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“Billy Yank” and “Johnny Reb”: Ordinary Soldiers in the Civil War
Teacher Page

Overview:

This lesson includes letters written by Confederate and Union soldiers during the Civil War. It will provide students with perspectives on what it was like to be a common footsoldier during the conflict.

Objectives:

Students will:

- understand the impact of the war on ordinary soldiers
- note the differences that affected soldiers on the Union side and the Confederate side
- make conclusions about the effects of the war on these men

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

One source used includes excerpts from the memoirs of Daniel Crotty, who was a member of the Third Michigan Volunteer Infantry. The source is located at http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@crotty_unionsoldier. The other source includes excerpts from the memoirs of Sam Watkins, who was a member of the First Tennessee Infantry. The source is located at http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@watkins_confederatesoldier. The sources were originally a part of the “Life Stories of Civil War Heroes” Web site, located at http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/index.html. This site also has several other biographies of Civil War era leaders that may be of use in teaching the period.

Strategies:

You may wish to open the lesson with a short overview of how soldiers were selected (in Crotty’s and Watkins’s cases, both enlisted), but you may also wish to discuss President Lincoln’s call for volunteers to stop the rebellion, the draft, the bounty system, and so on.

Next, you may wish to suggest that troops often find wartime to be extremely boring and difficult, unlike what students might find in their viewing of television programs and movies about soldiers during wartime.

Distribute the activity sheets to the class. Explain to the students that they are to read the selected accounts and then answer the related questions.

Answers to questions 1 through 5 can be answered in a few sentences or a paragraph. Answers to questions 6 and 7 may take several paragraphs up to a page, depending on the amount of time or detail desired.
Wrap-Up:

After completing the activity sheets, have students write fictitious letters to family members describing conditions in Civil War troop encampments, or describe their involvement in a battle. If desired, you may wish to grade the letters for spelling and grammatical errors as well as for historical information.

Extension Activities:

1. Have students create a poster or multimedia presentation about Union and/or Confederate soldiers during the war. Students may wish to include information about uniforms, food, living conditions, and so on.

2. Students can conduct online and print research on letters Union and Confederate soldiers might have sent, then create their own fictitious letters “home” describing a typical day in service or after a major battle.
“Billy Yank” and “Johnny Reb”: Ordinary Soldiers in the Civil War

Student Worksheet

Introduction:

During the Civil War, “citizen soldiers” from all walks of life fought for the Union and for the Confederacy. For many, going into the military and serving was the first time they had ever been more than a few miles from their homes and farms. Many of these soldiers found military life difficult and monotonous. Disease in the camps was common because of poor sanitation. Soldiers also suffered from bad food, and often they were unable to enjoy comforts that they enjoyed before the war; for example, Northern soldiers found it nearly impossible to get Southern tobacco for their pipes. Because of the Union blockade of southern ports, Confederate soldiers could not find coffee.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html

Directions:

Life of a Union Soldier: Excerpts from the Civil War Memoirs of Daniel Crotty
Go to http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@crotty_unionsoldier

Life of a Confederate Soldier: Excerpts from the Civil War Memoirs of Sam Watkins
Go to http://www.socialstudies.com/article.html?article@watkins_confederatesoldier

Answer the following questions about the two sources:

1. First, read the section of Crotty’s memoirs entitled “The Routine of Camp Life.” In your own words, describe the daily routine that Crotty experienced.

2. Scroll to Crotty’s account of “Winter in Camp.” In your own words, discuss how Crotty writes about how the men dealt with the deaths of fellow soldiers in the camp.

3. Next, read Crotty’s account of “Drawing Rations and Army Cooking.” Describe what a regular meal for Crotty and other men he served with might have included. Describe the methods by which the food would have been prepared.
4. Next, go to the Watkins account. Read the section called “Impressions After A Battle.” How does Watkins describe a soldier’s life?

5. Read Watkins’s account of “The Field Hospital in Atlanta.” How does he describe the condition of the patients in the hospital?

6. Compare how Crotty and Watkins saw the life and duty of the ordinary soldier compared to that of officers. (Look at Crotty’s account of “The Fate of a Soldier After Battle” and Watkins’s “The Field Hospital in Atlanta.”) In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

7. After looking at segments of Crotty’s memoirs and Watkins’s writings, describe what you believe the average soldier’s life would have been like during the Civil War.