

Last of the Blue and Gray: Old Men, Stolen Glory, and the Mystery That Outlived the Civil War

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Review

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Serrano, Richard A. *Last of the Blue and Gray: Old Men, Stolen Glory, and the Mystery that Outlived the Civil War.* Smithsonian Books, \$27.95 ISBN 9781588343956

A Civil War Mystery Almost 100 Years in the Making

Richard Serrano, newspaper columnist and author of several titles, has created an engaging narrative, which reads more like a mystery than a historical account of the passing of the last of America's Civil War soldiers. Whether they donned the blue or the gray, as Serrano aptly summarizes, "Nothing in their long lives could surpass what they had accomplished in their youth" (p. 181). As the United States began planning for the centennial commemoration of the war in the late 1950s, many of the aged veterans breathed their last. Today, we witness the decreasing numbers of World War II vets, and share the sadness with the people across the country who became increasingly absorbed with news of the death of yet another Federal or Confederate soldier. The question, or as detailed in the author's account, the quest, continued to focus on who would outlive the rest - a former Northern soldier living in Minnesota, or a Texan from Hood's famous brigade.

As the reader journeys through the narrative, eager to learn the true identity of the last living Civil War veteran, many side stories enrich one's understanding of the reconciliation efforts still underway at the dawn of the centennial. Serrano masterfully intersperses accounts of veteran reunions, from the initial meetings in the immediate post-war period, through the final United Confederate Veterans gathering in 1951. The country continued to claim many veterans living for those early gatherings, and they turned out en masse for the larger ceremonies, such as the fiftieth reunion at Gettysburg. Often, hidden behind the pomp and circumstance of the affair, barbs flew from both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line regarding if and where the Confederate battle flag should fly at many of these events. On one such occasion, the Grand Army of the Republic issued a

statement regarding the Southern flag. "Dig a grave, broad and deep, in the soil of the battlefield and publicly bury the Confederate flag" (p.13). The nation continued preparations for the one hundredth anniversary of the war, while two veterans, Albert Woolson of Minnesota, and Walter Williams of Texas, lived out rather humble lifestyles.

The pace of the story quickens as the author travels through the 1950s; at the mid-point of the decade, six Civil War veterans reminded alive, and equally determined to outlive the others and gain the title (to borrow a phrase from a current reality TV program) of - sole survivor! The ever shortening muster roll brought forth naysayers, skeptics who questioned the legitimacy of each man's claim. Family members struggled to locate long lost service records, or turned to state officials for assistance. A highlight of the book includes a nice overview of the various Confederate homes scattered throughout the South, and brief descriptions of how many of the former Confederate states cared for their aging veterans. Serrano keeps the reader engaged through introducing new characters into the story, each seemingly stepping onto the scene replete with iron-clad stories of how they served with General Robert E. Lee, or fought in most of the war's greatest battles. Most of these dandies quickly lost the confidence of the public, as typically those displaying the grandest flair proved as phony as their general's stars and chest of medals. The true warriors usually remained at home.

Readers can excuse the occasional mistakes in military rank, as these do not detract from the genesis of this remarkable story. This reviewer prefers citations and a master bibliography; this book contains neither, instead one finds a list of sources for each chapter at the end of the book. Those with an interest in learning more about a particular event found in Serrano's work, can, with a little patience, locate the various sources the author consulted when composing the narrative. True, "Memories lose their hold after a while" (p. 64), as Walter Williams once commented, but do not let this book, and these reminiscences escape you. No better time exists than now, during the sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War, to reflect upon our recent and distant past, remembering those who struggled during the conflict and the steadfast few who continued to carry their banners as centenarians. Read, learn, and remember, while taking a journey with the *Last of the Blue and Gray!*

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