

The Mother of the Union Army: The Story of Mary Ann Bickerdyke

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Going to church can occasionally be a life-changing experience. Sunday, May 26, 1861 was one such church-going experience, for Mary Ann Bickerdyke of Galesburg, Illinois. It changed her life utterly for the next four years--and saved the lives of more Union and Confederate soldiers than will ever be known.

On that Sunday Mary Ann was at her usual place, in her usual pew, at the Brick Congregation Church, when the Rev. Dr. Edward Beecher got up to preach. (If Dr. Beecher's name sounds familiar, it should: he had a relative named Henry, and another named Harriet) . Instead of his usual sermon, though, Dr. Beecher read a letter from Dr. Benjamin Woodward, MD. Along with 500 or so other Galesburg men and boys, Dr. Woodward had enlisted in response to Lincoln's call to arms, and had been sent to Cairo in southern Illinois.

According to Dr. Woodward things were pretty grim already, and nobody had been anywhere near a battle yet. Disease was the problem, as in fact it was all over both countries. (In a day when travel was rare, people simply were not exposed to viruses and bacteria at such a rate as today. It did not help that viruses and bacteria had not yet been discovered.)

Rev. Beecher read the letter with a fair amount of passion, and his congregation was fired with a desire to act. He allowed a period of discussion, then raised his hands for quiet, and said, "Let us pray." After a time of quiet, a woman of the congregation rose to speak. What was needed, she said, were supplies to help the suffering, money to buy more, and someone to get them where they were needed. Then she volunteered--somebody else.

Mary Ann Bickerdyke was her chosen representative. Despite being a widow with two small boys and a medical practice...or perhaps because of those things....Mrs. Bickerdyke accepted the job. A week later, on June 9, she was on a train from Galesburg to Cairo, with a large amount of baggage. Her boys were staying with neighbors; the fate of her patients is unknown. The baggage consisted of a couple of changes of clothing for herself, and a huge quantity of supplies for the sick men from Galesburg.

Dr. Woodward met her train with a carriage. He was quite startled at the number of bags she brought with her, but took her to the Cairo

camp. The situation was even worse than he had described in his letter. The "hospital" consisted of three tents, set a little away from the tents of the rest of the regiment. Each held ten men, of which only two or three had cots. The rest lay in dirt, strewn with meager straw, and liberally coated with urine, defecation, vomit, and pus and substances even less pleasant. The "nurse" for the tent was a man, barely less ill than the rest, who sat at the front flap of the tent, with a bucket of water and a dipper. Flies and other insects were thick. Woodward expected Mrs. Bickerdyke to swoon on the spot. She was not the swooning sort. Retreating from the fetid tent, she told Dr. Woodward to order some healthy men to assist her. Dr. Woodward at this point proved himself, alas, something of a wuss. He hung his head and told Mrs. Bickerdyke that he was so junior in the unit that he had been unable to get anyone to obey his orders.

Finding no help from him, she simply walked over to the first group of men she found who didn't seem to be doing anything but sitting around a coffeepot hung over a fire pit. They wished to continue doing precisely that, unless ordered by an officer to do otherwise. Mrs. Bickerdyke couldn't give orders, so she offered a bribe: if the men would do as she asked, she would give them a fried chicken dinner. They suddenly felt an intense desire to aid the afflicted. Looking further around, Mrs. Bickerdyke spotted several unemployed barrels. She ordered some of her helpers to find saws and cut the barrels in half. A couple of others were asked to find kettles, fill them with water and hang them over the fire. While those were busy she sent the rest off to find some shovels.

Soon thereafter the barrels were being scrubbed out with some of Galesburg's best lye soap, then refilled with hot water from the kettles. The sick were helped (in some cases carried) out of the tent and relieved of whatever scraps of clothing they had left. Some of the patients, sick as they were, objected to this treatment. They, too, were offered chicken dinners and rapidly changed their attitude. Dr. Woodward was beyond being horrified at the thought of a lady being around naked men, so he protested feebly that some of the men had fevers and exposure might harm them. Mrs. Bickerdyke patiently brought to his attention that it was June in Southern Illinois and at least 90 degrees out, lessening the danger of frostbite somewhat. The patients were shaved, chin and scalp, on her orders; the reason was to remove hiding places for lice. Then they were gently put in the barrels and bathed, with more of the lye soap.

While all this was going on, the men with the shovels were doing their duty, digging out the disgusting straw and dirt in the tents.

When they got down to a level of clean dirt this was spread with fresh, clean straw. The clean patients were given fresh, clean clothes, again the donations of the citizenry of Galesburg. Finally sundown neared, and the whole crew, draftees, patients and doctor, got their promised bribe: chicken dinners brought down from, you guessed it, Galesburg. As they finished, Dr. Woodward went to get his buggy to drive Mrs. Bickerdyke to her train back to Galesburg. She looked at him in astonishment and informed him that she would go home when her work was done.

She walked into town and found a room by knocking on doors until she found a resident willing to rent one to her. Carrying her change of clothes, she went into her room and sat down to write a letter home. She described the scene and what she had done about it, and started listing orders for additional supplies to be sent. She wrote back to the congregation, bluntly describing the situation and asking for additional soap, underwear, chamber pots, blankets, skillets, pots (large), pans (large), and washboards. Washing equipment would figure large in Mrs. Bickerdyke's Army career...

Over the next few days she repeated her performance at every hospital in Cairo camp. Army medical personnel were so bewildered by this woman who issued orders like a general that it may have simply been easier to obey than investigate. Finally she ran up against a civilian, a "contract" doctor who saw army patients in addition to his regular, civilian clients. The Army men came last on his priority list, and Mother found his hospital to be the worst of the entire lot. She blew up at him in front of God, patients, staff and everybody and read him the riot act, informing him that he was not fit to set foot in a hospital, much less run one.

He was not about to put up with this from a mere mortal, and a woman at that. Unlike the Army men, he had no qualms about marching up to the commander. Once there, he threw a, well, a hissy fit about this rude woman, this "cyclone in calico", brought into camp in an unauthorized manner by Dr. Woodward, who had come into HIS hospital and created chaos.

Brig. Gen. Benjamin M. Prentiss, Illinois businessman and Mexican War veteran, was not one to putz around. He heard the doctor's story about this crazy woman, and saw that the solution was easy. Women were not allowed in camp, so she would be found and tossed out. As the general and the doctor left his office, finding her was not difficult. She and Dr. Woodward were standing right in front of him, having followed the civilian doctor straight to the confrontation.

She and the general retired to his office for a chat. Neither of them ever wrote of it, but when she left she had his personal permission to stay and do what was needed, starting with the kitchens. A precedent had been set.

Mary Ann Bickerdyke followed essentially the same procedure throughout the Western Theater for the rest of the war. First Gen. Prentiss, then some obscure fellow named U.S. Grant, and finally her favorite officer, the only general she ever took orders from, William Tecumseh Sherman, benefited from her absolute pigheaded, fearless, selfless devotion to her men. For that was the key to her success--an utter lack of fear. For herself, for the dignity of rank, for the ostentation of prestige, she cared not a whit. She was caught several times on battlefields after dark with a lantern. Sentries seeing her light suspected she was one of the buzzards who roamed to loot from the dead. When they `caught' her she usually drafted them to help her search one last time for any man who lay wounded, helpless, insensible, but not quite dead. And she found more than a few, too. It was men like them who started calling her "Mother" Bickerdyke, and it could have been one of them who was later quoted as saying, with no slightest thought of disrespect, "That homely figure, clad in calico, wrapped in a shawl, and surmounted with a `Shaker' bonnet, is more to this army than the Madonna to a Catholic!" A few vignettes, then, from the career of this lady called "Mother"...

For most of the first year of the war, Mrs. Bickerdyke had no authority whatsoever but the commission of her congregation in Galesburg. There had been organized a group called the Sanitary Commission, and over time she began to work in a sort of undefined cooperation with them. But at first, she had nothing whatsoever but her own determination..and a supply line, thanks to Galesburg, outside the Army entirely.

Some of these supplies sent from home, were, quite frankly, a pain in the ass. One writer observes: "Women rifled their storerooms and preserve closets of canned fruit and pots of jam and marmalade, which they packed with clothing and blankets, books and stationery and photographs. Baggage cars were soon flooded with fermenting sweetmeats and broken pots of jelly. Decaying fruit and vegetables, pastry and cake, badly canned meats and soups ruined clothing and papers." In the midst of this mess, Mother Bickerdyke did the best she could. With the wretched army rations, not exactly designed by nutritionists, one of her most desperate needs was for fruit, which hastened the healing of the sick greatly. Unfortunately, fruit was exceedingly popular among the healthy as well.

Late in October, 1861, a half built hotel in Cairo was commandeered as the new hospital for the area. Mother strawbossed the rest of the construction to completion in record time. Then, naturally, the surgeon in charge told her to get lost. This was when she made the acquaintance of (then) Col. U.S. Grant, now commander of Cairo area. He appointed her matron of the hospital, and all the surgeon could do was fight a rear-guard action. He allowed that she could run the laundry and hand out supplies, but was specifically forbidden to interfere with the kitchen, because he had hired a prominent local hotel chef named Tom to run that.

Soon Mother was getting requisitions for fruit, and whiskey, and other tidbits from Galesburg. She soon found that none of it was getting to the patients. So one day she marched into the kitchen with a pan of dried fruit, which she proceeded to reconstitute by boiling. She set the pan of peaches on a windowsill to cool. She warned Tom sweetly to make sure that they were not tampered with, since they were for a particular ward of sick men. Tom was in quite a huff at this accusation, and told Mother that she had better quit bad-mouthing him, and claiming his staff was stealing food, or SHE would get in serious trouble.

Mother smiled sweetly and went off to a nearby room to do paperwork. Soon various folks--doctors, nurses, ward supervisors, minor functionaries-- started wandering into the kitchen who had no apparent reason to be there. Shortly thereafter they started making really awful noises.... She marched into the kitchen in triumph to find the men clutching their stomachs and groaning, their expressions not unlike those of fresh-caught carp, and their situation that of trapped rats. Mrs. Bickerdyke explained sweetly that she had added a dose of "tartar emetic" to the peaches, and they were proved by their own reactions to be the thieves.

Then she pointed out that it could just as easily have been rat poison, and if the stealing didn't stop, one day it just might be! The stealing, alas, did not stop, even extending to an icebox equipped with a padlock used to store perishables. Mother had the only key, but one night about a week later the lock was torn off entirely. Mother and the Provost Marshall took the matter to Col. Grant. Result: reprimands for the surgeon and his officers; transfers to combat units for the others, and several days in the guardhouse for the now-unemployed Tom.

After the notion of getting clean quarters and decent food for the

sick, Mother Bickerdyke had one more idea that saved both the Army and the men a great deal of both money and comfort: washing their clothes. The army custom had been to take bloodstained uniforms from the hospitals and simply burn them. As General Grant was setting up for the next battle (in this case Shiloh) Mother was still carrying around the dirty clothing, bandages, linens, etc., from the last (Ft. Donelson). It was first stored in the back yard of her boardinghouse, until her landlady pointed out that it stank.

With her usual crew of "volunteers", in this case unemployed blacks known as "contraband", she did the whole lot by hand. This struck her as inefficient, so another letter went off to home.

Back came the machines, known as mangles, along with more tubs, kettles and irons. Eventually her operation was not only set up at all established hospitals and camps, but a traveling version went with her. She spent a long time at Vicksburg, and it was there that she established her two closest alliances of the war: Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, head of the Army of the Tennessee, and its 15th Corps commander, Gen. John "Black Jack" Logan. She and Sherman, both Ohio-born, proved to be very much alike--straightforward, grimly realistic about war, and devoted to the common soldier. He rode oftenest with the 15th Corps probably because Logan was another of the same sort. It was the men of the corps, though, whose adulation of Mrs. Bickerdyke knew no bounds.

And she went everywhere the Army of the Tennessee went, until almost the very end of the war.

Despite the alliances she had formed with Sherman, Logan and other commanders, the War had hardly become a pleasure tour for Mrs. Bickerdyke. Coming under the direct supervision of the Northwest Sanitary Commission, although it increased her access to supplies beyond what one small church in Galesburg, Illinois could provide, was a mixed blessing. The problem was receipts. Paperwork, and in fact the handling of money, was a lifelong problem. When supplies could be obtained in the South money was sent to her to purchase it. When it ran out she simply wrote demanding more. When the bureaucrats wrote back asking what she'd done with the LAST allotment, she often as not had no recollection, much less written records.

In the middle of November, 1864, Mother and General Sherman had one of their few disagreements. He was preparing for the final push "from Atlanta to the sea," and he flat-out refused to take her with him. He told her to take off North, gather supplies, raise money, and maybe

visit her children. This did not go over well...but she finally agreed to go, and meet him at Savannah after he captured it. A month later she was in charge of a steamship, loaded by her own efforts and those of the Christian Commission of Philadelphia with all the necessities of laundry and nursing, up to including an ambulance and a span of mules.

. She loaded up and set sail for Savannah. The ship had to stop in Wilmington, N.C. to take on water. Mother went ashore and saw some of the first released prisoners from Andersonville to reach town. One look at these men caused Mother to scribble a note saying "Sorry" to General Sherman and order the ship unloaded. She stayed there until the end of the war and awhile after.

Finally the war was over, and the day of the Grand Parade had arrived. May 26, 1865. Washington, DC, had just taken down the black crepe of mourning for Abraham Lincoln, and was more than ready to celebrate the ending of an awful war. None of these people had ever seen the armies of the "Western" theater, and rumor had not been kind about them, calling them a "mob" in Sherman's words, a rabble in arms. Sherman led the four corps of his army, 65,000 strong, whose battle flags carried the names of towns from Donelson on the Mississippi to Savannah on the Atlantic.

But riding at the head of the 15th Corps were two: Maj. Gen. "Black Jack" Logan, commanding; and Mrs. Mary Ann Bickerdyke, known as Mother. Her men had bought her a sidesaddle for "Old Whitey" and a beautiful velvet riding outfit. She used the saddle...but rode past the reviewing stand in her everyday calico.

After she passed the reviewing stand she was invited to go up on it. Instead she went off to two tents she had ordered ahead of time. One was a dispensary for lemonade and foot balm, for thirsty, footsore men were still her first concern.

The other was a latrine.