chaos spreads, someone shouts at me to gather up my weapon and reinforce some of my fellow soldiers. I run across the hillside, duck boots flopping, and fall in line with my unit. I still can't load my gun very well, so I fake aim my fake bullets at my fake enemy a time or two without even trying to fire. Then I take a little more time and start making real "pops" again.

The battle is quite the adrenaline rush, and my success at making the rifle fire pleases me most. Before long, though, many of my fellow soldiers

lay dead. After a while I decide it's unrealistic for a newcomer like me to be one of the few still standing. I fire one more round and yell "Yankees are stinkers!" Then I wait for the very next "bang" to fire from Union territory and take an invisible, painless round in the chest, flopping to the ground like a fish. I fall on top of my canteen, which is quite uncomfortable, so I add a dramatic bit of convulsing until I'm free of it. And with that, I died.

When the smoke clears, I get up – the best aspect of fake-dying – and brush myself off. I watch as the Confederacy surrenders to the Union and then mill about, accepting hearty congratulations about my brave performance and halfway expecting even more candy to be thrown. My father-in-law, who had been videotaping my exploits, exhorts me especially well. I grin from ear-to-ear and recount, not for the last time, just how heroic I had been.

I never would've guessed that dying would be the time of my life.

#### IF YOU GO:

**The Battle of Laurel Hill, 304-823-1611,**  
[www.battleoflaurelhill.org](http://www.battleoflaurelhill.org)

**"Rebels at the Gate,"**  
[www.wvcivilwar.com/rebelgate.html](http://www.wvcivilwar.com/rebelgate.html) or  
[www.wvbookco.com](http://www.wvbookco.com)

**West Virginia Reenactors Association,**  
[www.wvra.org](http://www.wvra.org)



# 150th Anniversary of John Brown's Raid

In 2009, history buffs will celebrate the 150th anniversary of John Brown's Raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry. Brown, an abolitionist from Kansas, lead an uprising on Oct. 16, 1859, in an attempt to steal weapons from the old federal armory so they could be used in the fight to end slavery.

U.S. soldiers led by none other than Robert E. Lee, who had been on leave nearby, stormed the fire house next to the armory, where Brown's men had taken refuge. Brown was captured, tried for murder, treason and conspiracy, and hanged – but his exploits lit a spark that led to the Civil War.

To commemorate this historic event, the John Brown Sesquicentennial Quad-State Committee (representing West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland) is planning a variety of events surrounding the anniversary. To learn more, visit [www.johnbrownraid.org](http://www.johnbrownraid.org) or call the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park at 304-535-6029.

Highlights starting in the spring and peaking on the Oct. 16, 2009, anniversary include:

- ☛ **"In the Footsteps of John Brown"** – a two-hour, two-mile walking tour in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.
- ☛ **"John Brown's Body"** – an adaptation of the epic poem by Stephen Vincent Benet, sponsored by the Harpers Ferry Town Foundation.
- ☛ **"The Secret Six"** – a temporary art exhibit at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park shedding light on the men behind John Brown's Raid.
- ☛ **"John Brown Remembered"** – a three-day academic symposium at the national park.
- ☛ **"Sword of the Spirit"** – a play at the Old Opera House in Charles Town, dramatically depicting John Brown's final days of life.
- ☛ An anniversary procession following the abolitionists' six-mile march from Kennedy Farm in Washington County, Md., to Harpers Ferry.

## Roundup of Civil War SITES



For a war that started nearly 150 years ago, the Civil War still offers a lot of educational and entertainment opportunities in West Virginia. Here are just a few of the highlights:

For a crash course in how the Civil War began, no visit would be complete without stopping by **Harpers Ferry National Historical Park**. (Read about ol' John Brown above to see why.) The national park has managed to keep the armory's engine house, Brown's headquarters during the fight, exactly as it appeared then. For more, go to [www.nps.gov/hafe](http://www.nps.gov/hafe)

**Carnifex Ferry Battlefield State Park**, nestled on the rim of the Gauley River Canyon near Summersville, is the site of a battle that represented the failure of a Confederate drive to regain control of the Kanawha Valley. As a result, the movement for West Virginia statehood proceeded without serious threat from the Confederates. Check out [www.carnifexferrybattlefieldstatepark.com](http://www.carnifexferrybattlefieldstatepark.com)

**Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park**, located in the Greenbrier River Valley north of Lewisburg, is the site of West Virginia's last significant

Civil War battle. The location also offers a stunning view of West Virginia's grand mountains. See more at [www.droopmountainbattlefield.com](http://www.droopmountainbattlefield.com)

West Virginia boasts more than 20 Civil War sites on the National Register of Historic Places and 18 Civil War Discovery Trail stops, all of which are detailed at [www.civilwardiscoverytrail.org](http://www.civilwardiscoverytrail.org)

**The West Virginia Reenactors Association** participates in many events each year, all of which are listed at [www.wvra.org/events.htm](http://www.wvra.org/events.htm). Highlights include the Trans-Allegheny Soldiers Aid Society Gala Ball, the

Battle of Philippi, the Battle of Laurel Hill and the Battle of Droop Mountain. Members of the club also travel to Gettysburg, Pa., each year for the watershed battle there.

Finally, representation of West Virginia's unique role in American history is located right at the **State Capitol Complex** in Charleston, where a sculpture of Abraham Lincoln deciding whether to grant West Virginia's statehood is located just a stone's throw from a statue of Stonewall Jackson, the famed Confederate general.

For more information about these and other Civil War sites and events throughout West Virginia, visit [www.wvtraditions.com](http://www.wvtraditions.com).