The Daily Item

So many stories, voices – Artist preserves the Civil War for posterity

By Robin Connolly, The Daily Item, January 21, 2004

Jeff Fioravanti never forgot the soldier he never met.

"He was a Union soldier," the artist and historian humanist says of one of the 600,000 voices silenced by the United States most uncivil war.

"As his comrades tried to pull him bloodied from the field," the 70's Saugus High School Hall of Fame member says (taught early to look beyond the factual to the faces of history) "his last dying wish was a simple one, to get home to swing the scythe once more."

It's a swing that never came with the death of the young volunteer defender of the North, and according to this preservationist, it's a story (many stories actually) that remains today, for those who choose to see, the heroes that walked this way. Some from Lynn, Massachusetts, and some who walked on what were once their training grounds long since paved over by Route 1 near Spinelli's function hall. Others came home to Pine Grove Cemetery bearing still, their medals of honor.

It's that honor, that grit; this artist/admirer of the common soldier says that needs to be remembered. It is at the National Museum of Civil War Medicine, in Frederick, Maryland, where with the help of the Lynn artist and his creations (pastel paintings, Giclee prints and note cards) raised $4,660 during a recent fundraiser, to help keep that memory alive.

"There are so many stories, so many voices," the 1976 Saugus High graduate and member of its hockey team says, "You hear them. You see them, in the places they fought and fell."

He see them in non-traditional historical or Civil War paintings, "the kind you'd hang in your living room," of battlefields unscathed, blood yet spent in places like the Henry House on Henry Hill at Manassas, or First Bull Run, in Manassas, Virginia.

The painting is, for the viewer, serenity stilled, with the pristine white manor lording over the dark/light greens of the fertile fields, and the knowledge, sudden and startling rushes upon you to know that Mrs. Henry, 80, lies dead in her bed on the second floor from a bullet or shell strayed from battle.

It's this civil battle, 1861-65 that saw many losses and shockingly more deaths from disease than battle. "People don't realize that," the Salem State Business grad who later turned to a talent for painting says. "More soldiers died during the Civil War from disease, most from diarrhea, than from actual combat."

"I think the first time the imagery, passion, hope and loss of the Civil War," the son of Anne and Richard Fioravanti mentions, "was when I was a child and my mother bought a set of American Heritage picture encyclopedias you used to get once a week from A&P or Stop&Shop." They had pictures, the evolving artist says, that led him years later, to "one at Appomattox called "Furling the Flag" by Brooke." That's when I became attached to the faces, their emotions, the hands-on-head resignation, loyalty, and exhaustion, all there. You could see it."

They are faces, truths, he says, that gave him insight like one gained in learning his since deceased uncle lost his arm.

"I've done a lot of seascapes" the Gloucester connected youth says, "and I learned about the people, the fisherman, like my uncle, whose arm was torn from the shoulder by a boat winch. That's history. Everyday history. That's truth."

It's a truth he says, that needs expression, needs and demands preservation.

"It's so important that we remember," the North Shore Civil War Roundtable, a Civil War historian's haven at the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Building on Andrew Street, member insists.

They are memories the father of nine-year-old Nicole says of those who fought a civil war, or suffered the maladies of a medical/hygiene society not yet enlightened and died, for cause and country, without the chance "swing the scythe once more."

"Did you know there's a Confederate soldier buried in St. Joseph's Cemetery?" the in-the-know historian asks those unaware, even, further, that Union graves are rounded, while Confederate are built to a point. The reason, he explains, is so no enemy soldier could ever "sit on the grave of a Confederate."

They are all American graves, he quickly points out, the dead of a land that learned its losses after the battle quieted.

They are the sacrifices of storekeepers, farmers, civilian volunteers who came to the forefront in the most trying of times unaware of the danger they faced or the statistical surety, by modern standards, of medical practices that would kill them long before any fighting. "You'd be amazed at what some of them went through," this keeper of their painted tales says.

They went he, he says, through the horror of war uncivil, a medical mishap of unhygienic harboring of filth and disease, and a grandiose higher-up plan of attack that, upon review, was inappropriate or misguided. "They went through a lot," this civil preserver, determined to tell their legacy says, "and they're all right here."

They're here, Jeff says, in the plush green grass tracked by cannon wheels, bowed to the enormous weight and bending, pointing, to a tree-line hiding enemies, Americans about to die.

They're in Gettysburg, in Manassas, in Richmond, Shiloh and at Appomattox, with Grant, mud-spattered and Lee, spit-shined and honorable in Confederate surrender.

They're the faces in the background, soldiers of grime-gained glory, blood coursed and crusted on tattered uniforms and in the knowledge they did the common folk courageous.

They have spoken to one who will not forget. Jeff Fioravanti remembers. He puts (them), their spirit, their soul, inside the very history they created, with the paintings he creates, most civil, of fields yet untouched, in barns still standing, witness to the valor of young men, with a desire to live if only to once again, "swing the scythe once more."

Jeff Fioravanti can be reached at http://www.fioravanti-fineart.com