

PHOTOGRAPHER'S NOTE: SEEKING LIGHT IN ALL SEASONS

Chris Heisey

A half century ago, I first visited Gettysburg as a young boy in the summer of 1972. I still remember vividly the spectacular cyclorama painting depicting Pickett's infamous charge in all its awful splendor. Also, it's hard to forget the park's iconic electric map, which sketched out with blinking lights the troop movements of Yankees and Rebels across the southern Pennsylvania landscape in the summer of 1863. These images were seared into my mind's eye.

But what made the greatest impression on me was the battlefield itself. The Gettysburg battleground is distinctive, with unique landscapes such as the rock-strewn hills of Little Round Top, where Maine and Alabama brothers fought each other for every boulder, and Devil's Den, where a grand old white oak tree stood witness to one of the great Confederate assaults. That tree still stands heroically today. How could a young boy not become enthralled by such a peculiar battlefield only an hour from his Pennsylvania home?

It's not that war was foreign to me; hardly. I grew up watching the evening news on a thirteen-inch black-and-white television set as we ate dinner as a family in my humble Pennsylvania home. Seemingly every night, I watched helicopters whiz over the jungles of Vietnam set ablaze by bombs and bullets. Never do you forget seeing kids fleeing their burning houses in stark terror.

War was also brought home by my father, who was a Korean War veteran. It was an experience that shaped his soul mostly in manners not so good. My mom stored all his letters in an old, worn-out 1950s shoebox, and after they both passed away a few years ago, I spent a rainy summer morning reading those letters. Many had been written while he was sitting in the North Korean mud, telling his eighteen-year-old bride how much he missed and loved her. I don't remember feeling my father's love much while I was growing up. He was mostly distant, which I never understood until I read those powerful war letters. I learned war by hearing my father's voice in written word. He was never wounded in battle, but yet he was.

When I was a fifth grader in 1975, I returned to Gettysburg for a life-changing school field trip on a hot June

day just before summer vacation. Only a few days from retiring after forty-seven years of teaching at Palmyra's Pine Street Elementary School, Mrs. Bomberger had a reputation for being gruff and tough. She commanded with a booming voice, and no fourth grader had a happy summer knowing she awaited you in September. Tough, maybe, but she taught me the importance of walking this great battlefield. Furthermore, it was this insightful teacher who was responsible for my love of books.

When I visited Gettysburg fifteen years later in 1990, I was a novice photographer hoping to capture lasting images of a place I already knew was special and beautiful. Light at Gettysburg spills slowly and softly upon the ridges, and every sunrise greets you differently. While it is great light that every seasoned photographer seeks, what makes this hallowed battleground worthy of the chase is its seasonal beauty.

If there is a more verdant landscape in the birth of springtime, mine eyes have not seen it. Summer is hot and humid, and when the daylilies pop in early June, you know drenching thunderstorms will soon follow to quench their thirst. By mid-September, the fields turn crimson as dwindling light causes native grasses to lose their green. Leaves begin their tumble on Culp's Hill and Big Round Top, and soon frost gives everything a sparkling coat.

Yet the best season on the battlefield is winter. Southern Pennsylvania is blanketed on average with three feet of snow, which can come in one crippling storm or a dozen small dustings that magically paste the fourteen hundred monuments with white powder and dripping icicles. As the snowflakes fall, you can often experience absolute silence. Though hushed, the battlefield never seems dead, just asleep until it comes to life again in spring. If there's a lesson this photographer has learned on these sacred fields, it is that death does come abundantly, but life goes on and always wins the battle.

Never will I be finished photographing at Gettysburg, which offers a lifetime of images to capture. Whether I'm shooting a full moon rising above the battlefield on a crisp autumn evening or a star trail above Devil's Den, it makes me feel alive to freeze that moment for eternity. When it

snows, I'll be slipping around Little Round Top and its enchanting landscape. In summer, it's worth awaking at 3 A.M. to make the journey to Cemetery Ridge to witness the colorful dance of light and clouds at sunrise. And when the grasses and leaves turn brilliant hues in autumn, you'll find me with my tripod slung over my shoulder as I prepare to shoot a blood-red field near the Henry Spangler Farm, where Barksdale's Mississippians and Pickett's men fell in droves during two days of battle.

Doing a book project with Kent Gramm has been a joy. His writings strike me in a profound way. His book *Gettysburg: A Meditation on War and Values*, which I read in the mid-1990s, changed forever how I experience Gettysburg. After savoring that wonderful book, I knew that I wanted to meet this master wordsmith. When we did meet some fifteen years ago, a friendship ensued, and I am the better off for that blessing. Teaming with him to do *Gettysburg: The Living and the Dead* and adding my images to his richly woven words has been a revered honor.

War cannot be forgotten. Gettysburg is where I make peace with war, and it is where I seek God's gift of light in all His glorious seasons. As I walk these hallowed fields and ridges where the living fought a deadly battle long ago in the summer of 1863, I continue to learn about war by seeking light. I hope that light, shared in these pages, touches your soul.

Numerous good and generous people have freely given me help in making this book possible. No photographer learns this craft on his own. Thirty years ago, Nghia Trung Le taught me photography basics at our workplace at Holy Spirit Hospital in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. Shooting images for this book made me gratefully think of him often, since he recently passed from the horrible ravages of ALS. His story of fleeing South Vietnam in 1975, when Saigon fell under Communist rule, is a tale of heroic courage.

I am humbly appreciative of Bishop Ronald Gainer. Tim Schropp has been more than generous to me. He helped me "paint the rocks" at Devil's Den with flashlights for the star trail image, and it remains one of my

favorite photo shoots. My friends Newt Wertz, Charlie Rulapaugh, and Shane Swetland gave me appreciated input. As did Christian Charity Sister Geralyn Schmidt, an artist whose talent I respect and whose marrow-deep faith inspires. Rachel Schlegel offered me her able designer's eye, and I am thankful to her.

The National Park Service has many dedicated professionals who serve quietly. When I locked myself out of my car on a cold winter's evening at Little Round Top, slicing my finger into a bloody mess trying to free my keys, it was a kind park ranger who rescued me, the fool, while not making me feel like one.

I am sincerely grateful for the generous support of Gettysburg College and the Civil War Institute on this project.

Working with Southern Illinois University Press has been a collaborative joy. It takes many skilled hands to cooperate on a book of this style. I say a heartfelt thank-you to Sylvia Frank Rodrigue for minding the details; her professional engagement throughout the entire project has made it an enjoyable endeavor. Judy Verdich, Linda Buhman, and Wayne Larsen have been a pleasure to work with, and their deft designing skill made this the handsome book that it has become.

My son, Aaron, is a wonderful son, and it is rewarding to parent him alongside his mother, Kim. When he was a little boy, we spent countless hours climbing rocks, throwing water balloons, sliding down snowy hills, and doing all else that was unforgettable fun. He grew up in Gettysburg in many ways, and I could not be more proud of him now that he is all grown up.

My cousin, Ken, has been more brother than cousin, and I appreciate his tender support.

Finally, I thank my parents, who passed before this book saw the light. My father taught me to love sunrises, especially summer ones, and my loving mother instilled in me the passion to photograph the way my God-given eyes saw altogether fitting.

October 2018