



HISTORY MADE PERSONAL

Troops by the Hundred Were Passing

By Gene Pisasale



N.C. Wyeth and Chris Sanderson were both born in the year 1882. Chester A. Arthur was President of the United States, having been sworn in after President Garfield succumbed to injuries related to his assassination. The South was undergoing Reconstruction, yet many people in the South still resented what they considered the “Battle of Northern Aggression” and the subsequent laws which changed their way of life. It would take several decades before the Southern states would regain a sense of normalcy and reach parity with their pre-Civil War status.

Wyeth was asked to illustrate a book on the great conflict, titled “Sally Castleton, Southerner” by Crittenden Marriott. The book describes a Southern girl who comes into contact with a Union spy in Virginia. She’s been asked to turn him into authorities, but she has misgivings, due to her interaction with this attractive and interesting stranger. The oil painting “Troops by the Hundred Were Passing” is one Wyeth did for this book, first appearing as a serial feature in “Everybody’s Magazine” in 1912. It hangs on the wall in the Battlefield Room of the Christian Sanderson Museum, near objects from many other wars this country has suffered through.

Chris Sanderson collected numerous artifacts of the Civil War and this painting is a fitting tribute from a well known artist who often illustrated battle scenes, heroic struggles and epic conflicts. Wyeth became good friends with Sanderson and gave the painting as a gift to Chris’s mother Hanna. Confederate soldiers are marching behind their commanding officer, who is on horseback as two young boys in caps run excitedly alongside the phalanx. The painting is awash in grey-blues and dust browns, the colors of the Confederacy, ones which clothed the brave young men who fought for a cause which was bound to fail. “War-hardened, lean, efficient troops, whose road-pace was eagerness itself” forms the caption of this illustration. Loyal men were following General Robert E. Lee’s orders to defend Lynchburg- for many, to their death.

Several of N.C. Wyeth’s paintings have an ethereal look to them, as if the scene is other worldly, part of a dream. In this painting, you get that same feeling- and the viewer is watching through a misty haze surrounding these young men, dedicated as they march, rifles on their shoulders with bayonets fixed, briskly along the dirt road, their eyes unblinking. One soldier stares straight at the young boys running up to him, knowing the tragedy of war as they only dream about it, his gaze also nearly capturing the eyes of the viewer as he marches steadfastly with his determined rebel comrades. Yet, if you look closely into their faces, you can see that some of them knew... they wouldn’t be coming back. This would be their last march. It remains an enigma of war- of all wars- that people in later generations will be completely horrified and yet, fascinated by them... enraptured with man’s continuous struggle... in one way or another, to be free. The painting is one of the many gems that await visitors.

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