



## Episode 7, 2005: Civil War Soldier Photo Shreveport, Louisiana

Elyse Luray: Our next story challenges some long-held views about the role of women during the Civil War.

The American Civil War ravages our still-young Republic for four punishing years. Of the nearly 3 million Americans who take up arms in the War Between the States, more than half a million perish. At its most brutal, in a single day, several thousand men are slaughtered, but surprisingly, not all those battlefield casualties were men. A collector in Shreveport, Louisiana, has found a remarkable photograph that will change how you think about the Civil War.

Tom Pressly: when I first saw the image, I thought there was something that was very unusual about it. There's no facial hair, and the hands, also, are very delicate-looking to my eyes. I would be very excited if my theory of this image was correct.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray. I'm meeting Tom Pressley to hear more about this intriguing photograph.

Tom: This is a six-plate ambrotype of a confederate soldier that I think is very unique.

Elyse: Let's see. Oh, wow.

Tom: The soldier is at least double-armed with a musket and a pistol, has a militia hat that's on. Also notice the striping on the soldier's pants.

Elyse: So what can I tell you?

Tom: I want to know if this is a woman.

Elyse: A woman? Okay. Well, that's something I didn't think of. Tom catches me completely off-guard. A woman disguised as a confederate soldier? What makes you think she's a woman?

Tom: Well, if you look at the image, first of all, the soldier does not have any facial hair. To me, the shoulders look like they're smaller than what they should be for the size of the soldier. I think the waist seems to be high and relatively smaller. If you look at the knees of this soldier, they're touching each other, and I can't do that comfortably, but my wife can easily do that.

Elyse: Do you have any other information for me?

Tom: The previous owners do not know any more information than this with the exception of -- it was published in a book back in 1983 called *Even more Confederate Faces*. The caption says, "An unidentified member of the 2nd Louisiana." And I have an 8x10 photograph I brought for you. I thought this might be easier to see, some of the image blown up. The more I look at this image, I'm convinced it's a woman.

Elyse: Tom is certain the soldier in this photo is a woman, but in all my years at Christie's auction house, I've never come across any Civil War images of a woman dressed as a soldier. I can certainly see the physical qualities that he's talking about, though, but this could just as easily be a young man. There were soldiers as young as 13 years old in the Civil War, and since food was often scarce, that might easily account for how thin this soldier looks. Back at the hotel, I open the case to get a better look at the photograph. All right, there's nothing on the back, but it's nice and clean. It appears to be in pristine shape. I'd say it's definitely original. I'm going to call Wes. I've sent a scan of this to my colleague Wes Cowan. He's an expert on Americana photography. It's an image on glass, and the back is painted black.

Get more on History Detectives at: [www.pbs.org/historydetectives](http://www.pbs.org/historydetectives)



Wes: Okay, so if it's on glass, it's an ambrotype. Now, an ambrotype is a kind of photograph that was very popular from about the mid-1850s through the early part of the Civil War.

Elyse: Okay.

Wes: Think of it as a negative. And the reason the back is painted black is to make it a positive. So if you took that black backing away and you held it up to the light, you would be looking, basically, at a negative.

Elyse: The soldier's carrying a musket and a bayonet and a pistol.

Wes: They may not be the soldier's weapons. They could be the photographer's props. A lot of times during the war, soldiers came in and they wanted to look tough and fierce for the folks back home, and so they would arm themselves to the teeth. Let me do a little more homework on the guns, and I can probably send you some more information.

Elyse: That would be great. At least we know it's the real thing.

Wes: There's no question it's the real McCoy.

Elyse: Okay, speak to you soon. So it's an authentic early Civil War image of a confederate soldier. That's a start, but it doesn't get me any closer to finding out if this he could be a she. And if this truly is a woman in disguise, it raises another question: why on earth was she masquerading as a man? I thought I knew a fair amount about the War Between the States, but I was pretty startled by what I discovered in my research: newspaper articles like this one. "Women who donned uniforms and fought in the Civil War. Annie Dillybridge, a 16-year-old girl, enlisted at Detroit so that she might be near her sweetheart." Here's another one: "Mrs. Belle Reynolds was with her husband during several heavy battles." Were they just a few rebellious thrill-seekers or was there more to this? I'm meeting with Deanne Blanton, senior military archivist for the National Archives. She spent more than a decade digging through material identifying Civil War soldiers who were women. She's written a book on the subject. It documents an entirely new history of the War Between the States: women in combat in the 19th century. So in your opinion, how many women fought in the Civil War?

Deanne Blanton: I don't think we'll ever know exactly how many women fought. I was able to Document about 275 to my satisfaction.

Elyse: Hundreds of women and probably more managed to get themselves to the front lines. Why would a woman want to fight in a war?

Deanne: Why would men want to fight in a war? Women went to war for very much the same reasons men did. They went because they were patriotic, and the paycheck alone was an enticement for a number of poor women. A number of these women were farm girls or from pioneer families. They already knew how to shoot a gun. They already knew how to hunt. They already knew how to ride horses.

Elyse: Okay, so I understand them having the physical ability. They were farmers and they were pioneers, but how did they pass as men?

Deanne: Recruiters were supposed to subject enlistees to a physical exam, but at least half the time, they didn't do it. There was such pressure to get fresh soldiers to the front. So it was very easy for women to slip into the army. Most of the women who were found out to be women, it was because they were wounded, or it was because they were sick, or even if you were discovered postmortem.

Elyse: What would happen to a woman when she got caught?

Deanne: Some women were sent home. Other women were sent to jail.

Elyse: Would you say that these women were pioneers?

Deanne: One of the reasons Civil War soldier women were so successful in the military is because no one knew they were women. Their performance on the field of battle was judged solely on the basis of their merit. There was no gender discrimination against them because the world viewed them as men, and they proved that when given a challenge, they were up to that challenge.

Elyse: Okay, let's get back to the photograph.

Deanne: It could very well be a woman.

Elyse: Have you ever seen this specific photograph before?

Deanne: I've never seen this photograph before, but it's similar to other photographs of women soldiers from the Civil War. For example, this is Sarah Rosetta Wakeman.

Elyse: She really looks like a man. I would never think that that was a woman. Now, this photograph was published in a book on confederate soldiers with a caption that said "unidentified soldier, 2nd Louisiana infantry." Deanne has found evidence of two women soldiers who fought for Louisiana. Could the mystery soldier in our photograph be one of them?

Deanne: One was Loretta Geonetta Velasquez.

Elyse: But what infantry was she in?

Deanne: She was in the 21<sup>st</sup> Louisiana infantry.

Elyse: Our soldier was in the Second Louisiana, so we know it wasn't her. Who's my other hope?

Deanne: This is the brief military service record of William Bradley, who was a private in the confederate army. It shows that Private Bradley was mustered into the regiment on April 18, 1862.

Elyse: "Mustered in through a mistake. Was of female sex."

Deanne: Bradley was the wife of another soldier in the regiment, and Bradley was allowed to stay with the regiment, and she became the company laundress.

Elyse: You know, I noticed here that it says that she served in the Miles' Legion. Could that be part of the 2nd Louisiana?

Deanne: No, it's a different regiment from the 2nd Louisiana.

Elyse: Okay, it's not William Bradley either. So far, I've come up empty-handed. We still don't know if this



soldier is one of the women who fought in the Civil War. Deanne's research paints a completely different picture of 19th-century American women. Ironically, these female soldiers were not only ahead of their time, but they were ahead of ours. Their disguises put them on a truly level playing field, one that was completely gender-blind. These radical Victorians really challenged my preconceptions about what it meant to be a woman. Maybe science can tell me whether this soldier was one of those women. Our best bet is a forensics analysis. I'm at the University of North Texas, outside Dallas. Their laboratory of forensic anthropology specializes in human identification using high-technology forensics. Dr. H. Gill-King is the director of the lab. He agrees the image has several female-looking features.

Dr. Gill-King: It could be a woman. If you want to take facial characteristics first, this person has very small cheekbones.

Elyse: The facial features are especially curious.

Dr. Gill-King: You see what I mean by the difference in the brow? Very smooth.

Elyse: But a forensics analysis only begins with the naked eye. Dr. Gill-King walks me through the complex process.

Dr. Gill-King: There are hundreds of measurements you can make on the face to see whether the various lengths and widths of things might be more appropriate to a male or a female. If you'll let me take a couple digital photographs of your face from the side and the front, I can show you what I'm talking about.

Elyse: He makes his point by measuring a profile of yours truly.

Dr. Gill-King: And for females, the mean for the group would be 89. You're well over the mean, way into the female range. So that's good news.

Elyse: I'm all woman.

Dr. Gill-King: that's right.

Elyse: But we need something conclusive to determine our soldier's gender. Now, tell me, what can we learn from this photograph?

Dr. Gill-King: One of the very telling measurements is the distance from the bottom of the lip to the cleft and then the distance from the cleft to the bottom of the chin.

Elyse: Women have smaller chin measurements than men. Now we're getting somewhere.

Dr. Gill-King: We come up with a proportion of about 50%, and so based on the characteristics of the lip and chin, we're well into the male range.

Elyse: So maybe this isn't a woman.

Dr. Gill-King: The problem is we have to guess at where that cleft is because of the lack of sharpness of the photograph.

Elyse: The resolution of our photograph can't give us an accurate read on the soldier's chin. Our



measurements could be misleading. So now what's our best bet for trying to identify the gender of the soldier?

Dr. Gill-King: If we knew the heights of this particular individual, we could compare it to the norms for 19th-century males and females.

Elyse: So what can we tell from this photograph?

Dr. Gill-King: As you can see, the heights of that bayonet is approximately near the top of the head. If you have a reliable source of information on the combined length of the musket and the bayonet, then you have a very good chance at determining what the stature of this individual is, give or take.

Elyse: The bayonet stretches just over our soldier's head. This could be a clue that tells us whether this is a woman. Look at this. I remember that Wes' e-mail had detailed information about the musket including its dimensions. So now we have a handle on the soldier's height, and with that, Dr. Gill-King can make his final analysis.

Dr. Gill-King: So that's 73, 74 inches.

Elyse: We found our answer. I can't wait to tell Tom. First, I want to thank you because this is probably one of the best investigations that I've done because I learned so much. I walked Tom along the little-known path through Civil War history. I tell him his photograph wasn't one of the female soldiers who's been unmasked so far. Then I share what our forensic examination revealed. Wes' e-mail told us that the musket's length was approximately 56 inches, plus about 19 inches for the bayonet. So together, that's 75 inches.

Dr. Gill-King: Give or take maybe an inch overlap where the bayonet mounts on the muzzle. So that's 73, 74 inches.

Elyse: So that means that this person is about 6 feet tall.

Dr. Gill-King: So 4 inches taller than the average male at 5'8" in the middle 19th century in America, and actually, a foot or more over the average height for a female.

Elyse: In your opinion, is there any chance that this soldier could be a woman?

Dr. Gill-King: If you look at the percentage of women who might have been this height in that era, I would say far fewer than one percent.

Elyse: Tom, we couldn't prove that this was a confederate woman soldier. The good news is we know that it's authentic, and we know it's a very early example. Were you disappointed that you brought this object to History Detectives?

Tom: I'm certain this is a woman. I just can't believe that this is a man. I bet you \$100 that's a woman.

Elyse: You're on. Everyone who looked at this image had their own take on whether it could have been a woman. Too often, we rely on visual stereotypes and preconceptions to tell us what we're seeing, but having watched how these Victorian women staked their own claim to American history, I'll never look at Civil War images the same way again.