

BIVOUAC OF THE DEAD

AMBROSE BIERCE'S WAR IN WEST VIRGINIA

by **Kyle Warmack**
Program Officer

In Grafton around Veterans Day, you can see the kind of mountains Ambrose Bierce wrote about. Though the wind has a certain cutting chill, in the sunlight the colors of the trees flare up in fiery bursts, while in the deep shade of the mountains lie “purple valleys full of sleep,” as Bierce—himself a veteran—penned with more than a shade of sentimentality in his short reflection, *On A Mountain*. “Looking back upon it through the haze of near half a century,” he admits, “I see that region as a veritable realm of enchantment.”

Beneath this enchantment, however, Bierce’s relationship with West Virginia and the Civil War in which he partook is complicated.

In 1842, Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce was born in Ohio, tenth of thirteen children. He spent his formative years in Indiana and briefly attended the Kentucky Military Academy before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Enlisting almost immediately in the Union Army, he ended up in the mountains of soon-to-be West Virginia with the 9th Indiana Infantry, with which he would spend the first three years of the war. The 9th Indiana was soon blooded at the Civil War’s first true land clash at Philippi. From there, his unit saw action in most of the battles in that part of West Virginia in 1861-62: Laurel Mountain, Corrick’s Ford, Cheat Mountain, Rich Mountain, Greenbrier River, and Camp Allegheny. Nineteen men of Bierce’s regiment are buried among the silent stones of Grafton.

Since Confederate forces had been effectively pushed out of northern West Virginia, the regiment shipped west in time to experience the horrific slaughter at the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee in April 1862—the bloodiest battle of the war up to that point. With his three-year enlistment ending just after the near-disastrous Union defeat at Chickamauga in September 1863, and having seen some of the war’s most brutal battlefields, Bierce would have been justified in calling it quits. But he was a dyed-in-the-wool Unionist, who had even worked at an abolitionist newspaper before the war. So instead he jumped back in as a topographical engineer for generals whose names, like George Thomas and Oliver Howard, are etched in history.

Bierce’s personal crusade for the Union was cut short in June 1864 at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain in Georgia—a bullet to the head left him with a traumatic brain injury, suffering from blackouts and fits of dizziness. He was discharged in January 1865, three months before the war ended. By 1866 he was in San Francisco, where his career as a journalist soon took off and earned him an international reputation for searing wit and merciless satire. He also began writing short fiction in the late 1860s.

Over the next four decades, the soldier-turned-author forged a body of work that has made him an essential of American literature, particularly with his now-classic anthology, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891), which largely draws upon his wartime experiences to render short fiction that is riveting in its majestic, unrelenting tragedy.

*“No country is so wild and difficult
but men will make it a theatre of war.”*
—Ambrose Bierce, *A Horseman in the Sky*

While soldiers’ reminiscences from America’s longest, bloodiest conflict were extremely popular by the 1880s and 1890s, Bierce’s memoirs and fiction go far beyond the typical eyewitness accounts of the day. The psychological horror and trauma of war, profound bitterness and loss are hallmarks of Bierce’s work—qualities notably absent from most of the flag-waving, trumpet-blaring recollections of his contemporaries. Renowned Civil War historian Earl J. Hess argues that the experience of postwar Reconstruction, not the war itself, poisoned Bierce’s attitude toward the violence and slaughter he and his compatriots had undergone:

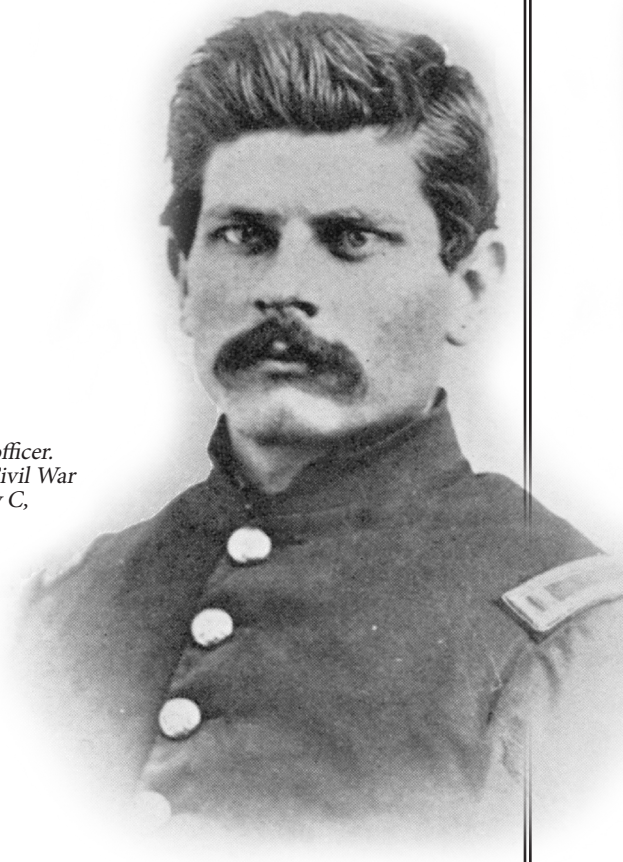
“... the failure of Reconstruction ... soured [Bierce] on the worth of what he and his fellow soldiers had suffered during the war years. ... [W]hat was suffered in the conflict was enduring, as long as the cost of that suffering was valued by a society that followed through to bring justice to freed slaves and suppressed the slave power that many Northerners thought had started the war in the first place. When that reconstruction effort failed to achieve those goals, many veterans like Bierce wondered why they had fought at all.”

By the time the author got around to packaging his perspectives on the war into fiction and memoir, he had earned the moniker “Bitter Bierce”—and it doesn’t take a particularly astute reader to spot this in his West Virginia reflections. In the early 1900s, a full forty years after the war, he returned to the Mountain State

THE BROAD SIDE

RIGHT: Ambrose Bierce as a young officer. He served for more than half of the Civil War in the 9th Indiana Infantry, Company C, rising to the rank of lieutenant. Several of his Company C comrades are buried in Grafton National Cemetery.

For further reading on some of the battles in which Bierce was involved, see Joe Geiger, Jr.’s *Holding the Line* (Quarrier Press, 2012) and Hunter Lesser’s *Rebels at the Gate* (Sourcebooks, 2005).



battlefields where he had first seen blood and fire. Gazing upon the “green graves” in the Grafton National Cemetery in *A Bivouac of the Dead* (1903), he darkly observes that more than half are marked “Unknown.” “[S]ometimes . . . one thinks of the contradiction involved in ‘honoring the memory’ of him of whom no memory remains to honor.” Not much has changed: according to the National Park Service, 613 of the 1,252 Union soldiers buried in Grafton are still unidentified.

Including *Bivouac*, Bierce only wrote four pieces directly concerning his West Virginia experiences. The fictional *A Horseman in the Sky* (1889) may take place near Seneca Rocks, and pits family member against family member. *A Tough Tussle* (1888) chronicles an almost supernatural internal struggle on Cheat Mountain the night after a battle, whereas *On A Mountain* (1909), one of his final war reflections, chronicles the true horror of his regiment upon discovering that some of their dead comrades’ bodies have been desecrated by wild hogs. Present in all of these is a helpless rage at the futility of the war—his enduring bitterness that after the collapse of Reconstruction, as Hess puts it, “the power structure of Southern society was still intact, that blacks were still oppressed under a different but equally unjustified system of racial control, and that ex-Confederates were winning the battle to interpret the conflict as a ‘war between the states’ rather than a ‘war for freedom.’”

Bierce’s decades-long struggle with the violence he experienced was a prescient one. As a nation we still struggle to properly honor the service of veterans, especially those who fought in wars with ambiguous outcomes like Vietnam and Afghanistan. Many Americans, veterans included, are justifiably angered by the messy military withdrawal and subsequent collapse of Afghan democracy this year after two decades of sacrifice and struggle. But as Bierce’s writings prove, even wars with clear-cut “victories” can leave a bitter taste as time passes. The cost of war, and whether it is worth paying, will always be an open question no historian can unilaterally decide.

In 1913, at the age of 71, Bierce bid farewell to his old battlefields and struck out for Mexico, determined to see something of the revolution happening there—and was never seen or heard from again. From Chihuahua he wrote on December 26, “As to me, I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination.” His literature and his legacy remain as perplexing as his final words.

For my mother who, when she gave a young boy a copy of Ambrose Bierce’s Civil War stories, had no idea what she was getting into.

Much of the information for this article, including quoted material from Earl J. Hess, was drawn from the Ambrose Bierce Project by Craig Warren and Penn State University. More can be found at www.ambrosebierce.org.

BELOW: An excerpt from Theodore O’Hara’s poem *Bivouac of the Dead*, from which Bierce’s short memoir takes its name. Grafton is one of several National Cemeteries that contain some of the poem’s verses on plaques. For more background, visit <https://www.cem.va.gov/cem/history/bivouac.asp>

*“On famed eternal camping-ground,
Their silent tents are spread,
And glory guards with solemn round
The bivouac of the dead.”*

YOU'VE GOT
TO HAVE
LOVE SONGS,
TOO THE SOFTER SIDE OF
HASIL ADKINS

by Eric Waggoner, Executive Director

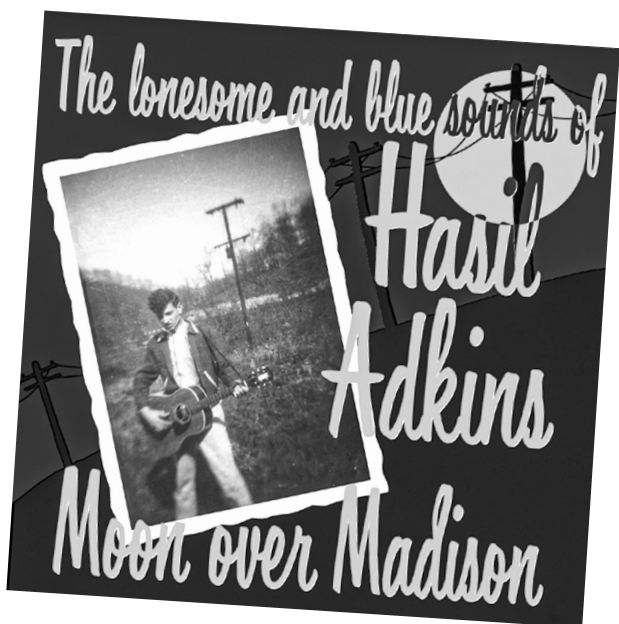
At this point, what more can be said of Boone County music legend Hasil Adkins—Haze, the One-Man Band, grandfather of psychobilly rock, and 2018 inductee of the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame? When New York-based Norton Records began re-releasing Adkins' one-off singles from the 1950s, and releasing his home recordings from the same era for the first time, Adkins quickly became a cult favorite among outsider-art fans and aficionados of raw, starkly unique musicians and performers. Famously admired by bands including The Cramps and Southern Culture on the Skids, documented for posterity in Julian Nitzberg's film *The Wild World Of Hasil Adkins*, Hasil was *sui generis*. Even today, he exists in a category of one. No next-generation musician ever worked the unhinged, wild-man rockabilly vein Hasil mined. As far as I know, no musician ever even tried.

So what's to be added, now that stompers like "She Said" and "The Hunch" and "Peanut Butter Rock and Roll" and "The Chicken Walk" are well known by admirers of determinedly weird music the world over? A strangely underrated album in Adkins' Norton Records catalog, *Moon Over Madison: The Lonesome and Blue Sounds of Hasil Adkins* (1990), displays a side of Adkins's music that isn't much discussed. On both the original LP pressing and the much-expanded CD version (both still in print), *Moon Over Madison* showcases a kinder, gentler Haze across a set of songs much more restrained in their content and renditions than the hollerers for which he's best known.

Two covers, of Bill Monroe's "Blue Velvet Band" and Gene Autry's "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You," signal the album's feel: "late-night music," as Hasil himself described it, soundtracks for the dark moments of the soul. While even the upbeat cuts are easygoing and unhurried, it's the heavier tunes here that establish the tone. The tremolo-soaked "By The Lonesome River," the eerie Hank Williams delivery on "A Fool In This Game," and even "This A.D.C.," a wailer about commodity rations that comes closest in content to Adkins' usual lyrical obsessions, reveal a side of the One-Man Band that's unfairly overlooked: When he tapped into his inner romantic, Hasil could be a fine, if still determinedly undomesticated, crooner. By the time you get to the tear-in-my-beer hat trick of "Love Taker," "I'm Alone," and "Lonely Is My Name," you'll have heard a much softer and more plaintive Hasil Adkins than most listeners know.

"Back home a man can't make it just on dance music," Hasil observes in the album's liner notes. "He's got to have the love songs, too." Truer word was never spoken.

Moon Over Madison, like much of Hasil Adkins' catalog, is available from Norton Records in mutiple physical and digital formats. The album consists of archival home recordings dating from 1956-1963 except for the title song, which was recorded in 1989 for this collection.



Norton Records (1990)

EVENTS DECEMBER 2021 - JANUARY 2022

Always check with the venue or hosting organization of an event before attending, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as schedules may change without the knowledge of the Council.

- Dec 2 Maureen Donnelly* - West Virginia holiday craft event, Arthurdale Heritage. 6pm-8pm
- Dec 3, 4, 11, 13, 17, 18 Selected West Virginia Artisans* - Demonstrations and exhibits, Arthurdale Heritage. 11am-2pm
- Dec 3 Appalachia on the Screen* - Showing the film Rosemary, Arthurdale Heritage. 6pm
- Dec 4 Old Fashioned Christmas - Hosted by the Beverly Heritage Center, Beverly. 10am-5:30pm
- Dec 4 Crossroads Weston Closing Day* - Final day of Smithsonian traveling exhibit in Weston, in conjunction with Miracle on Main Street event. 9:30am-5:00pm
- Dec 6-18 Richard Mine Exhibit* - Courtesy of Friends of Deckers Creek, Arthurdale Heritage.
- Dec 10 Crossroads Arthurdale Reception* - Smithsonian preview and reception at Arthurdale Heritage, Preston County. 6pm-8pm

- Dec 13 Crossroads Arthurdale Public Opening* - Smithsonian exhibit opens to public, Arthurdale Heritage. M-F 10am-4pm, Saturdays 9-5pm until Jan 2, 2022
- Dec 16 Childrens' Weaving Class* - Interactive traditional crafts, Arthurdale Heritage. 5:30pm
- Dec 18 Eleanor's Garden* - Marionette performance featuring Eleanor Roosevelt and dog Fala, Arthurdale Heritage. 11am and 1pm
- Jan 4, 11, 18 Crochet-Along* - Interactive traditional craft demonstration, Arthurdale Heritage.
- Jan 8-9 Oral History Collection* - Community archiving event, Arthurdale Heritage. 10am-4pm
- Jan 10-14 Richard Mine Exhibit* - Courtesy of Friends of Deckers Creek, Arthurdale Heritage.
- Jan 15 Square Dance* - Arthurdale Heritage. 5-7pm

- Jan 17 Across the Generations* - Panel discussion of race in WV featuring Al Anderson, Torli Bush and Danielle Walker, Arthurdale Heritage.
- Jan 17 Childrens' Weaving Class* - Interactive traditional crafts, Arthurdale Heritage. 11am-2pm
- Jan 31 Crossroads Opening in Weirton* - Ribbon cutting at Weirton Area Museum and Cultural Center, Weirton. 5:30pm-8:30pm

*Events marked with an asterisk are part of the Council-sponsored Crossroads Smithsonian tour. For local contact information on events and exhibit hours in Weston, Arthurdale, or Weirton, visit wvhumanities.org/programs/crossroads

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia. The Broad Side is ©2021 by the West Virginia Humanities Council. All rights reserved. Copyright of individual articles is retained by their respective authors. Images used with permission. Additional graphics and layout obtained from Vecleezy.com.

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