



NEWS RELEASE

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THE ILLINOIS MOTHER AND AUNT OF UNION ARMY HOSPITALS

Mother Bickerdyke and Aunt Lizzie, Illinois women who served the efforts of the Union Army

Story by Army Pfc. Jami Prichard, Illinois National Guard Historian section

SPRINGFIELD- Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman was sitting at his desk looking over some papers and deciding what move to make next when a doctor burst into the room shouting vigorously. The doctor looked at Sherman and started fussing about Mother Bickerdyke. As soon as Sherman heard her name, he knew what the bickering was about.

Sherman looked at the doctor and said, "Oh well then, if it was she, I can't help you. She has more power than I ... she outranks me!"

April 15 marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. Every March, the nation celebrates women's history month and remembers the women who helped to shape this great country.

However, women are notoriously forgotten in the history books of the Civil War. Two distinct personalities come to mind from the history of the Illinois National Guard during the Civil War period, Mother Bickerdyke and Aunt Lizzie.

Mary was born Mary Ann Ball in Mount Vernon, Ohio. At a young age, her parents and grandparents passed away, leaving her to be raised by her aunt and uncle. Mary attended Oberlin College and moved to Cincinnati.

She worked at a local hospital and married Robert Bickerdyke. Together they had three children, only their sons survived past age two. In 1856, the family moved to Galesburg where Robert soon passed away. She worked as a laundress, nurse and housekeeper to support her family. One Sunday at church, a pastor was giving a lecture and stressed the need for nurses in the Union Army

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hospitals that is when Mother Bickerdyke found her calling as a Civil War nurse.

Aunt Lizzie was born Eliza N. Atherton. Born in Auburn, N.Y., she spent much of her childhood in the New England area. Lizzie spent a lot of her time doing missionary work with the Cavendish Church. In 1837, she married Cyrus Aiken and moved to Grand de Tour.

After a series of unfortunate events, Lizzie settled in Peoria. In 1861, the Civil War broke out and camps were established outside of Peoria that housed the ill and injured Soldiers. She joined a women's group that travelled and provided comfort to the sick and wounded. In those camps, Aunt Lizzie discovered her passion to help Union Soldiers.

Conditions in the Union hospitals were appalling and chaotic. Sterilizing equipment, washing eatery and laundering clothing and bandages were unrecognized hazards in staving off infections. But, there was one person who knew better, her name was Mother Bickerdyke. From the day she arrived in Cairo, Illinois, and saw the conditions of the hospitals, she made it her main priority to make the hospitals more sanitary.

Mother Bickerdyke knew that better living conditions would lead to a longer life. Over the duration of the war, she was matron of several hospitals. She worked as a nurse, laundress and cook. She had an unusually caring attitude, although sometimes that caring attitude came off pretty vicious.

Many doctors complained about her, but "her boys" loved her. One of "her boys" was Gen. Sherman of the Union troops. Sherman knew the love Mother Bickerdyke possessed for the Soldiers under her care and he let her do things her way. She was the only woman allowed in Sherman's encampments.

The need for compassion was quite obvious in the Union hospitals. The sick men were left unattended a lot, due to understaffed nurses. The nurses did all they could, but all they could do was many times not enough. Men died by the hundreds in the hospitals, until Aunt Lizzie came around. Aunt Lizzie provided much needed support to the sick and injured Union Soldiers.

She not only used the knowledge she had of nursing, but she used the compassion she had been taught at a young age to inspire others. She provided comfort to dying Soldiers and hope to the

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gravely injured. She travelled mostly with the 6th Illinois Cavalry.

In Shawneetown, Lizzie wrote, "...All join in saying we excel all other hospitals in being attentive to our sick and in cleanliness." Lizzie had so much compassion for the Soldiers, they endearingly gave her the name "Aunt Lizzie". She was often asked to pass on messages to loved ones from dying Soldiers. That alone was satisfactory to her, that she was trusted enough to leave messages with families.

Both of these women had commanded positive changes through imperious attitudes. Headstrong, yet compassionate, they cared deeply for their "boys". These women travelled with the troops and displayed raw courage by putting themselves in harm's way.

They did it to help the fighting, keep our freedom. They were literally the 'women behind the curtain', or tent flap of the hospital, devoid of the celebratory festivities of victory while working tirelessly to save lives. Their mission entailed helping out when needed, to care for the sick and wounded, to make conditions better for the Soldiers, and to ultimately help the North win the Civil War.

Mother Bickerdyke and Aunt Lizzie, spared many lives through sanitation and pressing labor. They helped pave the way for the generations of women that came after them. Their actions, even without a uniform, were a great service to the Union forces and its Soldiers during a major war in American history.

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Submitted photo/ Mother Bickerdyke a Civil War nurse, knew that better living conditions would lead to a longer life. Over the duration of the war, she was matron of several hospitals. In addition to being a nurse she worked as a laundress and cook helping Union Soldiers.



Submitted photo/ Aunt Lizzie joined a women's group that travelled and provided comfort to the sick and wounded during the Civil War. In those camps, Aunt Lizzie discovered her passion to help Union Soldiers as a Civil War nurse; she travelled mostly with the 6th Illinois Cavalry

For high resolution photos, please contact the Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office at ngilstaffpao@ng.army.mil