



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
May 28, 2004

*“On Fame’s eternal
camping-ground
Their silent tents are
spread,
And glory guards,
with solemn round,
The bivouac of the
dead.”*

-from “The Bivouac of the
Dead” by Theodore
O’Hara; on a metal plaque
in the Gettysburg
Cemetery

Last week while I was in Pennsylvania, I visited the Gettysburg National Military Park. I hadn’t planned on going there, but since we were close by, we stopped to take a look.

I found the buildings, with their photographs, weapons, uniforms and military equipment - and the intense air-conditioning - not compelling and ended up wandering around the cemetery. And I began to wonder once more about wars. I think it is the influence of the current Iraq war that makes me look at thousands of graves - young men who fought, killed and were killed - and question the justification for this kind of human loss. As I imagine the fatigue, the fear, the pain and the horror, I ponder the sheer pointlessness of one young person killing another.

In a way, it is arbitrary - as if these soldiers were like the lead ones my brother used to play with. As if you could arrange and rearrange them on

the battlefield - and have their life depend on where they stand and the color of their uniform.

One of the most moving parts of this visit was seeing where Lincoln stood when he gave the Gettysburg Address. When I was in elementary school, we memorized these ten sentences, but I didn’t understand exactly what the speech was about. Seeing the spot, I finally realized that when Lincoln said: “But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate - we can not consecrate - we can not hallow - this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract” he was looking around him and talking about the very ground below his feet. And again I couldn’t help thinking about the soldiers - American, Iraqi and all the rest - who are currently consecrating land most of us will never see.

It is ironic that our next

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visit was also a historic one. Ironic because I have never thought of myself as being interested in history – yet there I was, experiencing the past and comparing it to the present.

This visit was to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where I followed library signs down the street and ended up in the old jail building, which was built in 1818 and survived the burning of Chambersburg by the Confederate army, in 1864. The library I discovered was not the public library, but the Kittochtiny Historical Society library, which “houses an extensive collection of books and manuscripts on history and genealogy” (from their brochure) and includes tombstone inscriptions, photocopies of family bibles, marriage and obituary notices and many, many other documents – two rooms full, in fact. People come to look up relatives and get expert help from the volunteers there, and posted

on the walls are helpful clues for these searchers, like “Old naming patterns for children” : the 1st son is named for the father’s father, the 2nd for the mother’s father; the 1st daughter is named for the mother’s mother and the 2nd for the father’s mother. There is also a list of commonly used abbreviations, for instance, “hic jacet” means “here lies.”

I was struck by the power of these old documents. I know that more and more material is available on the Internet and this is probably good, since most people won’t be able to go to the original source. But there is something wonderful about touching a piece of history and thinking about all the other people, over hundreds of years, who have done the same.