

ETHNICITY OF THE REBEL YELL

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The Rebel Yell of the American Civil War is a cultural and historic oddity. By this it is meant that it was recognized by friend and foe alike at being specifically and uniquely made by Confederate troops. That is not to say that Federal troops did not yell in battle, nor that troops of other nations in other eras have not yelled as they fought, but it is to say that the Rebel Yell was specifically identifiable and distinct from all other yells known by those persons who actually had heard it.

It is remarkable that Union forces did not make that specific yell given that the ethnicity and history of the two armies were so similar.

A thorough review of all of the articles addressing the issue of the ethnic origins of the Rebel Yell available on the internet address the subject with only speculations. Indian war whoops, and Celtic battle cries are suggested. The use of the Rebel Yell is documented as having been used in Missouri, Texas, Virginia, and North Carolina.

There are several theoretical problems with these ethnic groups as the source of the Rebel Yell, however. There are many Scots and Irish in the North. Southern New Hampshire and Boston were heavily settled by the Scots and Irish. The Celts in their native countries are noted to have yelled in battle. So, why did the Federal Scots-Irish not give a yell similar to the Rebel Yell if they were its origin? The American Indian war whoops, regardless of the tribe, were uniformly described as individual "whoops", and not a continuing sound made by the group. Numerous examples of the Indian war whoop are recorded in modern Hollywood films, with the modern Indians being the performers.

There are still in existence a small number of sound clips, one of which is also visual, of former Confederate troops demonstrating the Rebel Yell. These veterans offered their efforts both in unison and individually. It is redundantly confirmed by period observers that the Rebel Yell was usually given in mass, as thousands of men yelled in unison giving an auditory effect of a continuous sound. Union troops said that it seemed to roll from one end of the battlefield to the other, and back again.

These film clips have been reviewed analytically by three professional historians, one of whom is also a professional musician. There are several common features of the recorded Rebel Yells that were noted by all of these analysts, and which had not been noted in any of the reviews available on the internet. The first observation is that all the existing sound recordings were made by Confederate veterans from North Carolina.

Another observation is that all those veterans attempting to demonstrate the yell were at least in their eighties. A number of them made preliminary comments about the difficulty of “getting it up”, and on not being able to “keep it up”. In observing these attempts, one can see that some of the participants did not succeed in “getting it up”, and some of those who did “get it up” could hold it for only short periods.

Analysis of the phonics was most revealing. The yell is not a whoop, or a set of articulated spellable alphabetical sounds made in the usual way by use of the vocal cords, or the false vocal cords. The sound originates in the nasopharynx using the soft palate, and a tremolo or a wavering effect is added by altering the tension on the soft palate by movement of the jaw. In all the existing examples it is remarkable to note that all the performers made the sound at very close to the same pitch. The Confederate veterans did offer some variety in the sounds they made by the use of the jaw to effect the tension of the soft palate.

It is difficult to quickly appreciate these qualities because of the poor technical qualities of the sound recording equipment of 1930, which distorted frequencies, and poorly captured especially the high pitched ones. It is also true that most of the wind had long since left the sails of these old warriors as they attempted to record for posterity their yell.

So, what ethnic group or groups are known to have used the massed tremolo in their battle cries? Certainly not the American Indian, nor the English, nor the Celts, nor the Germans, nor the Negro. These are, in fact, the groups usually credited with settlement of North Carolina.

The recent availability of personal DNA testing has become popular among the general population, as well as in academia. North Carolina, and areas settled by emigrants from North Carolina, are no exception. A frequently occurring surprising common finding in these analyses is the widespread existence of DNA commonly referred to in the lay DNA reports as “western Mediterranean”. It is also becoming increasingly clear that North Carolina had significant very early settlement by people from this region, specifically from Spain and Morocco. Known by many names, perhaps the most widely recognized term is ‘Berber’.

The American audience is familiar with the Berber battle cry from the background sound tracks of the movies “Patton” and the new “Killing Jesus”, both of which were partially filmed in Morocco. One can find on line numerous clips of current Moroccan Berbers performing this cry. These clips are, interestingly enough, performed by women.

The sounds produced by these modern Berber women are referred to by them as ‘ululation’. This term is, in fact, a specific vocal tremolo. These ladies do not use their jaws to produce alterations in the sounds they make, as did the

Confederate veterans, but instead use their tongues. However, remarkably enough, the pitch produced by these tremolos of both the modern Berber woman and the Confederate veterans of North Carolina in 1930 is very close to being the same. This is astounding, given the some three hundred years that separate the Confederates of North Carolina and their ancestor's departure from Spain and North Africa, the different sexes involved, and the major differences in the cultural contexts. But, there it is.

The old clips of the Confederate veterans were reviewed by several modern educated Berber women, who are well familiar with the Berber ululation, as well as by an American professional musician educated in Appalachian Studies. Their unanimous opinions were that the North Carolina Confederate Rebel Yell and the modern Berber ululation are "remarkably similar". None were willing to say that one was historically or culturally derived from the other, but neither did any of the commentators know of any other potential common source for the Rebel Yell.

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