

Do It! Be a Civil War Photographer

Stage Your Own Civil War Battlefield or Camp Scene and Photograph It

Before the Civil War, Mathew Brady was already a famous photographer. His gallery in New York City was very busy as he posed with sitters, controlled the lighting to highlight his subject, arranged props to suit the occasion, and chatted amiably with his clients to put them at ease. Both the studio and the man's friendly chatter allowed him to take wonderful pictures that showed people as they really were. At a time when many photographers' work showed people looking grim, uptight, or holding a pose with great concentration, Mathew Brady's pictures captured a person's true likeness.

When war became a certainty, Mathew Brady knew that someone needed to record the scenes of battle in photographs. He was determined to head up that effort. He took out a loan for over \$3,000 against his New York gallery, and prepared to outfit photographer wagons to record the war. These "darkrooms on wheels" carried the equipment and chemicals a photographer needed to take photographs in the great outdoors, or wherever else the war raged. Each wagon had a trained photographer who would follow troop movements, take pictures, expose and develop plates in the field, then return occasionally to the gallery to have the photographs printed. From there, a large photographic would produce and sell the images, each of which were credited as a "Photo by Brady."

Photography of the time was virtually in its infancy. This limited the pictures a photographer could take. A photographer could not take action photographs of any kind, as they would blur because of the 5-10 seconds needed for exposure. Thus, photographers focused on posed scenes, or other scenes in which there was no movement. This is why we see so many "aftermath" scenes among Civil War photos; ruined homes and dead soldiers didn't have to be told to keep still.

Photographers had to rely on natural lighting, forcing them to wait for good weather, and work feverishly during the brightest hours of the day. Then, too, the photographers couldn't venture into actual battle; their bulky equipment had no place on the battlefield, and they couldn't be afforded any protection in any case.

If you'd like, you can learn a lot more about Mathew Brady. There is a wealth of information about this man. A great book to try might be "Photo by Brady: A Picture of the Civil War" by Jennifer Armstrong. It is a fantastic look at Brady's pictures and follows the course of the war.

To complete this activity, stage your own Civil War battlefield, or create a camp scene. If you live nearby a battlefield run by the National Parks Service, you may be able to stage your photo amid real artillery still sitting on the park grounds. However, almost any natural scene would do. Photos often featured elements such as those listed below. Have a few friends or siblings put on typical soldier trousers and a shirt or jacket, and see what your imagination can create. Then, have a parent print the photo in black and white, or better yet, with their "sepia" setting, in which the photo is in tones of brown and white. It'll look very realistic! File it in your Timelines in History.

Common Picture Elements:

crooked rail fence

rock wall

trees or vegetation

simple dog tent

big rocks or boulders

open fields

simple farm houses

railroad tracks/ bridges