

Rediscovering Civil War Classics: Remembering The Sultana

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Feature Essay

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS

Remembering the Sultana

Summer 2001

Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Remembering the Sultana.*

Last spring, at the Mt. Olive Cemetery in my hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee, I attended the 13th annual reunion of the Association of *Sultana* Descendants and Friends [www.sultana.org]. Those assembled there will forever remember what most Americans a few days after the end of the Civil War forgot as quickly as they could: the sinking of the *Sultana*.

Vexing the Father of Waters for only a few hours, the *Sultana* exploded and almost 1,600 Union soldiers, homeward bound from Confederate prisons, perished. Converging lines of force in battles, hospitals, prisons brought them to that boat, that haven, with its defective boiler, its greedy officials, on the night of April 27, 1865, 18 days after the Confederates lost the war, 13 days after the Union lost its president. Did the drowning victims see their whole lives, or just the prison ordeals, flash before their eyes? And did the survivors then drown all the rest of their lives in the memory?

Prisoners of war on both sides fought some of the most courageous battles for survival. After having survived prison, most of the men on the *Sultana* perished, but over 500 others, in poor health or wounded already, injured in the explosion, battled the dark waters of the Mississippi above Memphis and survived to tell the tale. Few people listened and remembered. Growing up in the partly unionist East Tennessee mountains, I heard many Civil War stories but never that one, not until 1979, when I began research for my novel *Sharpshooter*, and the *Sultana* has haunted me ever since. A chapter in the novel deals with the *Sultana* sinking, and I may some day write a separate novel about it, but I have struggled in vain for over 20 years to comprehend this brief event, emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually, at a depth commensurate with its importance.

Out of a compulsion to remind his countrymen and to fix the disaster in their collective consciousness, one survivor, Private Chester D. Berry, set about compiling facts, records, and personal testimonies. He published his work in 1892 under the title *Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of Survivors* (Darius D. Thorp, Printer). Like the Ancient Mariner, he wanted others to hear what he heard for the rest of his life: the screams of one victim whom he watched step off toward safety from the Sultana's burning, steeply slanting hurricane deck to the burning wheelhouse just as the wheelhouse broke up and mashed him, as in an iron vice, against the deck, where he flailed about and burned alive.

When you consider the current attention being paid to the loss of a few men in the *Hunley* submarine, lately brought up out of the mud of Charleston Bay and into the consciousness of Americans, it is all the more astonishing that the greatest maritime disaster in the history of the United States has failed, despite Berry's work and the publication of three other books in recent years, to seize the imagination of American readers. Not even the fact that the explosion on the grossly overloaded steam wheeler is yet another American scandal involving greed and irresponsibility, the conniving of civilians with military personnel, appeals to the public's insatiable hunger for such sordid conspiracies.

Ironically, Andersonville prison, in novels, plays, movies, and nonfiction works, including eyewitness diaries, has always commanded and held the public's interest. And yet not even irony serves to hold us still long enough to grasp the impact of the *Sultana* catastrophe. The irony is this: many *Sultana* passengers were Union soldiers who survived Andersonville only to endure yet another descent into hell that spring night, as Lincoln's funeral train crossed the blood weary land and defeated Confederates straggled home. Some die of irony.

What will it take to make this event a symbolic expression, embodying every adjective for sad loss, of the Civil War? A novel more powerful than *Andersonville*, a movie more appealing than *Titanic* (whose losses are fewer than the *Sultana's*). Missing so far is a conceptual imagination that places the *Sultana* disaster in a tragic light. Meanwhile, the darkness of that night still hangs, almost 150 years deepening, over the smoke, the screams and the prayers of the victims and the compassionate cries of the rescuers, some of them defeated Confederate soldiers. Only the light of an extraordinary imagination can raise this unique and meaningful event from the bottom of the Father of Waters. Let us have faith. Faith that a publisher will reprint it. Faith that readers will, in empathy and sorrow, feel the sting of irony and the need, the actual desire, to imagine that

night in all its strangling humanity, to retrieve and remember.

Berry's own words, the trial record concerning the officers charged with criminal negligence, and the great confluence of testimonials, long and short, arouse the reader's emotions. But, like Americans in 1865, both the survivors and the readers of Berry's book suffer a failure of imagination and of intellect when trying to deal with this immediately postwar horror. But it is a challenge deserving our effort. To turn to the other *Sultana* books, by James W. Elliott, Jerry O. Potter, and Gene Salecker, before reading Chester Berry's finger-singeing, heart-stirring assemblage of voices is very much second best. My hope is that a publisher will gladly pay the \$400 (oh, hell, I'll pay) for one of the surviving copies of Berry's book and reprint it, so that Americans may begin to respond emotionally to the horrific sights, the screams, the smell of burning wood and flesh, the taste of the Mississippi, and the touch of the flailing arms of the perishing soldiers, and the civilian men, women, and children. Readers may strive to imagine the vast, complicated canvas of folly and agony, and then perhaps to ponder the web of implications, absorb into their consciousness the testimony of the survivors, the last three of whom held their final reunion near Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1919.

Founding director of the United States Civil War Center, David Madden has published 10 novels, including Cassandra Singing (reissued 1999), and over 30 works of nonfiction, including Classics of Civil War Fiction (reissued 2001), with Peggy Bach. Some of the meditations in this column originally appeared in his 1996 review in BookPage of Gene Salecker's Disaster on the Mississippi.