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# Medical Conditions in Arkansas During the Civil War

Karen Polk
*Ouachita Baptist University*

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Karen Polk
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Dr. Ray Granade
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The Civil War was a war of great suffering, pain, and ignorance in the medical field and on the battlefield. The Arkansas soldier suffered for lack of medical supplies, medical care, and food. If the fear of being wounded was not enough, the soldier was apt to die either in an unsafe hospital or on the battlefield due to exposure. Contagious diseases spread like wildfire through the camps; and medicines, if available, were scarce and inadequate. Trying to provide for the soldiers was a main aim of the citizens, who established hospitals, and sacrificed commodities for the "lost cause." After the soldiers had once returned to their homes, the aftermath of the war produced a startling recollection of the soldiers' suffering. The men carried the marks of despair and disease on their faces. If that proved unsubstantial, the loss of limbs through amputation and the nightmares of previous prison life would surely be enough to bring back the memories.

The Civil War physician had many duties on and off the battlefield, with one being the examination of every man who enlisted or was drafted for the war. This

examination was quite extensive physically, and classified the soldier for a particular type of duty depending on his health. Each applicant was recorded on one page in the examination book, marked with the day, month, and proof of examination endorsement. First, the doors were locked and all clothing, except pants and drawers, were removed. The height was taken and recorded on the right section of the examination page. Other measurements of the chest, and the number of inches obtained at the end of expiration were recorded. The rest of the clothing was taken off, and the physician looked for scars and other identifying marks.

During regular conversation between the physician and recruit, hearing and intelligence were tested and recorded. Any disease of the head, eyes, teeth, or ears was recorded next, with sight being tested by reading. The chest muscles and organs around them were examined next; flexing of the arms and fingers was followed by the recruit walking around the room briskly. Areas of the abdomen and spine were examined next. The physician checked for hemmarrhoids, hernias, and the recruit's ability to stoop and lift, and recorded the data. Any deformities of the spine were described and recorded. The end result od the examination was either "rejected", "exempt", or "accepted." New recruits signed clothing and supply lists, which were witnessed by the surgeon, and thensigned their enlistment papers.[1]

The physician had other duties besides that of examining recruits. New was responsible for obtaining roots and herbs to be used as medicines. The Medical Purveyor's Department in Little Rock issued a list of herbs for use by the army, deliverable to Dr. Silverman, medical purveyor, or to Dr. C.O. Curtman at the Chemical Laboratory in Arkadelphia. Some of the herbs that brought the most money to the citizen who cleaned and dried them were:[2]

| | |
|---|---|
| poppy, ripe capsules | $1.00 per lb. |
| lettuce, dried juice | 1.00 per lb. |
| sassafras pith | 5.00 per lb. |
| flax seed | 2.50 per bunch |
| red pepper | 1.00 per lb. |

Calomel, castor oil, spirits of niter and various tinctures of iron and other valuable medicines were also needed and manufactured at the Arkadelphia Chamical Laboratory.[3] Boneset, horehound and mullen were used for cures, and were also requested. The poppy seed was the most useful of the herbs. The seed was sown in the garden, and when it reached a certain age, an incision was made in the stalk with a sharp knife. The sap oozed out as a gum and was dried and used as opium.[4] Some diseases, such as malaria and pneumonia, were cured by doses of quinine. Aufresh tobacco plaster was used on snake bites, tarantula, and scorpion bites to draw out the poison. Whiskey was also a valuable medicine. Other special remedies dealt with mixtures of gunpowder and vinegar to eliminate fevers.[5] During sick call every morning, the physician usually

dispensed medications that were numbered six, nine, and eleven. Number six was a blue pill, number nine was qúinine, and eleven meant vinum (either wine or brandy). Most men would try to get into the eleven slot to receive their dosage.[6]

Another duty of the physician was to obey certain medical regulations. The military department would have a medical officer appointed as a medical director, controlling general medical officers and hospitals. There would also be a medical officer designated as a chief surgeon, or as a senior medical officer of the division. The medical director would check hospitals and make suggestions for better organizing there. He would also examine case books, and decide on diseases which prevailed and their causes. Reports had to be made monthly by the medical officers to the medical director. The medical director would then make a report of the sick and wounded and send it to the Surgeon General , along with a monthly report of all medical officers contained in the command.[7]

Much of the work to help the physician,in direct and indirect ways,was provided by the women of Arkansas. The women deprived themselves of food, clothing, and medicines, and gave many hours of service caring for the soldiers. Many "home remedies" became widely used, such as a teaspoon of cornmeal in a little water instead of quinine to cure chills. Willow bark fodder was used to make tea for the same ill. Women adapted toasted corn, wheat, and potatoes to replace coffee. Tea was replaced by sassafras. and sorghum was used instead of sugar and

molasses. Since salt was so scarce, women dug up the earthen floors of their smokehouses, which were saturated with bacon drippings, and boiled it.[8]

Another example of the women's efforts was in the sewing of uniforms for the soldiers. Since the Confederate government was not capable of providing uniforms, Arkansas merchants gave the cloth they received to the women, who locally made the uniforms.The cloth was received in shipments every six to twelve monthsat first, then afterwards, only when lucky. After 1861, the only steamboats up the Arkansas River were those with army transports.[9] This had an indirect effect on the soldiers, because the need for adequate clothing soon outweighed the supply. Many soldiers were forced to take clothing off dead comrades,or hopefully wait for a clothing package to arrive from home.

With time spent in making soldier's uniforms, women also had to change their style of clothing to meet new demands. These new changes called for a simplified dress, and the use of makeshift dyes. Many dyes and types of cloth could not be bought. A makeshift dye was found by Dr. Taylor, who called it "Rhus Confederatum."[10] It lasted longer and took less dying time. Women could now dye their linens and dresses for much less money. They previously had used such dyes as sulphate of iron, which sold for $2.50 a pound.[11]

With these changes in women's lifestyles, other changes began to take place. Women began to organize certain

"aid societies" to furnish supplies and medical care to the soldiers. The Washington Hospital Association was founded on May 21, 1862, with Mrs. Mary McDonald named as matron. She appealed to the public for food, money, clothing and servants. This was the first aid organization at Washington, Arkansas, and one of the first officially organized groups in the state.[12]

Another group formed the Union Aid Society in Little Rock, on March 23, 1864. They hoped to support refugees and Arkansas soldiers and their families. They also solicited money and clothing, and sometimes provided entertainment at their meetings to encourage attendance. The organization ended in June of the same year, due to inadequate support.[13]

The Arkansas Relief Committee began work, in Little Rock, about the same time as the Union Aid Society. They began work with a $1,000 donation from Major General Frederick Steele. Local businessmen were asked to contribute to the Committee, but few responded. Steele was willing to set aside another $1,000, but stipulated that it would not become a regular contribution. This Committee was only for refugees, and made no attempt to help the sick and wounded. The Relief Committee was in existance for only three months, due to a lack of funds and support.[14]

Following the aims of the Arkansas Relief Committee, two private agencies began to get organized in 1864. These were the Western Sanitary Commission and the United States Christian Commission. They were formed in Little Rock, and survived past the Arkansas Relief Committee.[15]

One of perhaps the biggest aid societies or institutions to help the soldier was the United States Sanitary Commission. This organization, known as Lincoln's "fifth wheel" had the purpose of trying to supply the soldier's needs in sickness or health. Lincoln at first disapproved of the institution because he felt it was trying to supplant the government aid instead of supplement it. The Commission was responsible for dispensing supplies without sectional regards to the soldiers. Trained nurses were put in the established hospitals to care for the sick and wounded. "Inspectors" were sent to report on the quality of water and rations that the soldiers were receiving, and of the over-all appearance and "healthfulness" of the site.[16]

This Commission, however, did not reach in Arkansas to any great extent. Dealing primarily with large battles, the Commission seemed to disregard the poor conditions that existed in the camps and hospitals of Arkansas. One instance is noted, however, of the Commission stopping at Helena on their way to Vicksburg, Mississippi, with a cargo of supplies. Upon coming ashore, the Commission was so startled with the condition of the camp and the health of the men that they left the intended Vicksburg supplies with McNair's Brigade at Helena. The sick and deprived, because of this visit, received some dried currants as a supplement to their diet. This was the only time that McNair's Brigade received any supplies from the Commission throughout the entire Civil War.[17]

With the growing need for a specific place to be set up for the care of the sick and wounded, officers and citizens alike began to plan hospitals. At the beginning of the Civil War, the only regular hospital was located at Napoleon, Arkansas, and could not possibly serve the entire state.[18] Even though

hundreds of invalids came to Hot Springs, Arkansas for treatments in the springs, that city could not boast a hospital. The so-called hospitals of this time in Arkansas were planned for the isolation of infectious diseases, and then abandoned as soon as the crisis was over. Very few hospitals were established during the Civil War for the purpose of effective treatment.[19] This was partially due to the mobility of the troops, and the lack of available supplies.

One example of the temporary hospitals that were set up were those called "wayside hospitals." They were founded in railroad depots or in churches to care for the wounded after a battle. The chaplain was responsible for collecting relief items and soliciting the help of the townspeople. He usually administered a sedative, such as wine, to a soldier undergoing an amputation. The chaplain also took down the soldier's name, home address, and last words if he was dying.[20]

Some temporary hospitals were established in homes. After the battle of Prairie Grove, Captain S.F. Pittman came home to find his farmhouse converted into a hospital. When returning to his command, Pittman heard sounds of artillery, and did not know that General Hindman was retreating. While passing through a neighbors farm, where the heaviest fighting was, Captain Pittman heard cries for water from the wounded left unattended. He distributed the three canteens of water to many of them, knowing that they were left behind to die.[21]

After the Prairie Grove battle, the Confederacy established a main battlefield hospital at the Prairie Grove Church. The Federals established their hospital at Fayetteville. The wounded were to get to Fayetteville the best way they could, either by walking, or by the help of a friend. The Female Seminary had previously been a Confederate hospital and was now turned into use by the "Feds." The furniture and chairs were removed and replaced by straw, which was the soldiers

only bed. A great many amputations took place, and the amputated arms and legs were thrown outside the hospital door in haste to get to the next patient.[22]

Cane Hill was the location for another hospital established after the Prairie Grove battle. This Confederate hospital was behind the Federal lines, under a flag of truce between Generals Hindman and Hunt. Dr. W.B. Welch, chief surgeon of the hospital, was caught sending dispatches to the Confederate forces at Fort Smith. In these dispatches, Welch told of the Union possessions, strengths, and movements. Dr. Welch was forced to leave, and the hospital was put in the care of the civilians there.[23]

At the Battle of Helena, General Holmes attacked with a Confederate force of 7,646. General Prentiss began the battle with 4,129. The Confederate losses were: 173 killed, 687 wounded, and 776 missing. The Union losses were: 57 killed, 146 wounded, and 36 missing.[24] In Helena, the Biscoe residence had been acquired for use as a convent and a school. Reverend Philip Ahanahan was in charge of the school and convent when they were turned into hospitals. The new institution faced difficulty because of the lack of trained medical staff, and the delay in establishing a morgues along with the hospital. One benefit, however, performed by the hospital was the care of the orphans and widows, which had not been done before.[25]

Another hospital, established by McNair's Brigade, was located on the outskirts of Helena. This division hospital was a group of fifteen to twenty tents, with their walls together, and the flaps pinned back to make a channel. There were beds on each side, leaving one center aisle. The "medical officers" in charge were merely soldiers too feeble to march. Lighting was provided by placing a candle on a bayonet, stuck in the ground, at intervals. They had well water to drink, but because of the heat on the water as it set in barrles,

the water soon proved to be undrinkable. Food for the patients consisted of a thin soup with some grains of barley or rice in it. Occasionally, the sick would receive a hardtack to supplement their diet.[26] The only major medicine at the hospital was quinine. Whiskey, desired most by the sick, was sometimes smuggled into the hospital. These two medicines were used for all the ills from fevers to malaria.[27]

Mr. Allen Polk's plantation was also used as a hospital in connection with the Battle of Helena. Mr. Polk was cited by the Federals for giving up his house and donating his services to the care of the wounded. The Federals brought sugar, tea, coffee, potatoes, and bandages to the plantation hospital, and treated the wounded Confederates "with" consideration."[28]

Other hospitals were established in various churches, schools, and courthouses throughout the State. Culpepper Court House and a large residence were used to care for the sick near Newport. Several stores, along with the Methodist and Presbyterian churches served the sick at Washington Post, Arkansas. The Episcopal and Catholic churches, however, were not used at Washington Post.[29] The wounded soldiers were cared for at Camden in citizens homes, and at a Confederate Military Hospital, under the charge of Dr. Randolph Brunson of Pine Bluff. Dr Brunson also cared for three sick soldiers at his home, due to their serious condition.[30]

The Sisters of Mercy were teachers by profession, but opened their buildings up to be used as hospitals. The only Catholic Order for women in Arkansas, the Sisters had schools located in Fort Smith, Helena, and Little Rock. At Saint Mary's Academy in Little Rock, many of the soldiers suffered from cold, sickness, and exposure, and deaths were recorded at two or three daily. Saint Anne's Academy in Fort Smith was able to transform into a hospital because the war had frightened the boarders and day pupils away.[31]

Little Rock hospitals were formed quite different than the previous hospitals mentioned. Their organization began with a train accident. In January, 1862, Colonel Maxey's Texas Regiment was passing through Arkansas by railway when some of the cars derailed. Ten of his men were hurt, and several others were already sick. They were taken to a rent house, where they were fed by the Ladies Aid Society. Dr. John Kirkwood, the local physician, was soon treating twenty-five or thirty patients at the makeshift hospital. In spite of the efforts of the doctor, the ten men from Maxey's regiment died, along with one-third of the other patients. This high death rate alarmed the townspeople into considering a hospital.[32]

The Little Rock City Council appointed a committee to confer with the trustees of St. John's College for the purpose of using their building as a hospital. St. John's College was currently a military academy under the control of the Masonic Grand Lodge. The building asked for by the comittee was a large brick one, well ventilated, and close to the arsenal. Linens and supplies were contributed by the citizens to the hospital. Money making projects such as Tableaux, concerts, and public suppers began to develop.[33] The ladies of Little Rock and Washington, Arkansas challenged each other to see who could raise the most money for the hospital. One substantial gift to the hospital was $747.50, from a group of Pine Bluff negroes.[34]

Several months later, there was a total of four temporary hospitals in Little Rock. They were at such places as the theater, State House, arsenal, and the General Hospital. There was no coordination of effort at this time for the hospital's benefit, and many of the women brought food for the sick that was unsuitable for the soldiers.[35] When Major General Hindman was in Little Rock, he was appalled at the hospital conditions, and set out to reform the situation. He set up a

board of examiners to examine all applications for medical positions, appointed a medical purveyor, and a post surgeon.[36] This was tp alleviate corruption and lack of concern at the hospitals.[37]

Many types of sickness and disease overshadowed the soldier in the hospital, on the battlefield, and while stationed at camp. Measles, malaria, typhoid, smallpox, and pneumonia were a few of the many epidemics which weakened and killed many troops in Arkansas. Poisonous snake bites, scorpion and tarantula bites were also dangers faced by the soldiers. More then two-t irds of the deaths recorded in the South came from sickness.[38]

Measles struck the Fourth Arkansas Infantry's "F" Company, while camped at Van Buren. Fourteen deaths were recorded during the first six weeks of encampment. Also hit by measles was McNair's Brigade, while camped in Northern Arkansas. Three died out of one hundred severe cases during thirty days. They moved camp, and this resulted in more cases and deaths---thirty losses in thirty six days.[39] At Arkansas Post, Confederate losses were less severe then those resulting from a measles epidemic at nearby Camp Nelson.[40]

Malarial fever was reported at Helena from McNair's Brigade, and also at DeVall's Bluff. This was attributed to the hot weather and large amounts of rainfall.[41]

Smallpox was another rampant disease. During the winter and spring of 1863, smallpox broke out in Colonel William A. Phillip's Federal Indian Brigade near Bentonville. During the next six weeks, there were forty new cases and eight deaths. Sanitary regulations were adopted but the Indians refused to change their habits. A "pest house" was then established a mile and a half away from camp to quarantine the victims under the supervision of Major Henry Maynard, medical director of the District of the West. He completed vaccinations on March 28, 1863.[42]

This same disease broke out in Brigadier General Shelby's army in November, 1864. Many soldiers fell by the wayside and were left unburied.[43] At this same time, citizens in Little Rock were becoming concerned over sanitary conditions present there that might encourage a smallpox epidemic. Civilians and soldiers were put to work shoveling rubbish, and a job was offered to someone to water the dusty streets down every morning. A small building on the outskirts of town was opened up to care for any smallpox patients who might come down the river.[44]

Another great cause of death was attributed to wounds. Most Civil War soldiers feared that even a small wound would develop into gangrene and amputation procedures would have to follow.[45] Anesthesia was used very few times during the war to alleviate the pain of wounds and surgery. Most surgeons felt that "surgical shock"[46] was necessary to have a successful operation.[47] Blood transfusions were practiced few times during the course of the war, which made the patient's loss of blood from wounds even more critical.[48]

In Arkansas, another reason for soldier's discomfort was due to the prison life. Although better than most other Southern prisons, Arkansas prison life left the soldiers with a desire for something better. From the result of a government questionaire, a list was provided of the supplies at the Federal prison at Washington Post. There was a bunk for every man, and a blanket was provided. Evidently, they had received some clothing because they answered "difficult to ascertain" on the amount received. They drew rations regularly, and the quality of it was good. The men got prompt medical attention, according to this report, by Harrison Chambers, the prison physician.[49]

The Confederate Military Prison, Camp Ford, was not as fortunate as Arkansas Post. Most of the 4,500 prisoners were from Major General Steele's army, and

had no living quarters of their own. Prisoners could build their own huts, but wood had to be carried over half a mile and tools were scarce. Because of this, most of the wood was used as firewood. Bloodhounds were kept to trace escaped prisoners. If caught, they were subjected to punishments like hanging by their thumbs or standing on pointed stakes barefoot. The hospital at the prison was built without nails, and parts of the building would collapse occasionally. There was no bedding in the hospital. The diet of the prisoners consisted of corn meal with an occasional piece of fresh beef and salt.[50]

Some prisoners were kept at Camden, Arkansas, but no established prison was recorded. Mention is made, however, of the prison hospital diet, which consisted of corn meal, beef and bacon, with periodic amounts of sugar. There was little supply of medicine, and no candles or soap was available.[51]

A monthly report was issued for the Confederate prisoners kept at Little Rock, with enrollment, deaths, and sick listed. Through this can be seen the averages of deaths and sickness during the latter part of the war. The number of deaths was proportionally less compared to the number of men on hand. This possibly reflects that conditions concerning sickness and death were being improved.[52]

Through the years of the Civil War, medicine changed little, as was evident in the conditions through which the soldier had to fight. Shortages in food, clothing, and medicines, along with the fear of death stayed with the soldier long after the war ended. Although the hospitals organized were often temporary, the need was seen to make them more permanent after the harsh experiences of the war were over. This perhaps was one of the few contributions to the medical profession at this time, and served to awake the citizens to the needs of their communities.

## APPENDIX

| Number of men on hand | Joined | Total | Died | Sick |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| March, 1864 | | | | |
| 73 | 41 | 114 | 3 | 10 |
| April | | | | |
| 92 | 460 | 552 | 6 | 8 |
| May | | | | |
| 527 | 191 | 718 | 20 | 105 |
| June | | | | |
| 490 | 65 | 555 | 30 | 62 |
| July | | | | |
| 191 | 90 | 280 | 14 | 57 |
| August | | | | |
| 228 | 97 | 325 | 14 | 84 |
| September | | | | |
| 209 | 66 | 365 | 14 | 84 |
| October | | | | |
| 343 | 52 | 395 | 24 | 78 |
| November | | | | |
| 354 | 84 | 438 | 26 | 64 |
| December | | | | |
| 215 | 67 | 282 | 13 | 43 |
| January, 1865 | | | | |
| 254 | 38 | 302 | 11 | 57 |
| February | | | | |
| 288 | 66 | 354 | 17 | 56 |
| March | | | | |
| 330 | 31 | 361 | 21 | 41 |
| April | | | | |
| 132 | 22 | 354 | 3 | 46 |
| May | | | | |
| 338 | 21 | 359 | 4 | 0 |
| June | | | | |
| 17 | - | 17 | - | - |

| Number of men on hand | Joined | Total | Died | Sick |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| July 5 | - | 5 | - | 1 |
| August 4 | - | 4 | - | - |

BACKNOTES

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[2]Arkansas Gazette, October 25, 1862.

[3]David Thomas, Arkansas in War and Reconstruction, 1861-1874. (Little Rock: United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1926). p.181.

[4]Confederate Women of Arkansas in the Civil War, 1861-65. (Little Rock, 1907). p. 64. Hereafter referred to as "Confederate Women".

[5]Mrs. T. Gaughan, Letters of a Confederate Surgeon. (Camden: Hurley Co., 1960). pp. 1- 80.

[6]Warner Hermann, Jr., The Civil War: The Artist's Record. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). pp. 204-208.

[7]OR, Series 4, Vol. 1, pp. 1024-25.

[8]J. L. M. Curry, Civil History of the Government of the Confederate States. (Richmond: S. F. Johnson Co., 1901). pp.170-71.

[9]Confederate Women, pp 135-37.

[10]Arkansas Gazette, December 17, 1963.

[11]Ibid., December 17, 1963.

[12]Ibid., May 11, 1964.

[13]Ibid., May 28, 1964.

[14]Ibid., August 10, 1964.

[15]Ibid., August 11, 1964.

[16]Mary Livermore, My Story of the War. (Hartford: A. D. Worthington & Co., 1889) pp.128-132.

[17]W. L. Gammage, The Camps, The Bivouac and the Battlefields. (Selma: Cooper & Kimball, 1864). pp.84-86. Hereafter referred to as "Camp".

[18]Governor Rector asked the legislature to appropriate money to establish a hospital for sick and wounded soldiers. The hospital as Napoleon had fallen into the hands of the state at the time of secession, but had an unhealthful location. The legislature appropriated $10,000 to fix Napoleon hospital up. The building provided 75-100 quarters with a supply of competant surgeons and nurses on hand.

[19]Arkansas Gazette, January 16, 1962.

[20]Charles Pitts, Chaplains in Gray. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1957). pp. 78-79.

[21]Arkansas Gazette, December 14, 1962.

[22]Ibid., December 15, 1962.

[23]Ibid., March 1, 1963.

[24]Robert Johnson, ed., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Vol. 4, (New York: Thomas Yosoloff, 1956). p. 143-45.

[25]Confederate Women. p. 82.

[26]Camp. pp 84-88.

[27]Ibid., pp. 84-88.

[28]OR, Series 1, Vol. 22, Pt. 1, p. 823.

[29]Confederate Women. p. 82.

[30]Ibid., pp 46-48.

[31]Ibid., p. 135.

[32]Arkansas Gazette, January 15, 1962.

[33]tableau - a representation of a scene, picture, etc., by a person or group posed in appropriate costume.

[34]Arkansas Gazette, February 5, 1962.

[35]Ibid., April 26, 1962.

[36]Ibid., June 20, 1962.

[37]Ibid. October 25, 1963.

[38]Otto Bettman, A Pictorial History of Medicine. (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1956). p. 270.

[39]Camp, pp.84-88.

[40]Arkansas Gazette, January 14, 1963.

[41]Camp, pp.15-17.

[42]Arkansas Gazette, March 15, 1963.

[43]Arkansas Gazette, November 4, 1964.

[44]Ibid., May 26, 2964.

[45]Warner Hermann, Jr., The Civil War, pp.204-208.

[46]Surgical shock is shock which comes with an injury, producing a decrease in blood pressure and a weak pulse.

[47]Bettman, Pictoral History, p.270.

[48]Ibid., p.271.

[49]OR, Ser.2.,Vol.6,p.790.

[50]Arkansas Gazette, June 1964.

[50]Ibid., September 15, 1964.

[52]OR, Ser2., Vol.8., p.433.

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