



Chicago Historical Society



# THE CIVIL WAR: UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

## Who is William Huff? Blueback or Grayback?

**Grade level:** Late elementary

**Estimated time:** Two class periods

**Specific topic:** Analysis of the diary of William Huff,  
a Civil War Confederate prisoner of war

**Subtopic:** Civil War slang



*Painting of Camp Douglas by Union Private Albert Moyer*

### Teacher background information

**T**he following Civil War unit is based on a diary written by Private William D. Huff. It begins after Huff was captured at the Battle of Chickamauga, fought September 18–19, 1863. In the diary, Huff narrates his harrowing experiences at Camp Douglas, Chicago’s Confederate prison camp. The diary contains more than thirty detailed drawings and descriptions of life in this prison camp. Topics include escape attempts, harsh punishments, and disease. Huff ends the diary with his parole and return to his hometown of St. Mary’s Parish, Louisiana.

Prior to teaching this lesson, students should have a general understanding of both sides of the Civil War, including the reasons for dividing, seceding, and fighting, as well as the strategies, relative strengths, and major victories of both the North and the South.



**Key concepts**

Injustice, loneliness, communication, division, loyalty, and language

**Key questions**

What are your feelings about the Civil War, the Union, and the Confederacy? Do you think where you are raised directly impacts your perspective about the Civil War? Why or why not? With which side do you most sympathize? Do you think that the language one uses in his or her diary gives glimpses into his or her life, background, socioeconomic status, and culture? Do you think studying the language of the past helps us to see history more clearly?

**Goals of this lesson**

1. To learn that people in history, in this case the Civil War, were real people who were not so different from us.
2. To realize that no matter what side a soldier fought for, he still endured the same trials and fears as the men fighting for the other side.
3. To explore and understand how language adds authenticity to a document and helps to better our understanding of a time period.

**Objectives**

1. Students will work cooperatively to derive factual information about a place and time period through observations, critical thinking, analytical skills, and deductive reasoning while evaluating Huff's diary.
2. Students will use Huff's diary to identify Civil War slang words and their meanings.
3. Students will decipher meanings of other slang words used during the Civil War.
4. Students will compare and contrast historical contexts and changes in word meanings beginning with the Civil War through present day.

**Materials**

Master copies of all photographs and handouts are provided.

1. Huff diary excerpt sheets (one per group)
2. Huff diary photograph (for display or one per group)
3. Diary analysis worksheet (one per group)
4. Civil War slang worksheet (one per student)
5. Paper and pens

**Procedures**

This lesson plan requires cooperative learning in groups of three to five.

1. Discuss the meaning of "slang." Webster defines slang as "a nonstandard vocabulary used especially in casual speech and consisting of arbitrary and often ephemeral coinages and figures of speech."
2. Discuss slang words that are used today that may be unfamiliar to past or future generations. What does the use of slang say about us? What would it reveal to someone else from another culture or time? In what way do we use slang? Generate examples and discuss what different terms say about us:

**Sample terms**

**shorty** . . . . . term of endearment for someone younger than you

**boo** . . . . . loved one

**peeps** . . . . . friends

**whack** . . . . . bad

**the bomb** . . . . the best

3. Distribute the diary excerpts and a diary analysis worksheet to each group. Display or distribute the photograph of Huff's diary so that students can see the actual artifact. Explain to students that they will read excerpts from the diary.
4. Instruct the class to underline or highlight any words they do not understand.

5. Instruct each group to read, examine, and discuss the diary. Ask your students to identify some of the words or phrases that give clues and information about the reality of life in a prison camp. Remind them to write down their impressions as they read and discuss. Instruct students to use the diary analysis worksheet as a guide to find answers. Remember that students may find unfamiliar words in Huff's diary that are not actually slang. Discuss the meanings of any unfamiliar words.
6. Discuss slang. Potential discussion questions include: What examples of slang did you underline? How does Huff use slang in his diary? Does the use of slang make Huff's diary more real or convincing? Why or why not? Does Huff's use of slang reveal clues as to his background or emotions about the war?
7. After evaluating the diary within the groups, discuss the findings as a class. What did you learn about Huff, about life during the Civil War, and about life in prison camps?
8. Follow up with questions similar to those posed before reading the diary: What are your feelings about the Civil War, the Union, and the Confederacy? Do you still sympathize the same way? Why or why not? What has changed?
9. Distribute the Civil War slang worksheet. Ask students to discuss each word in groups and write down possible "meanings."
10. Discuss the real meanings of slang terms as a class.

Answer Key: 1. stomach 2. Union paper currency 3. Southern soldiers 4. angry 5. go ahead and start 6. very comfortable 7. clothing 8. knapsack 9. tough guy 10. doing the job 11. a tough break 12. match 13. knife 14. surgeon 15. bad luck 16. have your picture taken 17. sewing kit 18. busy/bad 19. yeah! or hooray! 20. run, scatter, retreat 21. bullets 22. buddy 23. healthy 24. conceited 25. peanuts 26. beaten 27. coffee 28. going great! 29. to complain 30. food 31. cheater 32. kissing 33. meat 34. officer 35. talking 36. officer's gold braiding on uniform cuff 37. said of a dead body 38. well off, wealthy 39. to be killed in action

11. Imagine that you are William Huff, a prisoner of war held in Chicago at Camp Douglas. As Huff, write a letter to a friend or family member in your hometown of St. Mary's Parish, Louisiana.

### Suggestions for student assessment

1. Grade student efforts at completing slang sheets. Grades should depend on effort, not on correctness. For example, a completed worksheet with well-reasoned, creative meanings deserves a plus mark. If a student does not complete the entire assignment, he or she should earn a check mark. A student should earn a minus mark if he or she completes very little of the sheet or if his or her answers are not well reasoned.
2. Evaluate the letter based on the amount of and appropriateness of slang used and overall content.
3. Grade the diary analysis worksheets.

### Additional resources

[www.civil-war.net](http://www.civil-war.net)

### Extension activities

1. Research, compare, and contrast slang and dialects based on region.
2. Write a response to Huff from the family member to whom he (you) had written.

### This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

#### English Language Arts

State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.

State Goal 2: Read and understand literature representative of various societies, eras, and ideas.

#### Social Science

State Goal 14: Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

State Goal 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

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Private William D. Huff's diary

## HUFF'S DIARY EXCERPTS

**Oct. 4th, 1863**

Arrived at Camp Douglas. The day was very cold and we were kept standing in the open square for about 4 hours. Had had nothing to eat for 2 days. We are guarded by the Michigan Sharp Shooters and sharp shooters they are too, for they practice often on some of us and shoot in the [barracks] if lights are not out punctually at 9 o'clock.

**Nov. 11**

The [barracks] occupied by the Yankees caught fire today and a large portion of them were destroyed. We were all ordered to our quarters. The fire created quite an excitement among both Federals and Prisoners. The evening paper contained the following report of the fire; "Camp Douglas is on fire and the prisoners escaping." No such luck happened. One of the features of Camp Douglas is the [brokers] who deal in almost everything. They buy and sell Confed money, [greenbacks] and sutler tickets and the sutler store is crowded from morning till night. Gambling of every description is carried to perfection here.

**Dec. 4**

Still in Camp Douglas. Had a snow storm followed by sleet converting the ground into a field of ice. On the 2nd they called every one out in the square and cut the tails off all the coats we were wearing, and also took the overcoats of all except those acting as Sergt. Majors of which I was one and consequently saved mine. It is [intensely] cold too, [everything] is froze up fast.

**Jan. 1st, 1864**

Every Confederate prisoner will remember this day. I'm going to head Qrs. to report I had my nose, ears, and chin frozen this morning. Frost was on the rafters and planks of the roof and some places icicles of 2 inches hung down. This was caused by the breath congealing and freezing to the roof. It was all we could do not only to keep warm but to keep from freezing. The guards even were frozen on the fence and had to be relieved every half hour.

**Feb. 16th**

Comes in almost as cold as the cold days of [January]. [Smallpox] is breaking out again.

**March 4th**

Today five months ago I landed here and I see no chance of exchange. Yet indeed I have every reason to believe that I will spend five months more under blue coat rule. I drew some comic pictures of the convalescents [today] which made the Old dry Doctor laugh. Winter is not gone yet for it is snowing strong and swift. . . .

**April**

Comes in wet and cold this morning. Had to get out to roll call at sun rise and stand for an hour or so more. It is bad enough to stand for that long but when we have to stand for 2, 3, or even 4 hours it is almost beyond human endurance and this is the case if any one of the men is missing. It is [hard] indeed to keep 4 of 5,000 men freezing because one or two is missing but we have to stand until the missing one is found. Many of the prisoners have escaped lately by tun[n]eling but that is about "played out" now for they are raising all the [barracks] 4 feet off the ground.

**April 6th, '64**

Am so sick today that I had to make an application to go to the hospital again. I have had the [flu] for the last 3 days very bad. . . .

**April 7th**

I am in hospital again but can scar[c]ely tell what I am doing. . . . My head is as big as a sugar hogshead. . . .

**June**

It is rather difficult to escape but now and then some fellow is lucky enough to do so. Several of my old companions have gone to another [barracks] and my only way of passing time is with my pencil and guitar but it is [hard] to get strings so I use my pencil more than my Music. . . . They have taken our cooking vessels from us and [instituted] kitchens and shortened our rations giving us nothing but pork and bread and not quite enough of that. I do not mean fresh pork. Ob! no but salt pickled pork, old and fat and not water enough to wash it down. It is rather tough living but we have to stand it. I think if the [commissioner] were here for a week they would agree on an exchange.

**HUFF'S DIARY EXCERPTS** (continued)

**July 31st**

*The hydrants have been stopped since morning. It is intolerable hot and we are almost dying of thirst. A [scarcity] of water often occurs.*

**August 24**

*I am sick today and can't go to roll call. The [flu] is on me again. Weather very hot . . .*

**August 27**

*Still sick. Can get no medicine. Have none in camp. Can't even get it at the sutler's store.*

**August 28**

*Worse.*

**August 29**

*Most dead. If I don't get medicine soon I will die. Dr. Cook says he will send me to hospital if possible.*

**August 30th**

*Still no help. I am so weak I can scar[c]ely sit propped up to write. My mess and sleeping mate Allyn is the best man in the world to me. Oh! If I could get to Dixie, sweet Old Dixie again.*

**Aug. 31st**

*I got an opium pill this morning. It has helped me very much indeed. How I long for Old Cote Blanche or anywhere in Dixie.*

**Sept. 2nd**

*Today I was sent to hospital. I am in Ward F. feel like I will never get well. Can write no more. . . .*

**Sept. 5th**

*I am much better. Can sit up.*

**October 29**

*In [barracks] 9 the rebs have killed and eat the Sutlers dog. Food is very scar[c]e and men have fainted for want of it. In cold days it is nothing uncommon to see men fall down from weakness. I am still sick and weak but it is all Allyn and myself can do to act gentlemanly about our little piece of Beef and bread. It is horrid to live as we do and no one can form an idea of our miseries except those who have endured them. Many catch and eat rats when they can. In fact, if this continues until mid-winter I do not see how we are to live. Old men are dying very fast and small pox is prevalent killing from 2 to 11 a day*

*The light step and merry faces of last winter are gone. No music or dancing or singing. All move slow as if to a funeral. Their sunken eyes speak of hunger.*

**January 25th**

*Today they made a search for money among the prisoners and they found a quantity of gold among the new ones that came in a short time ago. From the old ones they get but little for they are too sharp and have not been trained here for nothing. Up to today it has been freezing all the time and today it is so intensely cold that we had roll call in the [barracks]. Many are making applications to take the oath to get rid of their sufferings.*

**8 of April**

*This morning there is a general stir among the Yanks. [Something] has happened for their faces are bright with [something] that pleases them but we cannot guess what it is.*

**Evening**

*102 guns were fired off for it is stated that Genl. Lee has surrendered. It seems that we are indeed to lose all.*

**April 15**

*Today everything is astir for it is stated that Lincoln is assassinated. I believe it for the Yanks assert it and their actions prove it. They are mad today and are doing all sorts of things to the boys, kicking them, beating them and several are in the dungeon for saying they are glad of it. . . . I am almost afraid to say anything about it for they are too much enraged.*

**May 2nd**

*This morning they sent word that 500 men could go on exchange. I maneuvered to get my name on the list and succeeded.*

**May 3rd**

*Today signed parole of exchange. Have been searched and put in exch. [barracks] to [leave] tomorrow morning. Have my ra[t]ions and every thing ready to [leave]. My heart is lighter than it has been for 20 months.*

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**DIARY ANALYSIS WORKSHEET**

**Unique Physical Qualities of the Document** (check all that apply)

(Hint: To answer this question, look at the photograph of the actual diary.)

- |   |                                    |                                      |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> interesting letterhead | <input type="checkbox"/> notations | <input type="checkbox"/> handwritten |
| <input type="checkbox"/> "received" stamp       | <input type="checkbox"/> typed     | <input type="checkbox"/> seals       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> photographs            | <input type="checkbox"/> drawings  | <input type="checkbox"/> other _____ |

Date(s) of diary: \_\_\_\_\_

Author (or creator) of the diary: \_\_\_\_\_

Position, title, and occupation of author: \_\_\_\_\_

For what audience was the diary written? \_\_\_\_\_

**Document Information**

(Hint: There are many ways to answer these questions.)

1. List three things the author said that you think are important.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Why do you think this diary was written?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. What evidence in this diary helps you know why it was written? Quote from the diary excerpts.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. List two things the diary tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the diary excerpts.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## THE CIVIL WAR | WHO IS WILLIAM HUFF?

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### CIVIL WAR SLANG WORKSHEET

The following terms are words and phrases used during the Civil War. Are there any you recognize?  
Try to guess their meanings and then check your answers with your teacher.

Are there other slang terms that we use today that mean the same thing?

1. Bread basket: \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Greenbacks: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Graybacks: \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Fit to be tied: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Let 'er rip: \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Snug as a bug: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Duds: \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Beehive: \_\_\_\_\_

9. Hard case: \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Toeing the mark: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Hard knocks: \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Lucifer: \_\_\_\_\_

13. Arkansas toothpick: \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Sawbones: \_\_\_\_\_

15. Jonah: \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Take an image: \_\_\_\_\_

17. Housewife: \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Been through the mill: \_\_\_\_\_

19. Bully: \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Skedaddle: \_\_\_\_\_

21. Hornets: \_\_\_\_\_ 22. Possum: \_\_\_\_\_

23. Fit as a fiddle: \_\_\_\_\_ 24. Uppity: \_\_\_\_\_

25. Goobers: \_\_\_\_\_ 26. Whipped: \_\_\_\_\_

27. Rio: \_\_\_\_\_ 28. Hunky-dory: \_\_\_\_\_

29. Bellyache: \_\_\_\_\_ 30. Chow: \_\_\_\_\_

31. Bluff: \_\_\_\_\_ 32. Sparking: \_\_\_\_\_

33. Mule: \_\_\_\_\_ 34. Skunk: \_\_\_\_\_

35. Jawings: \_\_\_\_\_ 36. Chicken guts: \_\_\_\_\_

37. Somebody's darling: \_\_\_\_\_ 38. Sound off the goose: \_\_\_\_\_

39. To be mustered out: \_\_\_\_\_

