

Perryville Battle Nurses

Bobbi Dawn Rightmyer

I had been the custodian at the Harrodsburg Presbyterian Church for the past 20 years. Occasionally, during the rounds of my duties I would hear unusual noises coming from different parts of the church, especially in the basement fellowship hall. After numerous trips to find out the source of these noises, I had long ago given up on trying to track them down. The noises had become a normal part of my work day.

One day, I was later than usual getting to work and it was nearing sundown. After vacuuming the sanctuary, I sat down on one of the pews to rest. There was a booklet on the back of the pew, next to the hymnal. I knew this was the booklet given to newcomers of the church explaining the history of past church activities. I began leafing through the booklet reading about this wonderful old church I had worked in for such a long time. My eyes were getting heavy.

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I had just gotten to the section on the Battle of Perryville when I heard horses coming from the back parking lot of the church. I went to the window and saw horses pulling wagons coming down the road. The wheels of the carts screeched and the horses seemed disbelieving. Kicking up dust behind them, their eyes were huge and sad. I had never seen such a parade of killing before. The wagons, filled with dead or wounded men, stretched down the road, into the trees and the trees themselves stretched off into the war. This was my 39th day of watching men die.

In 1862, during and after the Battle of Perryville, the United Presbyterian Church was just one of the buildings in Harrodsburg, Kentucky used as a hospital, with the women folk of the community serving as “nurses” day and night. The United States Sanitary Commission was a civilian relief organization that improved the hygienic standards of Union camps and helped wounded soldiers. After the Battle of Perryville, Dr. A. N. Read of the Commission took supplies to Perryville in order to alleviate the suffering of the sick and injured. The Sanitary Commission was of great help to the wounded and sick in Perryville, Danville, and Harrodsburg. The Commission eventually sent more than ten tons of supplies to Perryville, which had been stripped of food and forage by the contending armies.

I came down the stairs, through the open doors, into the heat. The wagons were already backed up on the road. A conscious quiet filled the air. The men had exhausted their shouts and were left with small whimperings, tiny gasps of pain. The ones sitting appeared to be asleep. The ones lying were packed so close together, breathing in

unison that they appeared as one mass; contortion of blood and limbs. Rotting leather breeches, stinking flannel shirts; their flesh ripped open: cheeks, arms, eye sockets, testicles, chests. The beds of their wagons were black with blood. The blood had fallen on the wheels too, so that their lives seemed to circle and turn beneath them.

One soldier wore a sergeant's stripes and a gold harp on a green background. An Irishman. I had tended to so many of them. He was wounded in the neck and it was covered with filthy gauze. His face was various shades of dark from the blown-back powder. His teeth were broken from biting cartridges. He moaned and his head lolled sideways. I wiped the wound as clean as I could get it. His windpipe made a clattering noise. He would be dead within minutes, I knew. Slender black shadows moved over him. I looked up. Vultures flew overhead. They did not strike a wing beat, only soared on the thermals. Waiting. I had a brief impulse to smother the injured man in a desperate act of mercy.

I reached across and touched his eyes. I could feel his life fall shut beneath my fingers. No need to stop his breath, then; it was so much like drawing a small red curtain across. So many of them waited until they were in a woman's hands.

I was tapped on the elbow by an army doctor.

"We need to lift the men from the wagon and get them onto the grass." The doctor was small and round. He wore a bow tie splattered with blood. A rubber apron over his tunic. There were twelve other women working the wagons, along with several men.

We lifted the soldiers as gently as we could and placed them in the grass in the imprints of others who had been there just hours ago. All around, the grass was exhausted by the shape of the war.

The doctors paced along the length of the dying. They chose which ones they might possibly save. The soldiers groaned and stretched out their arms. I wanted immediately to wash them clean. The other nurses had lined up buckets of water and sponges at their heads. I thrust a towel down into a bucket. I had crossed more water than I cared to remember. I had often thought that I could use all the wide Atlantic to wash them and still never get them clean.

We carried the living inside on stretchers. The other injured sat, still and vacant, in their beds, staring straight ahead. This makeshift hospital was a church, the Presbyterian Church. Occasionally a loud shattering sound went through the hospital when a soldier stumbled out of bed, or lost his mind, or thrashed his way out from the sheets, knocked over his bedside table.

I reached for a hanging lamp, struck a match, lit the wick. It guttered blue and yellow. I placed the pier glass around it, went out of the ward, lighting all before me. I waited on the stairs outside. Open to the night, a small breeze was a relief in the enormous heat. The trees were darker than the darkness. Owls screeched their way through the canopy and bats moved from under the eaves of the church. Distantly I could hear the yips of dogs; or was it coyotes. Only an odd sound came from the hospital behind me: a scream or a rattle of pans and instruments.

As the Union army was woefully unprepared for the aftermath of the battle, the Sanitary Commission played a major role in feeding the troops and nursing many soldiers back to health. Dr. Read tried his best to keep an accurate Perryville report using me as his secretary.

"Immediately on the reception of the news of the late battle, I took such measures as were in my power for the performance of our duty in the relief of the wounded. Did you get that nurse? I obtained at once three Government wagons, and the promise of 21 ambulances, to be ready the day following. The wagons were loaded with stores from the Louisville Sanitary Commission, and started the same evening for Perryville."

“Yes, doctor . . . started the same evening for Perryville.

“Good, good. We found the first hospital for the wounded at Mackville. This was a tavern, with sixteen rooms, containing 150 wounded and 30 sick, mostly from a Wisconsin regiment. Twenty-five were on cots; some on straw; the others on the floor, with blankets.”

“Now this is important; the surgeon in charge, P. P. White of the 101st Indiana militia had authority to purchase all things necessary. Flour was very scarce; cornmeal, beef, mutton, and chickens, plenty. There was no coffee, tea, or sugar to be had. The cooking was all done at a fireplace, with two camp kettles and a few stew pans. The ladies of the town, however, were taking articles home and cooking them there, thus giving great assistance.”

“Doctor, we don’t have any of these items either. Most of the women are doing the best they can to help alleviate the suffering,” I said.

“I know, I know; and we appreciate your sacrifice. Continuing on, from this place to Perryville, some ten miles, nearly every house was a hospital. At one log cabin we found 20 of the 10th Ohio militia, including the Major and two Captains. At another house where several of the 92nd Ohio militia; and the occupants were very poor, but doing all in their power for those in their charge. The mother of the family promised to continue to do so, but said, with tears in her eyes, she feared that she and her children must starve when the winter came. As at the other houses on this road, the sick had no regular medical attendance.” The doctor paused in his dictation, removing his glasses and wiping his brow.

“We reached Perryville after dark. On our arrival we learned that we were the first to bring relief where help was needed more than tongue can tell. Instead of 700, as first reported, at least 2,500 Union and rebel soldiers were at that time lying in great suffering and destitution about Perryville and Harrodsburg. In addition to these, many had already been removed, and we had met numbers of those whose wounds were less severe walking and begging their way to Louisville, 85 miles distant. To these we frequently gave help and comfort by sharing with them the slender stock of food and spirits we had taken with us.”

“I’m sure this was painful for you, doctor,” I said with empathy.

“There had been almost no preparation for the care of the wounded at Perryville, and as a consequence the suffering from want of help of all kinds, as well as proper accommodations, food, medicines, and hospital stores, was excessive There were some 1,800 wounded in and about Perryville. They were all very dirty, few had straw or other bedding, some were without blankets, others had no shirts, and even now, five days after the battle, some were being brought in from temporary places of shelter whose wounds had not yet been dressed. Every house was a hospital, all crowded, with very little to eat.”

“It is the same here, we are using every building, barn and home to house and treat the wounded,” I reminded him.

He went on dictating as though he had not heard me. “At the Seminary building there was some fresh mutton, and a large kettle in which soup was being made. I left at this house a box of bandages, comfortable, shirts and drawers, and a keg of good butter. Three days after, at this hospital, I found that the surgeons had improvised bedsteads, and had provided comfortable beds for all their patients from the stores of the Sanitary Commission, leaving Dr. Jon Goddard to superintend the further distribution of supplies. On the 12th, I went with Mr. Thomasson to Danville. We here found the wants of the sick as urgent as those of the wounded at Perryville. The Court-House was literally packed; many had eaten nothing during the day, most of

them nothing since morning.”

I could tell the doctor was getting tired. I spoke to him as gently as I could, “Maybe we should quit for the night, doctor, and get some rest?”

“There are so many who can’t rest; surely we can go on a little longer.” He paused, then continued. “As there were many of the sick without shelter, I looked around to find some building where they might be carried, and, at last, have a roof over their heads. After some search, a carriage shop was found which would answer the purpose. This belonged to a Mr. J. W. Welch. At my solicitation he opened it, had the carriages removed, and placed it at my disposal. I then procured two loads of straw, which was spread upon the floor, and two hundred men were brought in and laid upon it.”

I was quiet while the doctor collected his thoughts. My mind wandered to the many sick and wounded inside the church building. After a moment, the doctor began again.

“Returning to Perryville, I had the satisfaction of seeing the condition of the wounded considerably improved, thanks to the untiring executions of the surgeons in charge, and the stores we had placed at their disposal . . . They are still, however, far too crowded, and their condition, in many respects, is susceptible of improvement. At the Seminary Hospital, the best of the series, there were seventy-nine wounded . . . These were all badly wounded . . .”

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I was awakened by the shaking of my shoulders and I let out a hoarse scream. It was only my husband, James Lewis; he had become worried when I had not arrived home at a reasonable hour. He had come to the church looking for me and found me asleep on one of the pews in the sanctuary holding on to the information on the church history.

“Betty, you must have fallen asleep. I was getting worried about you,” he said to me.

“J. L., I just had the weirdest dream. It happened during the Battle of Perryville. What do you make of that?”

“Well, the church history says the wounded and the dead were cared for here in the church, sort of like a makeshift hospital. The resources of Perryville, already dealing with a summer long drought and the drain of supplies that both armies required, was reaching its breaking point. Nearly every home, church, school, barn, shed, and other type of structure was used as a makeshift hospital.”

“But the dream was so real. There were the piles of amputated limbs found outside of doors and windows and the scenes of wretched horror were full of distraught. The dream was so vivid and gut-wrenching and the battle injuries went on for days, weeks, and months. Without water, without enough medical supplies, without clean conditions, the men stood little chance of survival if they had been wounded severely. Diseases were rampant, and the soldiers were not the only ones to suffer and die as many of the local citizens who helped nurse the wounded also took ill and passed away.” I was crying now, as I related the story to my husband.

J. L. led me to the door of the church as we left to go home. I was still shaken up and too afraid to stay and finish my work. It could wait until tomorrow during the daylight. As we left the church hand in hand, I swear I could feel a weary figure follow us to the door. Dressed with a blood covered rubber apron over his tonic and bow tie, I knew how deeply he understood the disgraceful way that the dead had been treated here, where their abused bodies became fodder for local hogs and crows and how some men had been buried in graves so shallow that when it rained an arm or a leg might pop out of the ground in mute testament to horrors that had taken place in this small Kentucky town. Not a glorious end to such a horrible battle.