

The Woman in Battle: The Civil War Narrative of Loreta Velazquez, Cuban Woman & Confederate Soldier

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Review

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Daring disguise

Loreta Janet Velasquez's service to the slave states

While it has been claimed that approximately 400 women fought in the Civil War disguised as men, very few have written their memoirs, and Loreta Velazquez's autobiography is the only one by a Confederate. While most of its details lack corroborating documentation, and, indeed, the adventures of Loreta are probably mostly fiction, this is a typical Civil War narrative in the sense that it does provide a glimpse of military life seen through the eyes of a participant and a female observer. Even if the authenticity of the author's experience is questionable, the detailed descriptions of everyday life are as valuable to a historian as a novel written during that same period.

The *Woman in Battle* purporting to be the memoirs of a woman who fought in the Confederate Army, disguised as Lt. Harry Buford, was first published in 1876. Se±ora Velazquez described herself as the daughter of a Spanish colonial governor who had once owned property in Texas, which he lost after the U.S. war with Mexico. Her first marriage, to a U.S. Army officer, if we are to believe her own chronology, took place only a few months short of her 14th birthday! For the first few years of her marriage, during which time her husband participated in various military expeditions, she bore three children. We do not even learn their names, as they all died of fever by the time the War Between the States broke out, leaving their mother an unencumbered 18-year-old ready to pursue her dream of a military career.

Velazquez begs her husband to take her with him when he goes away to war. He attempts to discourage her, going so far as to take her, in male disguise,

into saloons and gambling dens hoping she will be repulsed by guy behavior when no women are present. While Velazquez claims to be revolted by the conduct and language of common men, this in no way changes her mind. Instead, she observes male body language in order to mimic it better.

As soon as the husband is out of sight, Velazquez proceeds with her plan: she has a uniform made for herself, complete with a complicated contraption of wire mesh and padding to flatten her breasts and hide her female curves, a kind of anti-corset every bit as constricting as the corset and wire hoops she was accustomed to wear as a woman. A false mustache tops off her costume, and she marches into Arkansas where she introduces herself as Lieutenant Harry Buford and recruits a company of men, even managing to romance one of their unsuspecting sisters. Lt. Buford leads her battalion to the Confederate camp at Pensacola, where she presents them to her husband as a trophy, and forces him to admit she made the right decision. The husband's untimely, but convenient death in a training accident leaves Velazquez free to continue her masquerade unimpeded, and to begin romancing Lieutenant Thomas C. De Caulp, who would eventually become her second husband.

She is arrested for impersonating an officer several times when her disguise fails, but always manages to find a way to resume her masquerade. With typical Victorian squeamishness, Velazquez neglects to describe how she dealt with concealing the most uncomfortable biological aspect of her gender. This is left entirely to the imagination of the reader.

The adventures of Lt. Harry Buford continue on in this manner. Velazquez claims that her inspirational role model was Joan of Arc, (who at that time was still a secular heroine, not being admitted to the Catholic canon of saints until the early 20th Century), but from her further adventures it becomes quite clear that her primary loyalty is to Loreta Velazquez, adventuress, and not to any national cause or political ideal. Her escapades as a spy and a double agent, in both male and female costume, seem to be performed for the sake of adventure and fun.

Velazquez especially prides herself on her ability to convince other women with her male disguise. She boasts about her reputation as a ladies' man and gloats about her romantic deceptions without a thought about the disappointment and the broken hearts of her deceived conquests. This is a character element not found in the other narratives of Civil War era women who disguised themselves as men. It reveals Velazquez as selfish and not caring about the emotions of

other women which she stirred up and then cruelly dashed. Velazquez reveals no homosexual tendencies in these seductions; she sees these false romances only as a means of furthering her disguise.

Velazquez's Hispanic heritage is tangential to her story of fighting for the Confederacy. By the time she returns to Cuba, long after the war is over, she has become so thoroughly Americanized that she barely remembers how to speak Spanish.

The Woman in Battle provides a good counterpart to Nurse and Spy, the memoir of Sarah Emma Edmonds, a Canadian woman who fought in the 2nd Michigan Regiment of the Union Army disguised as Franklin Thompson. Like Velazquez, Edmonds also donned a variety of disguises for the cause and her memoir, despite its sometimes pietistic content, is full of entertaining tall tales.

L. M. Berkowitz has spent many years scouring historical societies and university archives for primary documents relating to the Jewish-American experience in the mid 19th Century. The virtual archives can be found at <http://www.jewish-history.com>. Jewish-American History on the Web has received awards for excellence as an online resource from Microsoft, the History Channel, Yahoo!, Britannica.com, PBS, Librarian's Internet Index, The Jewish Week, the Jewish Press, Civil War Interactive, North and South Magazine, and many other online reference sites. Her published articles have appeared in The Jewish Press, The Jewish Observer, and in the Artsroll anthology Torah Lives. She has also written political commentary for the e-zine ToogoodReports.com.