

ANTIETAM NATIONAL CEMETERY – Sharpsburg, Maryland

(Shouting, Drum roll)

Keith Snyder – Park Ranger, Antietam National Battlefield

I'm standing at Antietam National Cemetery what many consider the most sacred ground here at Antietam National Battlefield. On September 17, 1862 over 23,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or missing in the bloodiest day in American history. Four thousand were killed outright on that day and their lifeless bodies were scattered across the countryside here in and around Sharpsburg. The Confederate army retreated back to Virginia ending Robert E. Lee's first invasion into the north and they left their dead behind. Union soldiers of the Army of the Potomac would bury these 4000 bodies across these fields. Speed was more important than great care. Graves ranged from individual marked graves to massive graves with 100, 200, 300 soldiers tossed in a long trench. On the Roulette farm just north of here, 700 bodies were placed on that field. So when the Roulettes came back to their farm, their farms were now filled with graves. Graves replaced the crops, many times in the farmer's best fields. The next spring, when these farmers wanted to plant this ground, many of the graves were in the way. Something had to be done and it took many years to make this happen.

In America, we get together with our neighbors, we get with our congressmen. Finally, state legislation was passed to create this national cemetery. It started at the Maryland state level, eventually moved to the national level and originally the legislation called for the burial of both sides, Union and Confederate. But as the cemetery was being created in 1865 and 1866, the Civil War had just ended. There was still tremendous bitterness between north and south from their recent holocaust. The cost of the cemetery was allocated to the states based on population and the number of dead to be buried from the individual states. The former Confederacy had no money to contribute to this effort. Add that to the bitterness and Union only were reinterred off the battlefield and placed here at the National Cemetery.

There are 4,776 Union soldiers buried here –about 1,800 unknown. They lie in a crescent around the central statue organized by states. Each state has a section as you go through the field. The cemetery was dedicated on the 5th anniversary of the battle, September 17, 1867. The President of the United States was here for the dedication, along with the governors of Maryland and Pennsylvania. 15,000 people came out for the dedication.

Confederate dead laid across these fields in shallow graves for five more years. Ten years after the battle, a Confederate cemetery was created in Hagerstown and most of the

dead of Antietam were reinterred there. Some Confederate soldiers are buried in Frederick and some are buried in Shepherdstown – the first town across the Potomac River.

The central statue here at the National Cemetery was added 18 years after the battle in 1880. It is known as the “Private Soldier Monument.” It weighs over 250 tons, made up of 21 blocks of stone. The statue features a Union soldier standing “in place rest” facing north. Locally it’s known as “Old Simon”, and Simon had a long journey to get to this spot. He was carved in Westerly, Rhode Island and then in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, this statue stood in front of the exhibition hall. From there, it was moved to Washington DC, placed on a canal boat on the C&O Canal and as they were placing it on the boat, the top half of the soldier fell off into the river. It took a couple of months to get him out, to get him back on the boat, to bring him up the C&O Canal here to Sharpsburg where he was transferred through town on gigantic log rollers, placed into position for battle anniversary 1880 where it was dedicated. Over 10,000 people attended the event.

Two other important features here at the National Cemetery include the Lodge building which is behind me. The Lodge building was the superintendent’s original quarters and the original visitor contact station. It was designed by architect Richard Pells who also designed the Library of Congress in Washington DC. The Rostrum was also added for public gatherings the first and most important of which was in 1869 - Decoration Day. Decoration Day is known today as Memorial Day. And every year here in Sharpsburg since 1869, the citizens that live in this community have gathered here to remember the fallen dead who gave the last full measure of devotion for their nation.

The soldiers of the Union Army did the best they could in this terrible tragedy burying 4,000 bodies. We think that all of those men had been reinterred here in the National Cemetery; however there has been a couple of exceptions. In 1988, the remains of four soldiers from New York, most probably of the famous Irish Brigade, were discovered on the battlefield. Those remains were reinterred here at the National Cemetery. Just last October, a visitor who was hiking the battlefield came across the remains of another New York soldier. His remains will probably be moved to a national cemetery back in New York.

This was an active national cemetery until 1953 when the cemetery closed. There are veterans buried here from the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. The cemetery has been closed for 60 years but there has been an exception. In October of 2000, the U.S.S. Cole was struck by terrorists. 19 sailors died that day. One of those sailors was Seaman Patrick Roy who grew up 5 minutes from the cemetery. His family came to the park and asked if there was any way he could be buried here. Now the cemetery has been closed for

60 years, but the park made an exception for a local neighbor and Patrick Roy now lies at rest on the far side of the cemetery.

The motto on the statue speaks to each and every one of us. "Not for themselves, but for their country" and that describes the men that surround the statue. What I like best about it is – it is not a statue of the great leaders of the Confederacy or the Union. It is a statue of a Union soldier, a private in the ranks - the true hero of the American Civil War and all wars before and since.

(Music)