

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Some suggestions for the female reenactor.

So why are YOU here? Because you married a man who reenacts and you want to show your support. Your son drags you halfway across the county so he can be a soldier. You like to dress up in fancy ball gowns and flirt with Rhett Butler. You love meeting people with a common interest and you love to “tell the story” of the female side of the Civil War. You just found a great way to spend time out of doors and you can pretend to be somebody you are not. All good reasons why women get involved in the hobby of reenacting. However, for a female reenactor, validation is the challenge.

Here are some suggestions if you want to be an accurate representation of the war period and do it with an acceptable reason. Whatever role you chose to portray, the most important thing to do is RESEARCH. Look for photos of women who did what you want to do. The library is a great place to start. Your librarian can help you locate books about very specific subjects. Go online and do a search for “Civil War Nurse” and it will bring up thousands of sites worth reading. Make notes of women who were actually in the war. When talking with spectators they love to hear names dropped. Try to mention the common women, but also mention some not so familiar. For example, everyone knows Clara Barton. But how many history books speak of Mrs. A. H. Hoge? Bring some new information to the public, don’t just re-hash what they already know. If you have trouble remembering names, then pick one lady who struck your interest and focus on her alone.

Traditional female roles found in camp~why are you with the army?

The common woman was NOT at the battlefield or in camp. Civilians were not commonly found around the military. The following were the only accepted civilian women to be present.

Laundress:

Beginning early in the war nearly every army had at least one laundress per 20 men. They were generally women trying to support themselves or were traveling with a male family member. Your attire will be work clothes, traditionally a long plain dress with sleeves rolled up, no hoops, nothing fancy, hair netted, full coverage apron, large bonnet (slatted or full brimmed) for weather protection. Wear flat shoes, no long fingernails, and try to roughen up your hands. You should have tubs and soap and scrub boards.

Cook:

Same as laundress in clothing, be prepared to cook all weekend.

Nurse:

Most nurses were not in close contact with the actual camps. There were usually hospitals of some sort where the nurses were. However, you could be a field nurse if you are so inclined and you have permission from the Military to do so. History has recorded women who did cover the battlefields in search of wounded. Your attire would be similar to the working women above. Have simple supplies with you like bandages, washbowls, soap, bottles of what appears to be medicines, and you can include whiskey, since it was the #1 medicine of choice. A little dried blood on your apron might help with the impression. Be prepared to drag bodies and support wounded soldiers.

Sister of Mercy (or some other order):

Nuns were often present on the battlefields and in camp to serve the soldiers. Your attire needs to be researched for accuracy with details. Every order had/has their own style of habit. Nuns were thought to have “Divine protection” and were often spared bullets whizzing past them. With such identifiable attire, it was very clear to both sides of the conflict they were non-combatants.

Camp refugee:

These ladies followed the military for a variety of reasons. Mostly it was because they had nowhere else to go.

Some women supported themselves as prostitutes, but this is difficult to do with historical accuracy. Your dress will vary according to your circumstances. If you were well-to-do and now a refugee, your dress should reflect your hardship. No hoops, battered shoes, unkempt hair. An old blanket for a wrap, be prepared to possibly sleep outside if you don't have a tent of your own. You may include your children in this role, since many women had to bring their entire families along. Your tent should be set up off from the main battery of tents. If you can hide some family valuables on your person, that would be great (a favorite Bible, a silk hanky, silverware, or any small heirloom. Be warned, however, only bring something that is not important to you in case you should lose it!).

If you try to present the seedier side of this persona, be prepared for rude, lewd, and crude treatment. Your apparel should be befitting of the profession. Do your research because the "woman of the evening" in 1860 did not dress like that of the 21st century.

Private's wife:

Unless you can do the duty of a cook and/or laundress, you probably shouldn't be in camp with your man. Privates very seldom had their women accompany them.

Officer's wife:

This role will allow a little more attractive apparel. If your husband is an officer, you have the luxury of being with him if your unit allows this. Your impression will be that of a typical wife. Chances are you still wear a hoop and may even have a servant along with you. Servants were common in camp. Underpinnings, hair, accessories will all be traditional "lady" style. You may bring needlework to do, books to read, or other items of leisure. A little (!) makeup might also be allowed.

Non-traditional female roles in camp~

These roles can be a little more challenging so be sure to do your research before making your appearance at an event. As you may find out, many men in this hobby are not always accepting of females in camp, especially these non-traditional presentations. So the better equipped you are with information, the easier it will be for their cooperation. Get names of actual women. Do not try representation without documentation!

Vivandier/Cantineer:

These ladies were generally YOUNG and the daughter or friend of the commanding officer. They were uniformed in feminine versions of whatever uniform the troop was wearing. You will camp with the men, drill with the men, and appear on the battlefield with the men. Be sure to attend all meetings to discuss your part of the activities. You may carry a small weapon, sword, or knife. Mostly, you are there to carry the flags, water jug, and offer coverage for dead bodies (drag them out of view). Most of these ladies carried canteens filled with the 3 "w's": water, wine, or whiskey. This role will give you the opportunity to be in the battle and still maintain a feminine persona. Your unit must have a Vivandier documented in their regiment for you to do this impression.

Soldier:

This is the most controversial part a woman reenactor can take on. There were documented cases of females impersonating men in order to fight. The key to your role is to NEVER LET ANYONE suspect you are female. You cannot be a soldier during the afternoon battle then dress up for the evening ball in a gown. Don't let spectators see you go into the Ladies Room, use a non-gender facility when people are watching. As in the real army, if a woman was discovered, she was immediately sent home, you will be too. Pay attention to the slightest detail of your disguise. Cover feminine features, including your hands and neck. Pad your uniform to hide a slender waist and back. Keep your hair short and masculine. Use black powder to roughen your chin so it looks as if you need a shave. Apply fake facial hair if that would help. Talk seldom and quietly. Many soldiers reported knowing of a "shy private who kept to himself". This could have been a woman trying to keep from being discovered, especially during her toileting activities. Be prepared to bunk in with other men if there is a shortage of tents. Keep in character if you do. If you show any attention to a fellow soldier you could be suspected

of covert sexual orientation (a common occurrence when a soldier had his wife along!). If your fellow soldiers know you are a woman, try to get their cooperation with your disguise. Having a mate call you “honey” or use feminine pronouns will blow your cover. Your unit must have a documented female soldier in their unit for this impression.

Traditional Female Roles in Civilian Camps~

Some events offer a separate location for civilians. If this is the case, you have many options for your presentation. Think of the women in your community. There are fund-raisers, organizers, church ladies, reformers, widows, single girls looking for a husband, etc. etc. etc. Chose something that you can be comfortable with. This is a good opportunity to take on an actual character from your family history. You could be a governess hired by the a wealthy family to teach their children. Your wardrobe would be middle class with somewhat fashionable dresses and accessories.

You will find men in these camps that are not soldiers, so be sure to interact with them the same way you would your neighbors at home. The civilian camp is your weekend community and everyone there are neighbors. Be friendly.

Your attire will necessarily have to reflect the character you are portraying. Do the research to see what someone in your economic class would wear and carry the appropriate accessories. Remember how you pay attention to details of your 21st century wardrobe and do the same with your historical wardrobe. Do not carry a pretty lace fan with plastic handles. Plastic wasn't invented yet. If you are a senior lady, you should wear clothing that is age appropriate. How silly is it to see a 70-year-old in a mini-skirt? It was the same in the 1800s. Do the research.

There are some opportunities for you to portray as a group with other women. When presenting a living history of these organizations, you can set up a central “station” that would represent the workshops and warehouses and allow you the chance to have a home base where your children and other family members can come and go comfortably, all the while still offering an authentic setting for spectators.

Christian Commission:

These volunteers, both men and women, were generally from the North and brought faith and hope to the soldiers. Some of their work included distributing Bibles, holding church services, writing letters, teaching the illiterate, and conducting conversions and revivals.

Sanitary Commission:

These volunteers performed similar duties to those of the Christian Commission but were more medically related. They raised money for medicines, supplies and food and brought them to the armies.

Fund-raising:

You could set up a bazaar to show the many things that were made by the women and sold as revenue for the armies. Do not confuse this with a SUTLERY. You are not there to make money but to educate the public. If you chose to offer handmade goods for sale to the public, including the reenactors, you might consider using the proceeds to go to your unit or to help the many causes in heritage preservation. Always check with the event organizers before setting up a bazaar booth.

Reenacting can be fun, educational and exciting. Just be sure you are dressed appropriately!