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Richmond's American Civil War Center presents the conflict through three perspectives

By: Frank D. Quattrone - Ticket Editor

Anyone who has read "The Killer Angels," Michael Shaara's searing account of the Battle of Gettysburg, or E.L. Doctorow's award-winning novel "The March," recounting General Sherman's relentless march to the sea . . . anyone who has watched Ken Burns' riveting PBS documentary "The Civil War" or visited the hallowed battlefields of Gettysburg or Antietam will surely appreciate the achievement of Richmond's brand-new American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar.

Open since October 2006, the bright and airy edifice, with huge windows overlooking the James River, is located at the historic Tredegar Iron Works, the industrial heart of the Confederacy, which produced heavy artillery for the Southern cause, including parts for the ironclad CSS Virginia. What makes it unique is its unprecedented perspective. Here in Richmond, former capital of the Confederacy and home of one of the most illuminating and moving museums I have ever experienced - the Museum & White House of the Confederacy (1201 E. Clay St.) - is the most comprehensive and balanced view of the Civil War one can possibly imagine.

That's because its main exhibit, "In the Cause of Liberty," interprets the war - its causes, course and legacy - from three separate viewpoints: Union, Confederate and African-American. Much like the more ambitious National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, the American Civil War Center (ACWC) is largely interactive, with state-of-the-art films, cleverly mounted displays and historic artifacts inviting visitors to participate in the story of the conflict that helped shape our nation.

A film on the causes of the war allows you to vote on the same issues that faced the North, the South and the African Americans who lived during the war. By pressing green buttons to cast your vote on key questions of the time, regarding slavery, abolition, states' rights and more, you begin to feel the power of the electorate, and perhaps helplessness of those who were disenfranchised.

By lifting small metal rods that resemble an automobile's dipstick, you learn the answers to questions you might never have thought to ask: In 1861, which countries still had slavery and which had abolished it. In the latter camp are the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Brazil and most of South America. You learn that during Sherman's March to the Sea, there were 62,000 Union troops, accompanied by 25,000 fugitive slaves. You must read Doctorow's "The March"!

In the mezzanine, described as "a floating second floor," in a round room enclosed by glass and harboring a dozen or so interactive stations, you will learn about the Battle of Vicksburg, the draft riot in New York City, the defense of Charleston and so much more.

You will be asked, ironically, why many Southern free blacks volunteered to serve in the Confederacy. You'll learn that many felt they would gain equality with whites if they did so, or that they hoped they would avoid being forced into slavery should the Confederacy emerge victorious.

You will be reminded that the Civil War was not just about generals and battles and occupation forces but also about the home front - the racial, social and economic tensions faced by the everyday family. At the center, you will learn what games the children played, how families learned to survive the loss of loved ones, why writing letters was such an important activity on so many levels, and what became of the war's veterans.

Artifacts on hand range from the expected (Confederate swords, cannon, flintlocks, grenades and canteens, not to mention antislavery banners and flags) to the surprising (toy cannons, common household soap, abolitionist pincushions, and Ku Klux Klan robes). And the exhibit ends with cases full of books about the Civil War (from Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind" and "The Killer Angels" to Faulkner's "Absalom Absalom" and Tony Horwitz's 2000 Pulitzer Prize-winning nonfiction work, "Confederates in the Attic") and even, unaccountably, some bobble-headed dolls representing Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant.

And, like the National Constitution Center, there are those ubiquitous Post-It notes, asking your opinion on questions related to this overheated period in American history. To the question "In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln called on Americans to fight for 'a new birth of freedom.' Are all Americans treated equally today?" one visitor answered, in big bold letters: "Equal rights for all - this includes women."

Point well taken, no?

The ACWC, situated in a building listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register, is also home to the Richmond National Battlefield Visitor Center, which provides visitors with an overview of Richmond's role in the Civil War and an orientation to the many battlefields surrounding the city.

It is an attractive, stunning and even entertaining learning center. Don't miss it!

American Civil War Center
is located at
490 Tredegar St.,
Richmond, VA 23219
Info: 804-788-6480 or
www.tredegar.org.