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# Lesson Plan

## *Women in the War*

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### Grades

4, 5, 6

### Subjects

Language Arts  
Social Studies  
Women's Studies

### Time Allotted

45–60 minutes

### Setting

Classroom

### Group Size

No limit, groups of 4–5 students

### Skills

Communication  
Problem solving  
Analysis  
Application

### Methods

Students read, discuss and make judgements about true dilemmas that women faced during the Civil War.

### Materials

Dilemma cards  
Paper  
Pencil

### Keywords

Regiments  
Regulation  
Cavalry  
Infantry  
Artillery

### Objectives

At the end of the activity, students will be able to:

- *Examine their own values and beliefs.*
- *Listen to and respect the rights of others with different values and beliefs.*
- *Evaluate possible actions based on various values and beliefs*
- *Describe the activities of women soldiers, spies, nurses and others during the Civil War.*



Clara Barton. three-quarter-length, seated.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Many women chose to play an active role in the Civil War. Some women, disguised as men, enlisted and fought side by side with their husbands and brothers, while others chose to work as nurses in army hospitals, or as spies, couriers, smugglers, and chroniclers. All of these activities were considered at the time “Male” occupations. Women were considered to be pious and pure at heart and responsible for moral education. Their “sphere” or accepted role was that of domesticity. Anything that strayed from that sphere was considered improper.

The Civil War allowed women to step outside their sphere because they needed to fill the voids that were vacated by men. Northern and Southern women suddenly found themselves overwhelmed with assuming the role as “head of the household” and being thrust into making decisions that they normally never partook.

The women in this activity are the exceptions to the rules of the 1860s. As traditional roles were being modified, some women expanded their domestic roles into nursing and other activities occupied by males. The dilemmas that faced these women would be tough choices for anyone to make but during the Civil War the decision was difficult because gender was involved. Hospital work and nursing were eventually viewed as expansions of the domestic sphere. Women were not suspected of spying and other secret activities because of their moral behavior, which worked to the advantage of those involved in such activities.

#### Dilemma Card #1: Mary Overall

Mary lived in Triune, Tennessee and was only nineteen years old when faced with this dilemma. Her Uncle Ned and Confederate Captain John W. Headley developed a plan that included Mary and her sister. They were well known in Nashville, so the girls would not be suspected of any wrongdoing. The girls took the Union officers up on their offer and mentally mapped the inside of the fort. Meanwhile, their carriage driver drove around the city and collected information about other Union strongholds.

The three returned with so much information that Captain Headley felt he could guide the Rebels “into the city on one hand and out on the other.” Mary continued to help the Confederates for two years until one of her notes, signed “Mollie,” was intercepted by the Yankees. She admitted her guilt and was imprisoned. The war had just ended so she took an oath of allegiance, got out of jail and married Captain Headley.



### Dilemma Card #2: Pauline Cushman

Pauline was born in New Orleans and spent some of her early childhood there, until her father moved the family to Grand Rapids, Michigan. She did not like it there and eventually left in her late teens and headed to New York City to try to find work as an actress. Soon she landed some small parts and caught the attention of a theatre owner from New Orleans. He hired her on the spot and took her back to her native land.

When she was twenty-one years old she married a fellow performer, Charles Dickinson. He joined the Confederates as a musician but caught dysentery and died early in the war. Pauline was now free to tour again and eventually wound up in Louisville, Kentucky, landing a role in “The Seven Sisters.”

When faced with her dilemma, she readily accepted the money up-front from the Confederates and promised to carry through at the next evening’s performance. She stuffed the money in her shoes and hurried off to the Federal provost marshal to explain her situation and he promised to protect her. The toast brought the play to a screeching halt as the Confederates predicted, and Pauline was fired.

The Federal provost smuggled her into “secesh country” where she could snoop around freely and not arouse suspicion. She pretended to search for her brother who really was a Confederate soldier. Pauline was instructed “to use her head as an actress and remember her lines” if she discovered any vital information to pass along to the Union officers. She operated throughout camps in Nashville, Shelbyville, Wartrace, Manchester, Tullahoma and others in Middle Tennessee.

Eventually she was captured by Confederate General John Hunt Morgan who sent her to Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest who, in turn, placed her in custody of a provost marshal. She was condemned to death, but because she became violently ill the execution was delayed. Meanwhile, Union General William S. Rosecrans struck Confederate General Braxton Bragg’s forces in June 1863 and caused them to break camp so quickly that they left Pauline behind. After being unexpectedly set free, she ventured back into Nashville and ended her career as a spy. She put her story in print in 1864.

### Dilemma Card #3: Lucy Williams

Lucy lived in Greenville, Tennessee with a relative near the camp of Confederate General John Hunt Morgan. He captured a handsome young Union officer and brought him to the house to recuperate. Lucy fell in love with him and supplied him with information about the strength of Morgan’s troops and his movements. When Morgan found the Yankee’s notes he made plans to send him to prison.

Lucy was heartbroken and planned revenge on the night of September 3, 1864. At suppertime she learned of the general’s plans to attack Bull’s Gap the next day. She pretended to be really worried that the Rebels would burn her house only a few miles away. Morgan assured her they would not touch her house but she intended to walk through a raging rainstorm to make certain. The general gave her a horse for her trip.

Lucy rode all the way to Bull’s Gap, found a Union officer and insisted that he wake General Gillem. Once awake, she asks the general to order out his men to follow her back into Greenville. The column of soldiers crept past sleeping Confederates and through rain and mud to reach the Williams house. As they arrived, Morgan was escaping out the back door and was shot dead. The Confederate army dispersed in confusion.



[top] Mary Tippee, sutler with Collis Zouaves (114th Pennsylvania). full-length, standing.

[bottom] Mary Todd Lincoln. full-length, standing.



Sister Joseph M.M. of the Sisters of Mercy.

#### Dilemma Card #4: Mary Walker

Mary received her medical degree to be a surgeon from Syracuse Medical College at a time when most surgeons were male. In the male-dominated society of the 1850s and 1860s no body wanted the skills of a female physician. Mary's father had warned that tight fitting clothes were not healthy and did not want his daughter wearing a corset, so Mary wore trousers all her adult life, which raised eyebrows.

When the Civil War broke out, she wrongly assumed that the U. S. War Department would need every available physician and would be happy to hire a woman in trousers. After being politely refused by the Surgeon General many times, she decided to "swallow her pride" and become an unpaid volunteer in the Washington, D. C. area. While volunteering, she established a Women's Relief Association for families members of wounded soldiers.

Early in 1862, she earned another degree from Hygeia Therapeutic College and returned to Washington, D. C. for another attempt at a military career. Finally, her tireless effort caused U. S. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to send her to Union General George H. Thomas in the Western Theatre, who accepted her as a contract surgeon after the Battle of Chickamauga. She was still a civilian but worked for the armed forces at eighty dollars a month.

As her contract was expiring, the unexpected death of an assistant surgeon in the 52nd Ohio regiment left a vacancy, which she readily filled. She was finally wearing the uniform of a federal surgeon, complete with the green sash that indicated she was a member of the medical staff. Her male colleagues made it difficult for her but she would not resign. In January 1866 she was the first woman to receive a Medal of Honor that was bestowed on her in lieu of a commission.

#### Dilemma Card #5: Mary Ann Ball Bickerdyke

Mary Ann was a Quaker woman skilled in using herbs as a botanical physician. The women of Galesburg, Illinois elected her as the logical choice to take the money they had raised for supplies for sick soldiers and head to Cairo to distribute them. Once in Cairo, she set about making some changes and cleaned up five hospitals; eventually combining them all into one central location.

When her money ran out, she enlisted some help from the Chicago chapter of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, known as the North Western Sanitary Commission (NWSC.) These organizations monitored the condition of hospitals, and collected goods to be distributed to sick and wounded soldiers. Mary Ann spied the young officer, half her age, and demanded that he bend over so she could seize the collar of his shirt. As she did, everyone in the hospital ward noticed the letters NWSC inside the shirt. She wrestled it off of him and also confiscated the crocheted slippers he was wearing and informed him: "Young fellow, some of your clothes came from the North Western Sanitary Commission in Chicago. These things ain't for the likes of you; they're for men to sick to get off the flat of their backs." After the incident she was affectionately known as the "Cyclone in Calico" because she did not back down to men of authority.

As Union General U. S. Grant was attacking Forts Henry and Donelson, a steamboat that was converted into a floating hospital was making its way to the scene. Usually male nurses staffed these boats, but the USS City of Memphis had a surprise visitor aboard. Once Mary Ann came out of hiding she took over the vessel and made sure every cot was filled before the boat returned to Cairo. She even lit a torch and went out after dark to make sure no wounded soldiers were left behind on the battlefield. "Mother" Bickerdyke sent the steamer back four or five times. When every cot in Cairo was filled she sent the ship to Mound City, Illinois and St. Louis. Mary Ann was also aboard a hospital steamer at the Battle of Shiloh, near Savannah, Tennessee and Lookout Mountain and Chattanooga.

Ward in the Carver General Hospital,  
Washington, D.C.



**Dilemma Card #6: Female Soldiers**

During the conflict at Stones River, two women soldiers were discovered only when they were wounded. Frances Hook, alias Frank Martin, served with the 2nd East Tennessee Cavalry in the Union army. When Frank was severely wounded and discovered to be a female soldier, Frances was mustered out. Frances, like many other soldiers determined to continue their service, simply migrated to another regiment after recovering from her wounds. During the course of the war, Frank Martin was mustered into several other regiments.

Another disguised female soldier was Mrs. Frances Louisa Clayton. Mrs. Clayton enlisted along with her husband and fought at the Battle of Stones River. When Mr. Clayton was killed, she crossed over his body to charge the enemy. She was hit in the hip with a ball and wounded. Her identity was discovered and she was discharged on January 2, 1863. While she was en route home with her military pay and papers, the train was attacked and she was robbed of her money.

A female soldier also participated in the Battle of Nashville. Jennie Hodges, also known as, Albert Cashier was recruited into Company G of the 90th Illinois regiment. After the war, Jennie continued her disguise, found a job as a farmhand, and kept her gender a secret for forty-two years. It was discovered in 1911 when she injured her leg in an accident.

It is estimated that some 300 women actually donned blue or gray uniforms and enlisted with their husbands, sweethearts or brothers. Their identities were usually not discovered unless they were severely wounded. The most clever of them were probably not discovered at all, so the estimated 300 may actually be more.

A more common scenario was women who formed Home Guards or State Guards. They were formed to provide needed protection on the homefront while the men and boys were gone. These groups often consisted of teenage and young women (20's) who practiced and drilled in similar fashion as soldiers. Their uniforms were homemade but often times resembled a military one. Many cases are known of guards confronting enemy soldiers but hardly any harm was done.



Mrs. Rose O'Neal Greenhow, Confederate spy, during her imprisonment in the Old Capitol.

Silver gelatin print, photographed between 1861 and 1864; printed later. Full-length portrait, seated, her daughter standing beside her.

#### SUGGESTED PROCEDURE

- Explain that this activity will require decision making about some difficult situations that actually happened during the Civil War. It is not the intent of the activity to prescribe any right or wrong answers, but to provide an opportunity for students to express, clarify and take responsibility for their own reasoning. It is not necessary for the students to reach a consensus, as there are many legitimate actions for each situation.
- Copy the dilemma cards. You may want to have them laminated or glue them onto an index card.
- Pick one card to use as your example and to demonstrate instructions for students' small group discussion. Read the dilemma out loud to the class and without group discussion have the students write a short paragraph about how they feel about the situation and what they would do about it. Try to wait until the end of the activity to reveal that the characters are women.
- Next, divide the students into groups of four or five and hand each group a dilemma card. One student should read the situation aloud to the others in the group and then tell how he or she would handle the dilemma describing the reasoning behind the choice. In turn, each of the other students should share with the group their ideas on how to best handle the situation.
- After a set amount of time, tell each group to pick a spokesperson to report to the class and have a class discussion about each dilemma. Some possible questions might be: Were they able to all agree on what they would do? Did their values change after listening to others viewpoints? Was there enough information to make a decision?
- Reveal that all these dilemmas were true situations that some women faced during the Civil War. Using the background information provided, share the problems and how each woman coped with the situation. Be sure to explain that these women were exceptions to the rule and that made their choices even more difficult.

#### FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- "It Wasn't the Bullet" activity and "Coded Messages" activity in this guide
- Have students write their own dilemmas and use for another class period
- Use the dilemma cards for a debate

#### RESOURCES

For More Information Garrison, Webb. *Amazing Women of the Civil War*. Nashville, TN. Rutledge Hill Press, 1999.

Western Regional Environmental Education Council, 1992, *Project WILD Activity Guide*, "Ethi-Reasoning."

Smith, Shelly J. and Jeanne M. Moe, Kelly A. Letts, Danielle M. Patterson *Intrigue of the Past*, Project Archeology Activity Guide, 1996, "Artifact Ethics."

#### APPENDIX

Dilemma Cards

**APPENDIX**  
**Dilemma Cards**

**Dilemma #1**

You overhear a secret meeting between your uncle and a Confederate spy. They plan to sneak you and a friend into Nashville as part of their mission. While in Nashville, two Union officers invite you to Fort Negley, which is known to be an important part of the Union defenses. Your uncle and the spy are depending upon you and your friend to collect any information that would be helpful to the Confederate forces. What do you do?

**Dilemma #4**

You are a surgeon with a degree from a well-known medical college. At the outbreak of war, you desperately want to work for the military and put your skills to good use for the injured soldiers. The military will not accept you because of your "looks" and the clothes you wear. What do you do?

**Dilemma #2**

You are acting in a play in the town of Louisville, Kentucky. A Confederate officer meets with you backstage and offers you \$300 if you will toast Confederate President Jefferson Davis somewhere in the middle of the play. He knows the incident will stir up trouble. You know you will possibly lose your job. What do you do?

**Dilemma #5**

While working in a hospital in Cairo, Illinois, you notice that a Federal officer is wearing clothing that is meant only for soldiers who are too sick to get out of bed. What do you do?

**Dilemma #3**

A Confederate general is using your house as his headquarters. One day he asks you to take care of a prisoner that convinced him that he was a Rebel at heart. You find out the soldier is still a Yankee and become close friends. At supper one night, you learn the general's plans to attack Union forces 15 miles away. What do you do?

**Dilemma #6**

You are a wounded soldier in need of medical care. But going to the doctor means having to give up your secret identity. What do you do?