Kyle – U.S. History

REVOLUTIONARY TEENAGERS

Some rebellious kids talk about murder, mayhem, and the madness of their lives during the American Revolution.

Almost all the time, it's the old guys who plan the wars and the young ones who fight them. The American Revolution was no exception. Boys as young as 10 were drummers; their older brothers were cannon fodder. And teenage girls had to grow up just as fast. When the men went off to war, women of all ages ran family businesses and farms, scavenged for food, and even fought off invaders.

What follows are teenagers' descriptions of their war experiences. Many of these selections were recorded years after the Revolution, in 1832, when the U.S. Government promised veterans a pension if they could prove — through telling an authentic story — that they had fought in the Continental Army. These stories, America's first oral histories, are accompanied by selections from the diaries, letters, and memoirs of America's founding teenagers.

VOLUNTEERS AND DODGERS

John Adlum of York, Pennsylvania, was 17 years old when the recruiters showed up in his hometown.

Independence was declared on July 4, 1776, and on the evening of July 6, the Honorable James Smith, our neighbor (and one of the signers of the Declaration), arrived at York to see how the good people of the town relished the Declaration. On the morning of July 7, the four companies of the town militia were paraded (Mr. Smith was colonel of the miltia) when the Declaration of Independence was read. Mr. Smith made a speech, pointing out the advantage that it would be to our country, then threw up his hat and hurrahed for liberty and independence. The militia on parade and others attending followed their example. There was then a proposition of "who will go to camp," when I believe everyone on parade without an exception volunteered to go, of which I was one.

Jehu Grant, a 20-year-old slave in Rhode Island, ran away from his Tory master in 1776, to join up with the Continental Army.

I was then grown to manhood, in the full vigor and strength of life, and heard much about the cruel and arbitrary things done by the British. Their ships lay within a few miles of my master's house, which stood near the shore, and I was confident that my master traded with them, and I suffered much from fear that I should be sent aboard a ship of war. This I disliked. But when I saw liberty poles and the people all engaged for the support of freedom, I could not but like and be pleased with such things. These considerations induced me to enlist into the American Army, where I served faithful about 10 months, when my master found and took me home. Had I been taught to read or understand the precepts of the gospel, "Servants obey your masters," I might have done otherwise, notwithstanding the songs of liberty that saluted my ear, thrilled through my heart.

Samuel Shelley, 16 years old, from New Jersey, was less enthusiastic.

I enlisted under the following circumstances. Two American officers came to my father's at Canoe Brook and desired a conveyance to Green Brook. My father sent me with them. When we arrived, I was asked concerning my age. I told them I was 12. They let me pass.

When I reached home, one James Ballard, an orderly sergeant in the army, came and inquired my age. I told him the same thing. He then went to an old aunt of mine who was ignorant of his purpose, and from her he learned the truth. He then said to me, "My fine fellow, do you not know that there is a heavy fine if you do not join the army when you get to your age?" I told him I did not. He then carried me off to Green Brook, where they persuaded me to enlist. I did not like to do it.

Sarah Osborn, a new bride at age 20, followed her husband off to war. Although hundreds of women traveled with the Continental Army, only Osborn recorded her story.

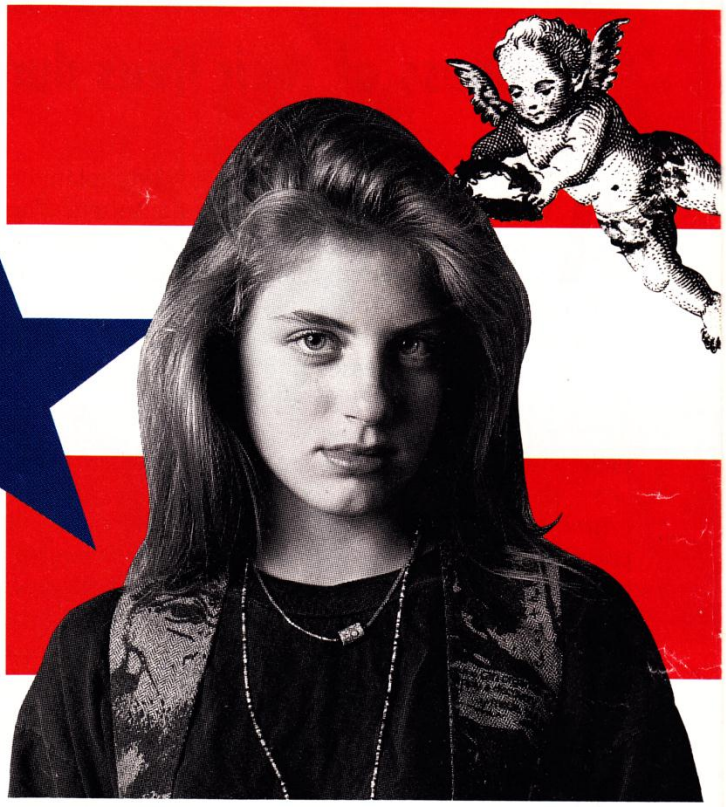
After I married Osborn, he informed me that he was returning to war, and that he desired me to go with him.

I took my stand just back of the American tents, say about a mile from the town and busied myself washing, mending, and cooking for the soldiers, in which I was assisted by the other females; some men washed their own clothing. I cooked and carried in beef, and bread, and coffee in a gallon pot to the soldiers in the entrenchment.

KILL OR BE KILLED

For both new and experienced soldiers, one of the first emotions at the outset of battle was gut-wrenching fear. Garret Watts, a member of the North Carolina militia, was 20 when he went into battle at Camden, South Carolina.

The two armies came near each other at about 12 o'clock at night (this was in the year 1780). I well remember everything that occurred. I can state on oath that I believe my gun was the first gun fired, notwithstanding the orders, for we were close to the enemy, who appeared to maneuver in contempt of us. I fired without thinking except that I might prevent the man opposite from killing me. The discharge and loud roar soon became general from one end of the lines to the other. Amongst other things, I confess I was amongst the first that fled. The cause of that I cannot tell, except that everyone I saw was about to do the same. It was instantaneous. There was no effort to rally, no encouragement to fight. Officers and men joined in the flight. I threw away my gun and ran.



Joseph Martin of Connecticut was 15 years old when he joined the Continental Army. He served for 7 years.

We joined another detachment, the whole composing a corps of about 500 men and marched towards the enemy's right wing. We kept concealed from them as long as possible by keeping behind the bushes. When we could no longer keep ourselves concealed, we marched into the open fields and formed our line. The British immediately began to retreat to the main body of their army. We pursued without order. When within about

five rods of the retreating foe, I could distinguish everything about them. They were retreating in line, though in some disorder. I singled out a man and took my aim directly between his shoulders. He was a good mark, being a broad-shouldered fellow. What became of him I know not; the fire and smoke hid him from my sight. One thing I know, that is, I took as deliberate aim at him as ever I did at any game in my life. But after all, I hope I did not kill him, although I intended to at the time.

ON THE HOMEFRONT

In 1777, when Sally Wister turned 16, the British occupied Philadelphia, her hometown. Sally's family fled to a small town 15 miles away, and Sally immediately started a diary to record her experiences. Her first entries describe the good-looking Continental captain who shares their new house. For Sally, as for many young people, the war offered a rare opportunity to meet new people. These advantages, however, were offset by the undeniable terror of death — either one's own, or that of a loved one.

This morning, I dressed in a green skirt and dark short gown. Provoking. About nine I took my work and seated myself in the parlor. Not long had I sat, when in came Captain Dandridge — the handsomest man in existence, at least that I had ever seen.

But stop here, while I say, the night before, chatting about dress, he said he had no patience with those officers who, every morn, wait to be dressed and powdered.

"I am," said I, "excessively fond of powder, and think it very becoming."

"Are you?" he replied.

I left off where he came in. He was powdered very white, a pretty colored brown coat, lapeled with green, and white waistcoat. He made a truly elegant figure.

"Good morning, Miss Sally. You are very well, I hope."

"Very well. Pray sit down," which he did, close by me. "Oh, dear," said I, "I see thee is powdered."

"I have dressed myself for you."

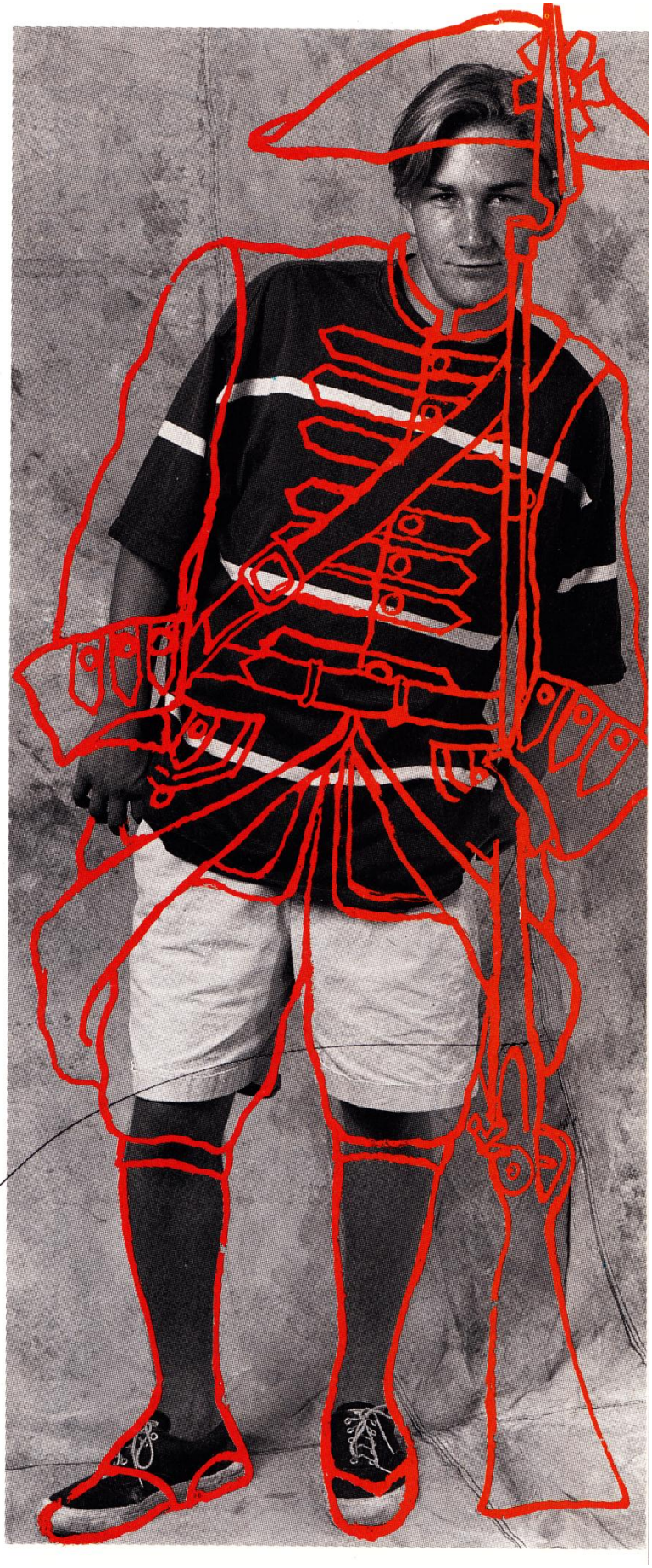
Will I be excused, if I look upon his being powdered as a compliment to me?

Tis impossible to write an account of our conversation. Be it sufficient to say that we had a multiplicity of chat.

Weeks later, Sally had more serious matters on her mind.

I am all alive with fear. The English have come out to attack our army. They are on Chestnut Hill. What will become of us, only six miles distant?

We are in hourly expectation of an engagement. I fear we shall be in the midst of it. Heaven defend us from so dreadful a sight. The battle of Germantown, and the horrors of that day, are recent in my mind. It will be sufficiently dreadful if we are only in hearing of the firing, to think how many of our fellow-creatures are plunged into the boundless ocean of eternity, few of them prepared to meet their fate. But they are summoned before an all-merciful Judge, from whom they have a great deal to hope.



LIES AND PROMISES

Josiah Atkins enlisted in the Continental Army convinced that God was on his side. He began to have doubts about the justice of his cause, however, in 1781, when he marched past George Washington's plantation.

This day we pass General Washington's plantation, which is large. Some men in these parts, they tell me, own 30,000 acres of land, and many have 200 to 300 Negroes to work on it as slaves. Alas! That Washington, who pretends to stand for the *rights of mankind,* for the *liberties of society,* can delight in oppression, and that even of the worst kind! These poor creatures are enslaved — not only so, but likewise deprived of that which nature affords even to the beasts. Many are almost without provision, having very little for support of nature; and many are as naked as they came into the world.

Like most in the Army, Joseph Martin was barely fed, clothed, or housed. In the winter of 1779, starving and furious, he and the rest of his abused regiment protested.

We had borne it as long as human nature could endure, and to bear it longer we considered folly. Accordingly, one pleasant day, the men spent the most of their time growling like soreheaded dogs. At evening roll call, they began to show their dissatisfaction by snapping at the officers and acting contrary to their orders.

When the protest turned into mutiny, the officers ordered some troops from Pennsylvania to surround the regiment.

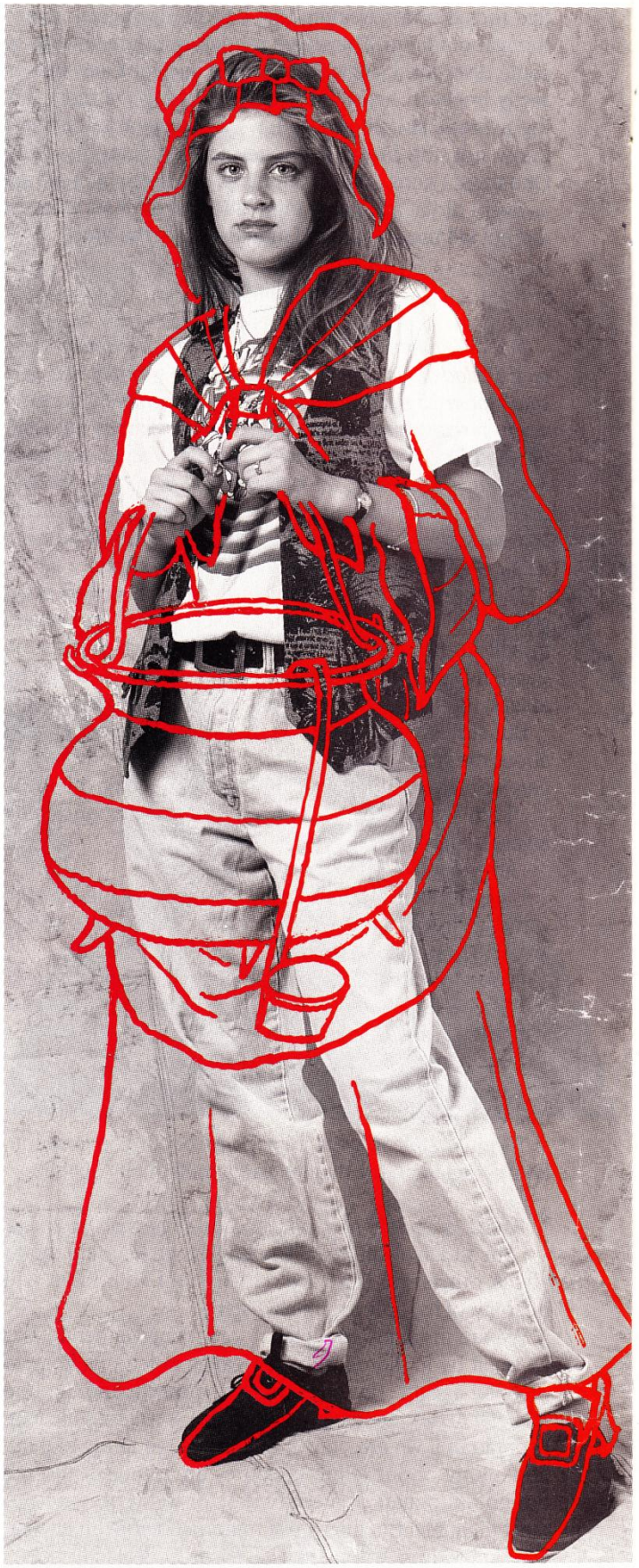
At length, the Pennsylvania troops inquired what was going on. Informed that we had mutinied on account of the scarcity of provisions, they said, "Let us join them." Their officers needed no further hinting. The troops were quickly ordered back to their quarters.

We dispersed to our huts, but the worm of hunger gnawing kept us from being entirely quiet. We vented our spleen at our country and government, then at our officers, and then at ourselves for our imbecility in staying there and starving for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us, so they could enjoy themselves while we were keeping a cruel enemy from them.

THE LEGACY OF WAR

After 8 years of death and destruction, many citizens of the new democracy struggled to convince themselves it had been worth it. Moses Hall, 16 years old, from North Carolina, relates his strange process of justifying the violence.

The evening after our battle with the Tories, I was invited by some of my comrades to go and see some of the prisoners. We went to where six were standing together. Some discussion taking place, I heard some of our men cry out, and the prisoners were immediately hewed to pieces with broadswords. At first I bore the scene without any emotion, but upon a moment's reflection, I felt such horror as I never did before nor have since, and returning to my quarters and throwing myself upon my blanket, I



contemplated the cruelties of war until overcome and unmanned by a distressing gloom from which I was not relieved until commencing our march next morning.

As we marched along, I discovered lying upon the ground a youth about 16, who, having come out to view the British, they ran him through with a bayonet. Though able to speak, he was mortally wounded. The sight of this unoffending boy, relieved me of my distressful feelings for the slaughter of the Tories, and I desired nothing so much as the opportunity of participating in their destruction.

Joseph Martin described other crimes of war.

We encamped on the fields for the night, the canopy of heaven for our tent. Early next morning we marched and came up with the rear of the British Army. We had ample opportunity to see the devastation they made in their rout; cattle killed and lying about the fields and pastures, some with a small spot of skin taken off their hind quarters and a mess of steak taken out, household furniture hacked and broken to pieces; wells filled up and mechanics' and farmers' tools destroyed. It was in the height of the season of cherries; the creatures could not climb the trees for the fruit, but universally cut them down.

Years after the war ended, Eliza Wilkinson of South Carolina, remembered vividly the day the British invaded.

Well, now comes the day of terror — the third of June 1779. I heard the horses of the inhuman Britons coming in such a furious manner, that they seemed to tear up the earth, and the riders at the same time bellowing out the most horrid curses imaginable, which chilled my whole frame. Surely, thought I, such horrid language denotes nothing less than death; but I'd no time for thought — they were up to the house — entered with drawn swords and pistols in their hands; indeed, they rushed in, in the most furious manner, crying out, "Where are these women rebels?" They began to plunder the house of every thing they thought valuable; our trunks were split to pieces, and each mean, pitiful wretch crammed his bosom with the contents, which were our apparel.

After they were gone, I began to be sensible of the danger I'd been in, and the thoughts of the vile men seemed worse than their presence. I trembled so with terror, that I could not support myself. I went into the room, threw myself on the bed, and gave way to a violent burst of grief, which seemed to be some relief to my full-swollen heart.

For an hour or two, I indulged the most melancholy reflections. The whole world appeared to me as a theater, where nothing was acted but cruelty, bloodshed, and oppression; where neither age nor sex escaped the horrors of injustice and violence; where the lives and property of the innocent and inoffensive were in continual danger, and lawless power ranged at large.

Excerpts from: *Sally Wister's Journal,* Albert Cook Myers, editor; *Letters of Eliza Wilkinson,* Caroline Gilman, editor; *The Diary of Josiah Atkins,* Steven E. Kagle, editor; *The Narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin,* George F. Scheer, editor. All other excerpts from *The Revolution Remembered, Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence,* John C. Dann, editor.