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ECHOES FROM THE PAST: AN INTERVIEW WITH PHOTOGRAPHER A. J. MEEK

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Civil War Book Review (cwbr): What first drew you to these sites?

A. J. Meek (ajm): When David Madden, founding director of the Civil War Center, invited me to serve on the board, I thought I should learn something about the Civil War. My expertise was in photography and especially nineteenth-century photographers and their techniques. When I visited the battlefields, and began to feel the impact of these sacred places, I was hooked.

cwbr: What drove you to continue this project in spite of delays?

ajm: Early results are often disappointing. An experienced researcher, writer, or artist is aware of this and expects frustrations. A valuable lesson may be gleaned from the stonecutters who built the great cathedrals. The stone is not "cut" from one mighty blow but instead, from slow, repeated strikes. I am grateful to historian William J. Cooper Jr. and novelist David Madden for their encouragement throughout this project.

cwbr: You describe the battlefields as alternately emanating "ghostly energy," tragedy, and a "healing" essence. How did you capture these feelings?

ajm: Musicians know how to play with more feeling when asked. As a photographer, I am sensitive to the energy and echoes from the past in the places I photograph, but I can't explain how I manage to capture them on film. But I do recognize when it happens. For example, the ghostly light in the photograph of the Hornet's Nest and Sunken Road at Shiloh has an ethereal quality that hovers over the dark battlefield. In contrast, the photographs of the Sunrise over the Valley of Death, Gettysburg, and Sunlight, Sky, and Trees near the Bloody...
Pond, Shiloh, have a healing presence for me. The overall sepia treatment of the photographs in this book also helps to wrap the viewer in the haunting memory of history.

 cwbr: What is the landscape of war telling us, and why should we listen?

 ajm: I was surprised to see that many of the park visitors are veterans. Now there is peace and contemplation where once there was death and destruction. Standing there on the battlefields I became aware of the terrible price of freedom.

 cwbr: How can your photographs aid battlefield preservation efforts?

 ajm: Western photographer William Henry Jackson was the first to photograph Yellowstone. It was partly because of these photographs that the National Park Service was born. Clarence John Laughlin through his photographs and book, Ghosts Along the Mississippi, was instrumental in bringing awareness that led to restoring the antebellum homes along the river in Louisiana. These are powerful documents that preserve a moment in time that may change and influence for or against a cause. And what better cause than to honor all Americans who gave "the full measure of devotion" to their principles and their country?

 A. J. Meek is a professor of art at Louisiana State University. His photographs have been exhibited around the country. In collaboration with renowned Civil War historian Herman Hattaway, Meek recently published Gettysburg to Vicksburg: The Five Original Civil War Battlefield Parks (University of Missouri Press, 2001, ISBN 0826213219, $29.95 hardcover).