



As we sped down the highway, the quiet and calming hum of the car seemed somehow at odds with the late-summer lushness of the Pennsylvania landscape. Without warning this quiet calm was shattered when my Uncle Alex yelled, “Firsts!”

“Uh, military railroads”, I mumbled, drawing myself out of a sleepy reverie.

“A working submarine”, Alex countered quickly.

“Hospital ships.”

“Flame throwers.”

Back and forth we went. We were playing one of our many Civil War word games. This one consisted of calling out all of the many things that the Civil War saw the first instance of. It was a great way to pass time when on a long road trip. I remember this particular trip with such clarity for two reasons. One was that we were on our way to visit Wheatland, the home of James Buchanan, a destination that I had been looking forward to for some time. The second reason is that the very next day was my birthday. I was turning eight.

I suppose for most children it would have seemed strange to be spending their birthday at the former home of a pre-Civil War president. To me it only seemed like a long-awaited treat. My Uncle Alex was an amateur Civil War historian with an infectious love of learning. Alex’s sickness took the form of believing that late 19th century American history was more exciting and more worthy of our attention than any other period of human existence. It would prove to be an illness that soon held me under its spell also. It all started when Alex bought me an Abraham Lincoln action figure for my 4th birthday. I remember unwrapping the gift paper, revealing the strange gaunt figure as my Uncle described to me in hushed tones who this man was and what he had done for our country. The real gift that Alex gave me over the years, however, was that he never acted as if it were odd for a young boy to have a keen interest in history. Because staying up late debating whether or not Stonewall Jackson was a hypochondriac was treated as perfectly normal, perfectly normal it became.

Looking back, I first remember thinking about what I would later realize was ethics or morals in relation to Robert E. Lee and his decision to support his home state of Virginia against the Union. My first contemplation of death took place after reading the correspondence of a young Union soldier who was shot and killed at Manassas before his younger bride ever received his letter. In short, my entire awareness has been shaped and influenced by my Uncle Alex’s colorful pedagogy. I don’t know what my life would have been without his influence but it certainly would have been different. I’m grateful that I shall never know.

Uncle Alex didn’t just teach me about a period of history. He taught me about life. He taught me the power of opening young minds to the mystery of knowledge. Most importantly, he taught me how to live life with excitement and passion. They are lessons I shall never forget.