

Handout: Children's Voices from the Civil War

"The church yard was strewn with arms and legs that had been amputated and thrown out the windows, and all around were wounded men for whom no place had yet been found." Charles McCurdy, age 10.

"I have seen little of the light heartedness and exuberant joy that people talk about as the natural heritage of youth. It is a hard school to be bred up in and I often wonder if I will ever have my share of fun and happiness." Emma Le Conte, age 17.

"It wasn't nothing to find a dead man in the woods." James Goings, formerly enslaved, age 6
Cornelia Peake McDonald remembered her three-year-old daughter clinging to her doll, Fanny, and crying that "the Yankees are coming to our house and they will capture me and Fanny." A Southern girl.

"My daddy go away to the war bout this time, and my mammy and me stay in our cabin alone. She cry and wonder where he be, if he is well or he be killed, and one day we hear he is dead. My mammy, too, pass in a short time." Amie Lumpkin, former slave, South Carolina.

"I went to the armory of the Hiberian Guards. They seemed to like me, and I liked them. So together with Jim Butler and Jim O'Reilly, I enlisted with them. My name was first on the company's roll to enlist. I didn't tell them that I was only fifteen. So I became a soldier."
Thomas Galway, Ohio (Union Army).

"We are starving. As soon as enough of us get together we are going to take the bakeries and each of us will take a loaf of bread. This is little enough for the government to give us after it has taken all our men." A young Southern girl, Richmond, Virginia.

"The house was full of the wounded. They had taken our sitting room as an operating room, and our piano served as an amputating table....The surgeons brought my mother a bottle of whiskey and told her that she must take some and so must we all. We did...Upstairs they were bringing in the wounded, and we could hear their screams of pain."

Sue Chancellor, a southern girl whose house provided the name for the battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia. Early the next morning, the sixteen women and children who were hiding in the basement during the battle were brought upstairs. Sue saw the chairs riddled with bullets, the piles of amputated arms and legs, and the rows of dead bodies covered with canvas. The house suddenly caught fire—probably from a shell burst—and the terrified women and children stumbled out of the building as the pillars collapsed. Her home was completely engulfed in flames, and Sue, her mother, and her five young sisters became homeless refugees.

"I passed...the corpse of a beautiful boy in gray who lay with his blond curls scattered about his face and his hand folded peacefully across his breast. He was clad in a bright and neat uniform, well garnished with gold, which seemed to tell the story of a loving mother and sisters who had sent their household pet to the field of war. His neat little hat lying beside him bore the number of a Georgia regiment...He was about my age...At the sight of the poor boy's corpse, I burst into a

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regular boo-hoo and started on.” John A Cockerill, sixteen years old Regimental musician, Union Army.

“Day after day and night after night did we tramp along the rough and dusty roads, ‘neath the most broiling sun with which the month of August ever afflicted a soldier;’ thro’ rivers and their rocky valleys, over mountains...scarcely stopping to gather the green corn from the fields to serve as rations...During these marches the men are sometimes unrecognizable on account of the thick coverings of dust which settle upon the hair, eye-brows and beard, filling likewise the mouth, nose, eyes, and ears.” John Dehaney, sixteen years old.

“I wanted to fight the Rebs. But I was very small and they would not give me a musket. The next day I went back and the man behind the desk said I looked as if I could hold a drum and if I wanted I could join that way. I did, but I was not happy to change a musket for a stick.” Union drummer boy, twelve years old.

Fifteen-year-old Tillie Pierce lived in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and was caught up in the three-day battle that raged around the town and nearby farms. Her parents sent her to a farm three miles south of town, thinking Tillie would be safer there. On the way, Tillie and her companions passed soldiers preparing for battle and came under artillery fire.

“Suddenly we behold an explosion; it is that of a caisson [a carriage carrying ammunition]. We see a man thrown high in the air and come down in a wheat field close by. He is picked up and carried into the house. As they pass by I see his eyes are blown out and his whole person seems to be one black mass...

“Now the wounded began to come in greater numbers. Some limping, some with their heads and arms in bandages, some crawling, others carried on stretchers or brought in ambulances...it was a truly pitiable gathering. Before night the bard was filled with the shattered and dying heroes of this day’s struggles....”

Tillie takes bread and water to the wounded solders. After the last day of battle, Tillie walks back to town to rejoin her family. She described what she saw.

“Horses, swollen to almost twice their natural size, lay in all directions....Fences had disappeared, some buildings were gone, others ruined. The whole landscape had been changed, and I felt as though we were in a strange and blighted land....We reached our homes. Everything seemed to be in confusion, and my home did not look exactly as it did when I left... At first glance even my mother did not recognize me, so dilapidated was my general appearance. The only clothes I had along had by this time become covered with mud...As soon as I spoke my mother ran to me, and clasping me in her arms, said: ‘Why my dear child, is that you? How glad I am to have you home again without any harm having befallen you!’”

For months afterward, Tillie and her family nursed soldiers in their home and in field hospitals that sprang up around the town.

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Resources

Please note that the quotes used to create this handout were compiled from the following sources:

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