



Civil War Medicine

The Civil War represents many things to people. Much has been written about the causes of the war, the bloody battles fought and the ultimate outcome. However, regardless of personal beliefs or political views, there is little debate that our nation paid a high cost on both sides of the issues through the immense loss of life during this devastating conflict.

Civil War Medicine

In the 150 years since the Civil War ended, myths and misconceptions still abound regarding the practice of wartime medicine. Although a lot has been written about 19th century medicine, many today still envision an injured man lying a table biting on a bullet while the surgeon pours whiskey on his wound! Although this vision may work for Hollywood, it doesn't work well for History. An honest look at the reality of medical procedures and care during the Civil War can help students gain a better understanding of the suffering and sacrifices made by their ancestors at THIS place. The realization they are standing at the place where someone may have been wounded or died can be a powerful teaching tool.

Instructional Talking Points:

Brief outline:

- ♦ Description of the Ray family and their role in helping with the wounded and dying.
- ♦ Describe the conditions:
 - Intense heat 108 degrees
 - Scene within and around the Ray house.

What must it have looked like as the soldiers came/were brought from the battlefield for treatment!
- ♦ Explain the condition of the soldiers:
 - Some could walk and may have been sent on into Springfield
 - Some would be treated and then taken to Springfield
 - Some would be treated such as surgery, amputations, etc, and kept at the Ray farm, some as many as six weeks
- ♦ Describe conditions once both armies were gone.
 - Both sides left pretty quick after the battle
 - Family and probably neighbors were left to care for those wounded who were in too bad shape to be moved
 - How things were the day of battle and as the days passed
 - Family was left with basically nothing due to foraging by *the* armies
- ♦ Give descriptions of the types and wounds:
 - Explain surgeries
 - Reasons for different approaches (primarily amputations, etc.)
 - Show smashed bullets, etc., to show what damage could be done.
- ♦ Conclude by stressing the impact on the family and other civilians not only during the battle, but, for months and maybe years to come.

Between 1860 and 1865 670,000 people lost their lives as a result of the fighting (50,000 civilians and 620,000 soldiers). Although many of these occurred on the battlefield, the majority actually died as a result of infection from wounds or disease.

Medical Triage

- Refers to stabilizing a wounded combatant until they can be transported for additional treatment at a regular hospital.
- Based on the accounts of Federal (Union) surgeons, wounds were dressed on the battlefield, but operations such as amputations were performed in Springfield.
- Southern surgeons appear to have performed amputations on the battlefield, likely in local farm houses such as the Ray House.
- Typical triage would have included dressing wounds (to stop bleeding) and pain relief through drugs, such as opiates.

Transportation of the wounded

- Wounded soldiers were traditionally carried off the battlefield by musicians who served as stretch-bearers, but there is no evidence of that occurring at Wilson's Creek.
- The "walking wounded" simply walked to a field hospital, while those who could not walk were carried by comrades.
- The federal army had adopted an ambulance by 1859, and one account states that an ambulance drawn by six horses was used here. Others report, however, that farm wagons were pressed into service as ambulances to transport federal wounded to Springfield, as well as artillery caissons. Such a ride must have been extremely painful.

Operations

- Major wounds included traumas such as gunshots to the limbs and trunk.
- Wounds requiring surgery were performed at hospitals. General Lyon had established a hospital in Springfield in July, and the State Guard had a hospital at the courthouse in Cassville by early August.
- Accounts of northern and southern surgeons refer to operations being performed in Springfield. Southern surgeons referred to amputations being performed the day after the battle, most likely in Springfield.
- Other operations would have included the extraction of bullets, and the dressing of wounds. These could be performed at the battlefield, with the primary objective being stopping the flow of blood. Direct pressure on an artery or the use of tourniquets was common.
- General anesthesia would be used, with chloroform being preferred because it took less chloroform than ether to do the same job.

- Local pain killers were often used for bullet extraction and dressing wounds. Powdered opiates were ordinarily applied directly to the wound for this.
- Infection was a common problem due to the lack of proper sanitation caused by ignorance of germs. (Pasteur's theory was still a decade away.)

Disease

- Disease killed more soldiers in the Civil War than did battles.
- Common diseases: Measles, Typhoid fever, Dysentery
- Disease in the Wilson's Creek Campaign
- General Lyon established a general hospital in Springfield soon after arriving there in July.
- Over 100 Union soldiers were admitted to the hospital prior to the battle, most in mid-to-late July. 91 of them were there for various fevers or diarrhea being the most common.

Medical historians of the war have indicated that fevers, diarrhea, and typhoid fever may have been caused by bacteria in local sources of drinking water, but poor sanitation in camp is also a culprit.

Sanitation

- Civil War soldiers and doctors did not know about germs, but they did know that a clean campsite contributed to better health.
- Military manuals of the period specified that camps were to be laid out in an orderly manner, with sinks (toilets) to be located away from the campsite and downstream in regard to drainage.
- Since most camps were located near a body of running water (such as Wilson's Creek) sinks were to be downstream from the camp site to prevent contamination.

Exposure

- Most soldiers in the Wilson's Creek campaign were new recruits to state units, and most were from the rural areas of the region.
- Most had not been exposed to communicable diseases, and were not accustomed to the rigors of campaign.
- Most of the soldiers at Wilson's Creek were from the rural areas had rarely been exposed to diseases what we would call childhood diseases. These men had no immunity, while recruits from urban areas tended to have a natural immunity to such disease from exposure at an earlier age.
- Exposure to the elements, poor nutrition in the soldier's diet, and the physical exhaustion of campaign contributed to weakening a recruit's immune system.

Hospitals

- At the beginning of the war there was only one post hospital was at Fort Leavenworth, KS with 40 beds.
- By the end of the war the Union had established 203 hospitals and the Confederacy 150.
- After the 1st battle of Bull Run (July 1861) Washington DC was overrun with wounded.
- Every public building was used as a hospital, including the Capitol.
- When Gen. Lyon arrived at Springfield in July 1861, he established a hospital. By end of July 100+ Union soldiers had been hospitalized for various fevers or diarrhea (most common)

- A field hospital was located with the army on the march. Most of the immediate surgery took place in the improvised hospital
- Any building, barn or enclosure would used – 3 miles behind battle lines. Churches were also used (Gettysburg)

Role of Women

With the advent of large general hospitals came the need for personnel. Since able bodied men were needed on the line of battle, women became the primary caregivers at the hospitals.

- 3200 women served as nurses during the Civil War
- Considered unusual and unfeminine circumstances
- Left homes and children
- Risked their lives in fevered hospitals
- Lived in tents or hospital wagons
- Target of gossip
- Paid \$12 month

Some worked with the Relief Commission

- Distributing needed items for soldier's comfort
- Helped establish soldier's homes or temporary soldier's lodges to house those in - transit home or back to their units
- Many scraped cloth for lint, knitted socks or sweater
- Baked, etc.

Conclusion:

Although much has changed, many of the personal consequences of war have not changed. Men and women still return bearing the physical and emotional battle scars. Now as then, one can't help but wonder what truly motivates people to go to war.