

Readers' Theater: Ghosts in the Schoolyard

Cast: *Narrator*

3 Students

Ghosts:

3 Union Guards

4 Confederate Prisoners of War

Narrator: It's a school night in early October. The leaves on the trees are turning their Fall colors. The wind has picked up and there's a chill in the air as three students make their way home across their schoolyard on the south side of Chicago. They're being careful to stay clear of an orange fence surrounding big holes that have been dug in the ground.

Student #1: I've got so much homework that I could be up all night!

Student #2: You know, I don't get it. Why do we have to know this stuff? We're never going to use it, so why do they make us learn it?

Student #3: You're right! Who cares about something that happened over a hundred and fifty years ago?

Prisoner #1: I care!

Student #2: Who said that?

Student #1: I didn't say anything.

Student #3: You're hearing things.

Prisoner #1: I said, (*with emphasis*) I care about what happened over a hundred and fifty years ago.

Student #2: Whoa, what's happening here? Where's that voice coming from?

Prisoner #1: It's coming from me! Over a hundred and fifty years ago I stood right where you are standing now.

Student #3: OK, OK! You know what, I think we're on homework overload and . . .

Guard #1: Relax, haven't you ever heard of ghosts? We're very real and we've got a story to tell.

Student #1: You mean there's more than one of you? This is crazy!

Guard #1: There's lots of us. We were alive in the 1860s, when tensions in this country exploded into a war between the Northern states and the Southern states.

Student #3: So, there was a war. What's the big deal? Anybody who was around then is dead.

Guard #2: It was a big deal. It was called the American Civil War. It cost the lives of 600,000 people, divided families, destroyed the economy of the Southern states, and . . .

Guard #3: . . . led to the passage of the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution abolishing slavery.

- Student #1:** You know, I looked ahead and the next chapter in our social studies book is on the Civil War. These ghost guys might just be the answer to some extra points for us.
- Student #2:** You're right! So, what about the Civil War?
- Guard #1:** The country was divided over slavery. I lived not far from here in Illinois. I'm proud to say that like many people in the North, I was an abolitionist, meaning I wanted to get rid of slavery.
- Prisoner #2:** I'm from South Carolina. People in my state, like most Southern states, wanted slavery to continue and even spread westward as the country grew. We wanted to keep our way of life.
- Guard #2:** Congress tried but couldn't find a compromise solution to end the conflict.
- Prisoner #3:** In 1860, South Carolina became the first of eleven Southern states to secede from, or leave the Union. We formed our own country, the Confederate States of America. Jefferson Davis was our President.
- Guard #3:** Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States of America, or the Union. He wanted the Southern states to stay in the Union, and he wanted slavery to end.
- Guard #2:** In April 1861, the Confederacy and the Union went to war.
- Student #1:** What's that got to do with us? Why are all you ghosts in our schoolyard?
- Guard #1:** Your schoolyard isn't just a schoolyard. Your school stands on ground that was part of Camp Douglas. Camp Douglas was built in 1861 on over sixty acres of land in a part of Chicago known today as Bronzeville. It was named for Stephen A. Douglas, a United States Senator from Illinois.
- Guard #3:** The camp stretched from 31st Street on the north to 33rd Place on the south, from Cottage Grove on the east, and Giles Avenue on the west.
- Student #3:** Our school used to be called Stephen A. Douglas School and Giles Avenue is the street alongside our schoolyard. This is getting interesting.
- Student #1:** What was Camp Douglas?
- Guard #2:** At first, Camp Douglas trained Union soldiers. I was one of 40,000 Union troops who were trained at Camp Douglas. Then we were sent off to fight in the war.
- Student #2:** There's a sign on the fence of the building across the street from our school that says something about Black soldiers at Camp Douglas.
- Guard #3:** The building used to be the Griffin Funeral home. Mr. Griffin's grandfather enlisted in the U.S. army. Along with other free Black men, he was trained at Camp Douglas and served in Company B 29th Regiment of the U.S. Colored Infantry.

- Prisoner #3:** Then, in 1862, Camp Douglas became a prisoner-of-war camp for Confederate soldiers captured in battles. By the time the war ended in 1865, over 30,000 of us passed through Camp Douglas.
- Student #3:** How did you get here?
- Prisoner #4:** I was captured at Fort Donelson, Tennessee. They took us by steamship to downstate Cairo, Illinois, and then by train to Chicago. The boat was crowded. We were piled in like hogs. The floor was covered with mud, slop, and tobacco spittle.
- Student #2:** Sounds awful.
- Prisoner #4:** It was February. Never seen snow before, and I was freezing. We didn't have winter clothes. When we got to Camp Douglas, they kept us standing in an open square for a long time. Some of us ended up with frost bitten hands and feet.
- Prisoner #2:** The camp were really crowded. They put us in barracks in Prisoners Square. We slept two men in a bunk. Three tiers of bunks were along each wall. Each barrack had a kitchen and a coal burning stove for heat. The barracks were raised on wooden legs and that made it really tough to escape. We thought about tunneling under the barracks, but it was too exposed.
- Prisoner #1:** The latrines, or toilets, were out back. Prisoners Square also had washhouses, coal sheds, a drugstore, a surgeon's office, a photo studio, and a guardhouse.
- Guard #1:** We stood watch on top of a 14-foot stockade fence that surrounded the camp, ready to fire on any Rebel who dared to cross the "deadline."
- Student #1:** Did you have to stay in the camp until the end of the war?
- Prisoner #3:** Nope. Sometimes each side would exchange prisoners. You could get out if you took the oath of allegiance to the Union, but to me it was a disgrace. How could I go back home to South Carolina after taking their oath? How could my people have any confidence in a man who would take the oath and desert a cause?
- Student #2:** What did you have to eat?
- Prisoner #2:** We didn't starve, but it wasn't what you'd call good eating. Each barracks got rations and prepared their own food. We got pickled pork or beef, and sometimes bacon, flour, hominy, coffee, tea, sugar, vinegar, salt, pepper, potatoes, and molasses.
- Prisoner #4:** Soup was made from the beef or bacon water, and once in a great while this water, or soup, would have a few beans or a potato, just enough to let us know, or believe, that a bean or potato had made its appearance somewhere near the kitchen, and perhaps had entered it!
- Prisoner #1:** You didn't hear a mention of fruits and vegetables, did you? That's because we didn't have them and that contributed to a lot of sickness.
- Student #3:** What did you do to pass the time?

- Prisoner #3:** Between roll calls, inspections, and daily details like bringing water or cutting wood for the kitchen, we managed to fill the time. Some of us were really good with our hands and made things like jewelry and smoking pipes. We played guitars and fiddles and organized our own entertainment.
- Prisoner #4:** We played marbles, checkers, cards, even did things we did as kids like playing leap frog. A group of us published a hand-written newspaper. It had camp stories, rumors, war news, original poetry, songs, jokes, and ads for things made by prisoners.
- Student #2:** What would happen if you didn't do what you were supposed to do?
- Prisoner #3:** Big trouble, that's what happened. You got sent to the dungeon. Or you might have to ride the mule. That meant straddling a two by four piece of wood four feet off the ground, sometimes with sand bags tied to your feet, for several hours.
- Prisoner #2:** The really dark side to Camp Douglas was how many of us got sick. We didn't have the clothing to withstand the winter weather. Sanitary conditions were really bad and medical facilities weren't good. Sickness of some kind was always here.
- Prisoner #4:** There were epidemics of smallpox. Everybody dreaded getting it. I was a nurse in the prison hospital. I saw death every day. Could be as high as thirty-five bodies in the dead house at any one time.
- Prisoner #1:** No one really knows exactly how many died at Camp Douglas. Probably somewhere between 6,000 and 7,000. Over 4,000 are buried in a mass grave called the Confederate Mound in Oak Woods Cemetery in Chicago. It's the largest mass grave in the Western Hemisphere.
- Student #1:** I'm starting to get the picture, but what's the point of hanging around here?
- Prisoner #2:** Haven't you noticed? They're digging us up again!
- Guard #2:** He doesn't mean that literally. Right now, archeologists and a bunch of volunteers are digging inside that orange fence in the schoolyard hoping to find what we left behind.
- Student #3:** So that's what those holes are for. Have they found anything?
- Guard #3:** They've found evidence that we were here including pieces of pipes that we smoked, a letter B which was a badge on a Union cap, a button from a Union uniform, and percussion caps and minié balls from Civil War weapons.
- Student #2:** How long are you folks going to stick around?
- Prisoner #2:** That depends. Our story has been buried too long. We're not going to rest until people today know about Camp Douglas and the important role it played in the American Civil War. When that happens, we'll be able to rest in peace.
- Narrator:** Like these students, all of you may discover that the past is not dead. People long gone still have a voice. Their words echo throughout time and allow us to know history through the eyes of those who lived it.