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From the Archives

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Citizen-Soldiers, circa 1835

The common, or enrolled, militia--every able-bodied male citizen between the ages of 18 and 45--though an institution on the laws of every state, was not quite what one might expect it to be during the period 1820-1850. To say it was loosely organized and trained would be, in most cases, an understatement. For the general male population, the working class was not interested in military affairs or in the pomp and circumstance of war. In the East, where the enrolled militia was hardly necessary since the frontier had been conquered at least to the Mississippi River, the enrolled militia met rather irregularly once or twice a year for militia muster and drill, according to the law. If one had "the common defense of the nation" in mind when he came to view such musters, it was quickly dispelled as the day turned from muster to picnic to drunken brawl in rather too rapid succession. Accounts of common militia musters are myriad in newspapers and writings of the period; we shall savor a sample from Georgia historical fiction:

At twelve, about one third, perhaps one half, of the men had collected, and an inspector's return of the number present, and of their arms would have stood nearly thus: 1 captain, 1 lieutenant; ensign, none; fifers, none; privates, present, 24; ditto, absent, 40; guns, 14; gunlocks, 12; ramrods, 10; rifle pouches, 3; bayonets, none; belts, none; spare flints, none; cartridges, none; horsewhips, walking canes, and umbrellas, 10.

[In going through the manual:] "Tention the whole! Please to observe, gentlemen, that at the word `fire!' you must fire; that is, if any of your guns are loaden'd, you must not shoot in yearnest, but only make pretence like; and you, gentlemen, fellow-soldiers, who's armed with nothing but sticks, riding-switches, and corn-stalks, needn't go through the firings, but stand as you are, and keep yourself to yourselves."

[The drill proved just as ludicrous:] "Tention the whole! To the left--left, no--right--that is, the left--I mean the right--left, wheel, march!" In this the captain was strictly obeyed; some wheeling to the right, some to the left, and some to the right-left, or both ways.

"Stop! halt! Let us try it again! I could not just then tell my right hand from my left! You must excuse me . . . experience makes perfect, as the saying is. Long as I have served, I find something new to learn every day; but all's one for that."

Before the aforementioned evolutions, however, the captain had twice sent for some grog "for their present accommodation" to settle the dispute about quitting or at least omitting the drill. Following the aforementioned mixup, the whole were dismissed. They immediately returned to you-know-where for more of you-know-what. So much for another militia muster.

Source: Richard J. Sommers, ed., *Vignettes of Military History, Volume III* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army Military History Institute, February 1982), Vignette No. 119, contributed by Michael J. Winey, drawn from Augustus Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes*.

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