

Los Angeles Times

A visit to Gettysburg opens your eyes to history

By Martin Miller
Published Nov. 6, 2009

California has current events and, despite budgetary woes, a future. But the East Coast has history.

So when our family flies across the country each summer to reunite with relatives, we try to work an educational excursion into the usual mix of cousins, water parks and overeating. Our sons, Nick, 10, and John, 7, love that.

Two summers ago, we visited Charleston, S.C., and hopped on a boat to Fort Sumter, where the Civil War began. So last summer, it was Washington, D.C., and I wanted to continue the Civil War theme. Only 90 minutes from the nation's capital is Gettysburg, which in 1863 was the site of the war's bloodiest battle and its turning point in the East.

We spent about six hours at the national military park, about 6,000 sprawling acres, but I easily could have stayed several days. A quick caveat: Although I'm not a Civil War reenactor, I'm sympathetic to the cause. I was a history major and, as a student at the University of North Carolina, went on a four-day class field trip to major Civil War battlefields, including Chancellorsville, Va.; Antietam, Md.; and Gettysburg.

In many ways, not much had changed in the 25 years since I had roamed the hallowed ground of Gettysburg. But in other ways — most notably an impressive new visitor center — much had.

The \$135 million center, opened in 2008, offers a dignified and moving introduction to the war's most famous battle. For those unfamiliar with Gettysburg's details, the 20-minute overview film, magnificently restored cyclorama and an artifacts-rich museum provide a solid historical foundation for newcomers and Civil War buffs alike.

In the days before radio, television and movies, cycloramas — often 300-plus-foot-long oil-on-canvas

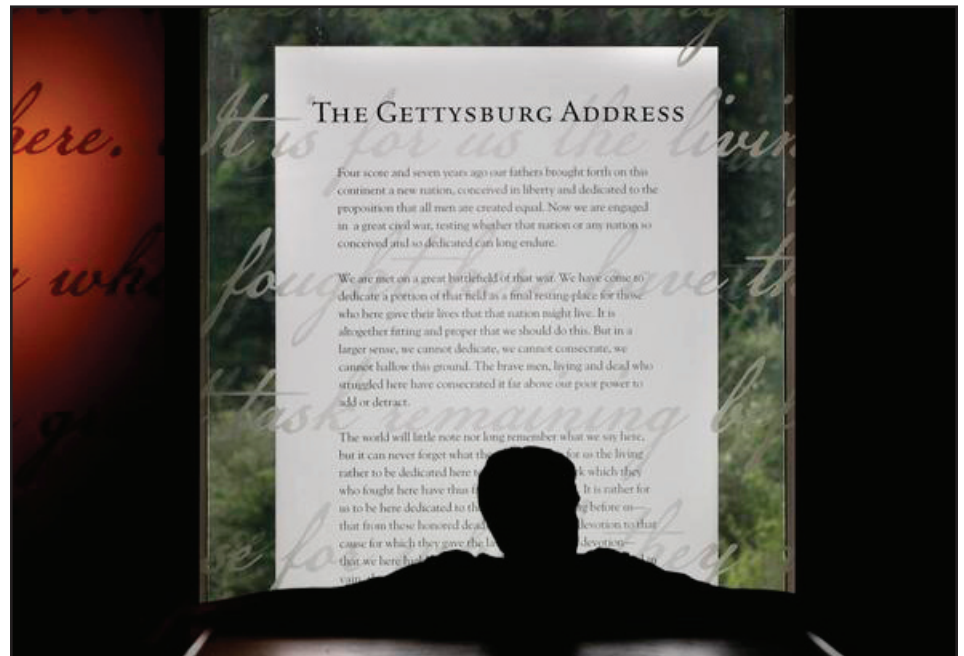


PHOTO BY DON BARTLETTI, LOS ANGELES TIMES

paintings that encircled an audience — were meant to re-create the experience of the battle. In its heyday during the late 19th century, the Gettysburg Cyclorama, which depicts the ill-fated Confederate charge led by Maj. Gen. George Pickett, reportedly brought veterans to tears.

Decades later, the cyclorama fell into disrepair but underwent a \$13-million, five-year restoration and reopened last year. Although the cyclorama room is crowded and it can be hard to see, because of the painting's historical authenticity, it is one of the highlights of the museum.

After we spent about 90 minutes inside, it was time to explore the battlefield. We could have chosen a formal tour, even a personal one in our car with a park guide, but we didn't have that much time. Thanks to Nick, who recently completed the fourth grade, we had an obvious and easily achieved agenda.

He had just finished studying the Gettysburg Address and his birthday is July 3, the same date as Pickett's Charge, so that automatically elevated their importance. Sites commemorating both occasions were within fairly easy walking distance ("forced march" might be how my sons

would describe it) of the visitor center.

First, we searched for the famed High Water Mark of the Confederate Army, the point of its greatest success during the battle's climactic third day on July 3. Without a guide, the precise area on Cemetery Ridge was tough to find amid the many monuments scattered across the fields. There are more than 1,000. But eventually we found the book-shaped monument near a clump of trees that we later learned actually dates to the battle.

Next, we made our way to the Soldiers' National Cemetery, where President Abraham Lincoln delivered his immortal speech several months after the battle. Even for a couple of California kids who know more about SpongeBob than the 16th president, it was inspiring to stand where Lincoln gave his most memorable address.

My kids are old enough to perhaps remember some details of this trip for the rest of their lives. I hope so, but they may not. What I also hope they remember is that their parents took them to a quiet corner of Pennsylvania and that they walked the same ground where ordinary and great Americans alike paid the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of their causes.