

One Labor Day weekend, about twenty years ago, I had heard about a Revolutionary War re-enacting event that would be taking place at a local park and talked a couple of friends into attending with me. As we strolled through the maze of tents and campfires and costumed participants, I thought that this would be something that I would like to try. I have always enjoyed all things historical, and have had the opportunity to visit Yorktown and Jamestown and Williamsburg. I've walked the Freedom Trail in Boston and followed a portion of the Lewis and Clark Trail from southern Illinois west almost to Great Falls, Montana. And though I barely remembered anything about the Revolutionary War from my long-past school days, I assumed this would be a learn-as-you-go kind of hobby.

I approached one of the campsites and inquired about how to join. A gentleman, clearly one of the British soldiers, with his pristine red coat and shining boots, looked me over and asked where my husband was. When I explained that I would be joining alone, he sniffed in contempt and pointed out to me that they needed "soldiers, not camp followers!" This was all done within the context of his camp "persona" so I took no real offense at it, but I went home disappointed nonetheless.

Back at work on Monday, as we were swapping stories about our weekend, one of my co-workers remembered that a former employee and her husband used to do re-enacting. The name of that former employee was Susan Hewitt.

A few weeks later, I found out that there was going to be another re-enactment at a park nearby and I wanted to see it again. The tents and the camps and the costumes, it all somehow struck a chord with me and I wanted to find out how I could join the fun. Unfortunately, I received a similar dismissive response from each of the campsites I stopped at.

It was late in the afternoon and I was about to head for home when I decided to check out one more of the cordoned-off camps. I happened to remember Susan's name and asked if anyone knew her. As I spoke the words, she stepped out of the tent in front of me. Serendipity at work!

I introduced myself and explained how I knew her name. As it turned out, we discovered that we lived just blocks away from each other in the same town, that our children had gone to high school together, and that we had a lot of friends in common. She was also a recent widow and would be happy to have someone to travel with. It was arranged that I would attend the next event to see if this was something that I really wanted to do because this was a hobby that required a commitment in time, travel, and not some little expense.

One frosty morning, about a month later, I found myself crawling out of a 6' x6' waxed canvas tent. I had straw stuck in my hair from my makeshift bed, my hands and feet were frozen and I had wriggled into a borrowed chemise and skirts. I put on a daycoat and cap, and walked over to the campfire where someone was scrambling eggs and making coffee that could only be described as acid-corrosive. It was the best coffee I ever drank!

I spent the day "in character" and tried to answer any visitors' questions with some sort of intelligence, but I soon discovered how little I knew. Poor Susan! I followed her around like a lost duckling. I was sure that I would not be invited to participate in another event.

However, at the end of the weekend as we were breaking camp and loading up the vans with the monumental amount of gear that an encampment requires, I was asked if I had enjoyed myself and if I wanted to do it again. They didn't have to ask me twice! A vote was taken and I became an official member of the "2nd Virginia Regiment" of the "Northwest Territory Alliance."

The Alliance was a living history organization that portrayed camp life during the Revolutionary War. We allowed the Brits to camp with us and had mock battles with them several times during the weekend, complete with screaming soldiers and cannon fire. We knew that we had demonstrated a successful battle if the cannon fire set off all the car alarms out in the parking lot.

Now that I was a member of the unit, I needed to find a "persona" for myself for camp. Susan was a widow and portrayed one. If we had actually been in the "Rev War" time period, she would have been allowed three days to remarry after the death of her husband or be left behind at the nearest town. There was a difference between the common "camp follower" and the women who followed their husbands and sons into battle. These wives and mothers had to earn their keep. These were the women who responded when they heard the cry of "Molly, pitcher"! These were the "mollies" who ran onto the battlefield with pitchers of water to assist the soldiers who fell during combat.

Because I was newly divorced at the time, the persona I chose was one of a woman whose husband had been taken by the enemy and was suffering extreme torture at the hands of his captors. It allowed me to be in camp without a husband in attendance and it gave me a certain personal satisfaction at the thought of all that pain being so justly inflicted! Serendipity, indeed!

So it was that several times, every summer, for almost 10 years, Susan and I attended re-enacting events all across the Midwest. Every Memorial Day, we started the season in Vincennes, Indiana where we camped along the banks of the Wabash River in the shadow of the beautiful George Rogers Clark Monument. One year, during a Sunday morning church service, I had the privilege of laying flowers on the grave of a Revolutionary War soldier that was buried there in Clark's Grove. In the fall, we would attend the "Feast of the Hunter's Moon" at Fort Ouiatenon. The Feast is a wild, four day event with more than 5,000 re-enactors in attendance and over 60,000 visitors on any given day. There were games and contests and exhibits and vendors who sold everything from pottery to jewelry and clothing and food stalls that served goodies from all parts of the world.

One of my favorite memories, however, is the event we attended in the French-speaking city of Quebec in Canada. We camped on the Plains of Abraham, overlooking the St. Lawrence River. We visited the Citadel and followed our soldiers as they marched through the gates of the Old City. We participated in one of the largest battle re-enactments ever done. And we ate ourselves silly on some of the best food outside of France while admiring many of the most beautiful public gardens we had ever seen. That was one of the last events that Susan and I attended. But our Revolutionary War experiences were not over! Serendipity was waiting!

A few years earlier Susan had remarried and, in October of 1999, she and her husband retired to Florida. She often called to tell me how beautiful the weather was and how beautiful the ocean was and when was I going to move down? At the time, it wasn't in my plans.

A few years later, however, my older daughter moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to accept a new job and my younger daughter, who was already living in Omaha, Nebraska, became engaged and would be getting married in September of 2001. The Twin Towers were attacked just three days before the wedding and although everyone tried to put on a smiling face, we were all walking around with broken hearts and tear-filled eyes. In October of 2001 I was diagnosed with breast cancer and by Christmas I just wanted to run away from home. So the next time that Susan called to see how I was doing, I reminded her that it was January in Chicago, that I had snow to my knees, that I had radiation-burnt boobs and that I was about to have a "mid-life" melt-down. Florida sounded damn good! I told her to find me a house and a job and a good man and I would be right down. By October of 2002 I had moved to Florida and had a house and a job. I'm still waiting for the good man!

The subject of re-enacting came up often and we searched several places to see if we could find somewhere to continue our favorite hobby. We called all across the state and the closest thing we could find, in terms of distance and historical time period, was St Augustine. However, we were told that they wanted "soldiers, not camp followers". Where had I heard those words before? After that, I assumed that our "Rev War" days were done.

What neither of us knew at the time was that we were about to come face-to-face with our own history. We had both taken an interest in genealogy and often compared notes as we put leaves on our family's trees. As we carefully traced each of our father's and mother's families back through the years, we discovered that their parents and grandparents were some of the founding fathers of our country.

It seems that all the while that we were playing the part of Revolutionary War wives who were following their husbands across the colonies, we actually had ancestors who were doing just that. Ancestors who were putting their lives and their livelihoods on the line in order to secure our freedom. Not only did we find Revolutionary War soldiers in our family's trees but we discovered that they were from Virginia. The very state whose soldiers' wives that we had portrayed.

In January of 2010, Susan and I were both accepted into the Daughters of the American Revolution. We attended the 119th Continental Congress in Washington, DC in July and now proudly sport our ancestor bars bearing the names of our family's patriots. We have a whole new appreciation of Independence Day and what it meant to our ancestors and their families.

As we continue our research into our family's trees, Susan and I will occasionally come across the same surnames. Sometimes in the same places. Is there some common ancestor out there just waiting to be found? Perhaps Serendipity isn't through with us yet!

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