



Cyclone In Calico

By Bette Lou

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Being sick and wounded has never been easy. But in the days when medical knowledge had barely caught up with the fact that a little soap and water could go a long way toward helping people regain their health and strength, it was even more difficult. Taking care of the sick and wounded has never been easy either and that task was equally difficult during those days before our current medical advancements.

Mother Mary Ann Bickerdyke, from Knox County, Ohio, was a self-trained nurse who took care of the sick and wounded soldiers during the Civil War. It was a time of little accurate medical knowledge, a time of little accurate nutritional knowledge and a time when women were considered to be too delicate to deal with such matters. But Mother Bickerdyke, and many other women like her, did not pay attention to what was expected of them – they only paid attention to what was NEEDED of them. Mary Ann took a job to care for the soldiers working 7 days a week and being paid the same rate as the men -- \$12/month.

When Mary Ann arrived in Cairo, Illinois to deliver supplies to wounded soldiers she was attacked by the stench and filth that was all around the camp. She looked out in disgust at the piles of garbage, dead dogs and the rats that were everywhere. Even healthy men could hardly remain so for long in this spot! The

soldiers in bloody, dirty rags had to endure rotting food and polluted water and there was not a single latrine in the camp. It didn't take long before Mary Ann took over. Latrines were built and she began a clean-up campaign.

Mother Bickerdyke was a woman of strong language, earthy manners and country cures and she was very unpopular with corrupt officers and lazy orderlies who preferred to sit around smoking and playing cards rather than tend to the sick and wounded.

Called a "Cyclone in Calico", Mary Ann was quick to get the wounded out of their filthy garments and to bathe them and boil their towels and clothes. She moved from battle site to battle site leaving her patients in much better shape than most doctors at the time.

Mother Bickerdyke was tireless in her attempts to care for the wounded. She traveled all through the south tending to the needy. By 1863 she was the matron of the military hospital in Memphis. When she discovered the shortage of fresh milk, eggs and meat, she launched a speaking tour to solicit food for the soldiers. Farmers contributed livestock including chicken, ducks, cows and pigs and sent bushels of vegetables and fruit. The Northwest Sanitary Commission was stunned by the success of her food-raising!

But there were always food shortages and they affected everyone. When rations were short, the men would eat old hardtack infested with weevils. They would break up the hardtack, place it in a cup, and pour on boiling coffee. Then the weevils would rise to the top where they would skim them off and eat the softened hardtack. As a nurse, Mother Bickerdyke was expected to eat the same food.

The challenges of winter were particularly harsh. The soldiers would return to camp frozen in their saddles and crusted with blood. Many had to be cut down and thawed out before they could be treated. Mary Ann would serve them hot soups and hot toddies of whiskey, water and brown sugar to warm them.

During Sherman's March, she spent five days at the battle at Resaca where she and her assistant, Eliza Porter, went without sleep in order to bring food, coffee and comfort to the soldiers and to help with amputations which were the best solution for bones shattered by musket balls. Doctors performed more than 29,000 amputations. Gangrene was common and many died from simple finger amputations. Doctors became known as "Sawbones" because they often carried only a knife and a saw which were wiped clean on their aprons between operations which took about 5 to 7 minutes to complete. Because there was not enough chloroform available, the men were given a "tot of whiskey" and told to "bite the bullet" (literally) during the operation.

Mother Bickerdyke worked in tent hospitals until Atlanta fell on September 1, 1864 and then she rode the troop trains for many months. Later she cared for the Union soldiers who had been imprisoned at Andersonville where the emaciated prisoners were astonished by this strong-minded, blustering woman with an encouraging word for everyone. She was still tending the soldiers when the war ended in 1865.

At the Great Victory Parade of May 24, 1865, she was given an honored place among Sherman's forces. But she did not receive a pension for her war work until 1886 when Congress voted her \$24/month. She died in 1901 at 84 years of age. She was remembered by the soldiers as loving, compassionate and caring and they said these were the ingredients that kept them alive.

NOTES

Mary Ann Bickerdyke was born July 19, 1817 on a farm in Knox County, Ohio.

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