

January 1863 - Conditions in a Nashville Hospital – A First-Hand Account

by Leslie Korenko

It was while she was there that Emeline Huntington, of Kelley's Island, received the news

This is one of the hospitals in Nashville, believed to be Hospital No. 4, where Simon Huntington was sent. It was once a high school building.



that her son Simon was injured and in the hospital at Nashville. She left for Cincinnati but could travel no further. She passed her time writing about her trip. Her son, Erastus, also passed his time writing down his observations. He described in great detail the operations and conditions of the hospital at which his brother Simon was recovering. "Having been requested by numerous friends to give my experience in hospital life, I now will try and do so. To give everything like a detailed account would take too much time and space for the columns of the *Islander*. I will therefore, give as brief a description as is possible to convey an outline of hospital life on the frontier, both as to the Soldier and Nurses. The first will be from sight and hearing, the latter from an experience.

The hospital in which the following scene is laid is about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile south of Nashville and a few rods west of the Murfreesboro Pike. It is a large 3-story brick

building, was built and formerly occupied for a high school building. Each floor constituted a Ward, making thereof, three Wards. There were four Surgeons who also acted as Physicians; one for each Ward and one surgeon in charge of the whole hospital. One Clerk who keeps the hospital books and records. One hospital steward who has charge of all the military clothing &c. so that any soldier who has his descriptive list can draw what clothing he wishes. Each Ward has one Orderly whose business it is to see that his Ward has its rations of sugar, coffee, &c.; to keep the room clean; report to the Clerk all arrivals, departures, and deaths of patients. In short, he has charge of his Ward as much as a landlord does his tavern.

Each Ward Surgeon has an assistant who superintends dispensing the medicine prescribed and who accompanies him in his grand rounds (which are at half past 7, morning and evening). Each Ward has also two Nurses that dress wounds and do nothing else and eight other Nurses making 10 in all. Four of these are on duty 12 hours and off 12, the other six change every six hours (three on duty at a time). This makes seven nurses on duty in the daytime and three at night. The wounds are dressed in the daytime, making the night duties light, consisting chiefly in carrying water for the patients to drink.

The cooking department of the whole hospital is in charge of one person, so that all the Wards are served alike. All the Surgeons, Nurses and in fact all Officers in attendance are Soldiers or Army officers detailed for their respective duties.

In our Ward (the Second) there were 86 bunks or cots for patients, but when I first entered there were 103 wounded and sick Soldiers in the room. Those that could not get cots were provided with beds made up on the floor, so in reality the hospital was more than full. Seven of these were sick, the rest were all wounded at the battle of Stone Creek. Some were mortally and some were slightly wounded with all the intermediate variety of injuries, as there is no way in which a man can be shot that was not represented in that hospital.

All the wounds, except amputated limbs, were dressed twice a day. Cases of amputations were dressed three times in 24 hours. Here the labors of the Soldier's Aid Societies are fully appreciated. The bandages furnished by [the] government are of new cloth and will not answer to put on a raw sore, but thanks to the Sanitary Commissions, there were plenty of old cloths and bandages so that the rough ones were only used to put outside of them and for that purpose were just as good.

The food furnished by Government consisted of bread, beef, coffee and sugar with occasionally rice and beans. Fresh beef was furnished two or three times a week. This is the bill of fare for the Nurses and Convalescents and would be for the patients, were it not for the Sanitary Commission. The word Patient as used in the hospital means all who are not able to be about and are confined to their beds; the remainder are called Convalescents.

The Patients had besides Government rations, dried apples, dried peaches, elder berries, eggs, and prunes. These are furnished by the U. S. Sanitary Commission, and I was at the Sanitary rooms in Nashville the day before I started North. Potatoes, green apples, onions, cabbages, and other fruits and vegetables that arrived on the fleet of steamers Sunday...were being distributed among the hospitals as fast as possible. The sick and wounded Soldiers will hail them as they would the messenger of better days and I sincerely hope there will be enough for the Convalescents and Nurses.

A great many seem to have the idea that the Surgeons and Nurses get all the luxuries, depriving the sick soldiers of them. This is not so, though it should be to some extent. If any in the hospitals need good living it is the Nurses. The Surgeons live entirely separate from the Nurses and Patients and have nothing to do with anything sent to the hospitals for the Soldiers. If they tried to get anything not their due they would be exposed instantly, as all supplies have to go through a Soldier's hand first, and are under the supervision of the Soldier afterwards, whose object is to get them himself, and not let the Surgeons have them.

Almost every Soldier, when brought into the hospital, has all his clothes on his back, which are generally covered with mud from lying on the battle field. These clothes are taken off and clean ones put on. The hospital is furnished with drawers, shirts and socks for this purpose, which were branded 'Northern Soldiers Aid Society Cleveland Ohio' and 'Cincinnati Brand, U. S. Sanitary Commission.' 400 pairs of socks were received a day or two before I left from the Sanitary Commission at Cincinnati. Every Soldier is entitled to the free use of these while in hospital, but leave them at his departure.

When a Patient is considered dangerous, the Orderly ascertains who are his nearest relatives, his P. O. addresses, &c, and when he dies, writes home when and where he died, of what disease or wound, and where his remains are put; so that his friends or relatives can procure them if they wish. This is a great satisfaction to both the soldiers and his friends and is strictly attended to by orders of the Surgeon in charge. They are put into plain white wood coffins, stained and buried in the cemetery by themselves, which gives the graveyard a very strange appearance and strikes the observer with astonishment.

At the head of each grave is a board about 7 in. wide and 2 ft. high, painted snow white, upon which is inscribed the Soldier's name and Regiment.

I have been asked frequently since my return, if I have not changed my opinions in regard to the war since being where all its horrors were so distinctly and painfully visible. I will say YES I have. The reasons for the great change of opinion will be the subject of another article."

Leslie is the author of six books about the history of Kelleys Island including Kelleys Island 1862-1864 – The Civil War, the Island Soldiers & the Island Queen