

## **Mother Bickerdyke: Civil War Nurse By Christina Lewis**

On a hot day in June of 1861 Mary Ann Bickerdyke was at church when the pastor, Dr. Edward Beecher, read a letter to his congregation from Dr. Woodward. The letter spoke of the poor conditions of the military hospitals in Cairo, Illinois.

The congregation was moved by the letter and gathered money and supplies to send to Dr. Woodward, but they needed someone to deliver them. A church member elected Mary Ann Bickerdyke, and she proudly accepted.

Mary Ann was appalled at the hospital conditions and went right to work cleaning up the hospital with the help of a young soldier named Andy Somerville. She told the men how to keep the hospital clean and promised to check on them. As she was leaving, Andy called after her "Goodnight, Mother.". The name stuck and Mary Ann became known all over as Mother Bickerdyke.

Mary Ann was born on July 19, 1817 on a farm in Knox County, Ohio. Her father, Hiram Ball, was a farmer and her mother, Annie, died when Mary Ann was just seventeen months old. She was sent to live with her grandparents and when they died she went to live with her Uncle Henry Rodgers.

When Mary Ann was just sixteen she moved to Oberlin, Ohio and possibly worked in a professor's home. She later returned to live with her uncle on his farm in Hamilton County, near Cincinnati. Throughout her childhood Mary Ann received only a very basic education. Although some people have guessed, no one really knows for sure what Mary Ann did during the years of 1837 to 1847. On April 27, 1847 Mary Ann married Robert Bickerdyke, a widower with three children. They had two boys of their own, Hiram and James.

In 1856 the Bickerdyke's moved to Galesburg, Illinois and three years later Robert died. Their third child, Martha, died at the age of two a year after Robert's death.

Mary Ann was now a widow and needed to find a way to support her sons. Growing up on a farm Mary Ann had the opportunity to learn about herbs and how to use them to make medicine. She now began using her "botanic medicines" to care for the sick.

When Mary Ann was elected to take supplies to the hospital she was determined to stay and do what she could to help. The patients loved her but the doctors did not want her coming into their hospitals and changing the way things were run. But Mary Ann did not care; she was only concerned about doing what was best for the soldiers.

As the wounded were brought in to the hospital, Mary Ann worked quickly and efficiently giving out food and drink. She was like an angel to the soldiers, always there to offer what they needed and give them comfort. Each time the patients were moved to a

new hospital, Mary Ann would work hard cleaning and making sure it ran smoothly.

In November of 1862 she went on a fund raising tour for the Sanitary Commission. She visited several towns and told stories of her experiences in the war. Her talks were a success and her audiences made generous contributions.

General Grant ordered Mary Ann to go to Memphis where she was put in charge of the Gayoso Block Hospital and it became known as Mother Bickerdyke's Hospital.

When she was no longer needed in Memphis, General Sherman sent word for Mary Ann to go to Vicksburg to help with the wounded. Mary Ann got along well with General Sherman and she became a special part of his corps. During her time with the army, Mary Ann made several trips up North, giving speeches and asking the people to donate food and other items for the soldiers. She always made sure her "boys" had what they needed.

While traveling with the troops Mary Ann suffered the same hardships and struggles as the soldiers did. The extreme cold weather, poor conditions and lack of good food and supplies was hard on everyone. When Atlanta was taken over by the Union on September 2nd, Mary Ann helped evacuate the wounded from the hospitals. On Sunday, April 9, 1865 General Lee surrendered at Appomattox; the war was finally over. She stayed with the army for another month helping to get the patients ready to go home. Her last stop was at Camp Butler in Springfield, Illinois.

On March 21, 1866 Mary Ann felt that her work for the army was done and she resigned. She had spent four long years working hard for the army and now that the war was over she needed work. She had been hearing from her the veterans about the possibility of settling in Kansas, but they didn't have the money and were having trouble getting their pensions from the government. Mary Ann went to Kansas to see for herself and was delighted with the open spaces, fresh air and sense of freedom. She received money from a wealthy banker and arranged for fifty families to move to Kansas. She also talked the president of a railroad company into giving her money to put up a boarding house called The Salina Dining Hall. Mary Ann enjoyed the two years she spent in Kansas; she would ride around the countryside helping the settlers any way she could. During the hard times of food shortages Mary Ann gathered her strength again and took care of the people by getting donations of food and clothing. She had a lot of visitors to the hotel but could not bring herself to charge those who were unable to pay, and the railroad took the hotel away from her.

Mary Ann was very upset about this and decided to leave Kansas for New York. She had been asked to help clean up the slums. Mary Ann never seemed to tire of doing what she loved most - helping others. She cooked, cleaned, washed, bathed, scrubbed, combed and taught the people how to take care of themselves. While Mary Ann was in New York her sons had started a farm on the land she had claimed for them in Great Bend, Kansas.

They now wanted her to come and live with them. She decided to give up her work in New York and move back to Kansas.

But her hard work did not end, when locusts destroyed all of the crops that summer Mary Ann came to the rescue again. She made many trips and gave hundreds of speeches asking for help for the settlers. She came back with 200 carloads of grain, food and clothing. All of this took its toll on Mary Ann's health and she soon became tired. But Kansas did not forget what she had done for them. A portrait of Mary Ann was painted for the state capitol and Topeka planned a great banquet in her honor and soldiers came from all over.

It was a wonderful occasion for her but she became ill that winter and could not get her strength back. The doctor said a warm place to live would be the best thing for her, so she decided to move to California.

While there Mary Ann found another cause to work for, trying to get pensions for the soldiers. She spent many hours filling out forms and tracking down information that required a lot of travel. She did not charge for her services. If a veteran could pay her he did, but if he couldn't she paid from her own pocket.

While Mary Ann spent her time fighting to get pensions for the soldiers her old friends Mary Livermore and General Logan were fighting to get a pension for her. Thirty years after Mary Ann's service in the war the Pension Committee finally agreed to award her \$25.00 a month for life.

Mary Ann enjoyed living in California but her son James persuaded her to come and live with him in Bunker Hill, Kansas, where he was principal of the high school. On July 9, 1897 a statewide celebration for Mother Bickerdyke Day was planned. Eighty-year old Mary Ann enjoyed it very much. During the holidays in 1899 she went visiting relatives and on Thanksgiving Day there was a large family reunion. She went home around Christmas time but had caught a cold that she could not get rid of. The following year she was sick again and in early November had a slight stroke. Mary Ann passed away peacefully on November 8, 1901.

In 1904 a statue was made of Mary Ann kneeling beside a wounded soldier holding a cup to his lips. It now stands in the courthouse square in Galesburg, Illinois.

Mary Ann devoted many years of her life taking care of wounded soldiers, helping families settle in Kansas and helping to improve the lives of the people living in the slums of New York City. Mother Bickerdyke may not be remembered by many people today, but she lived to help the people of her own time, and she did.