

Right: Ambrotype of an unidentified Union soldier and his family.

Opposite: Through the war, Colonel H. J. B. Cummings of Winterset, Iowa, carried this tintype of wife Annie and daughter Laura Justina. Locks of hair and a ribbon are attached.



Thrown Upon Their

Women on the Civil War Home Front

The Civil War disrupted the conventional dynamics of the 19th-century household as women expanded their roles well beyond family and home. "At no time in our country's history have so many women been thrown upon their own exertions," wrote Virginia Penny in her 500-page book titled *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopedic of Woman's Work*, published in 1863. "Thousands of women, formerly dependent . . . have lost or may lose their only support. Some of the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of soldiers, may take the vacancies created in business by their absence—others must seek new channels of labor."

One of these women was Mrs. M. J. M. Clark. Her husband was "a soldier without means," according to the job recommendation written by her Iowa congressman John Kasson. "The wife," Kasson wrote, is "intelligent and competent."

Mrs. Clark was applying for a job in the U.S. Treasury Department. During the war many Northern women earned wages as office clerks, or "government girls," filling positions traditionally held by men. Women also worked in the federal post office and war

department, in munitions plants and arsenals, and in garment workshops and private businesses.

"In countless ways, the Civil War complicated the lives of Northern women," according to Nina Silber. "Wartime circumstances compelled women to compete for jobs, negotiate wages, manage household accounts, and file pension claims," as well as to "settle debts [and] pay mortgages." They also had to steer clear of unscrupulous profiteers, price gougers, and others poised to take advantage of them.

Farm women were especially challenged by the war. Midwestern farmers anticipated high demand from the army for their crops, mules, horses, cattle, and hogs. The military needed massive amounts of meat for soldiers' rations—salt pork in particular because it was high in calories and easier to preserve than beef. The problem was that the war drew heavily upon the agricultural labor force—owners and tenants of farms, as well as hired men and itinerant workers. As the war dragged on, the labor shortage increased dramatically. "Our hired man left to enlist just as corn planting commenced, so I shouldered my hoe and have worked out ever since. I guess my services are just as acceptable as



Own Exertions

by Ginalie Swaim

his," pronounced one Iowa woman. As Helen Maria Sharp summed it up, "To get a man to do anything is out of the question."

Farm women had to be "managers and diplomats who negotiated relationships with kin and neighbors to provision and shelter their families and to preserve their farms," according to historian J. L. Anderson. Some wives called upon relatives or neighbors for advice or help. Others relied on their own wits and made their own decisions. Marjorie Ann Rogers wrote to her husband: "I did not think I was getting enough for the potatoes and corn, so did not decide to sell to the German without knowing how much more I could get in town if delivered and if it would pay me to hire the team and do the driving myself." So she did. Jasper Rice wrote to his wife, Mary: "I must give you credit for your good management. I think when I get home I will let you do the financiering."

Women and children took on the heavy physical work typically handled by males in the family. After Emeline Ritner butchered a hog, she wrote to her husband, "There was not a man on the hill that we could get. We done it up just right. We just had to do it."

Women also took on more fieldwork—plowing, planting, and harvesting. As relief worker Mary Livermore rode through Wisconsin and eastern Iowa, she observed women driving "the horses round and round the wheat-field, . . . the glittering blades of the reaper cutting wide swaths with a rapid, clicking sound."

The war sent shockwaves through African American families. Historian Leslie Schwalm estimates that "roughly 320,000 enslaved people—more than half of them women—became displaced during the war." Thousands of former slaves fled to already overcrowded army camps. They were labeled as "contraband," Schwalm says, and were grouped "with the wagons, horses, and miscellaneous enemy property seized by the U.S. Army. The technical military term [of contraband] bore little resemblance to the courage and desperation that prompted enslaved women and men to risk flight to Union lines."

In 1862, the federal government began relocating thousands of African Americans to the North. In

September, for example, 700 fugitive slaves, "mostly women and children, who had recently arrived at Cairo, [Illinois,] were directed (under the authority of the secretary of war, at government expense, and with the assistance of secular and denominational charities) to potential employers in Chicago, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota," Schwalm writes.

In Mississippi river towns, potential employers waiting at the docks sometimes outnumbered the refugees disembarking. Thousands of applications for workers poured in, many of them from white women. Schwalm notes that "some women took an active role in encouraging and arranging for the transportation of former slaves north. White women who were sympathetic toward the plight of slaves, or were simply desperate for domestic and farm help, responded enthusiastically when authorities invited Northerners to apply for contraband labor. Several women made inquiries through Annie Wittenmyer, the Midwest's preeminent wartime relief organizer, hoping that her extensive contacts in the South could help them obtain black workers."

In addition to the organized federal relocation efforts, individual officers and soldiers worked on their own to bring refugee slaves to their home state. "Are there any contrabands wanted in Iowa City, or its vicinity for help this spring?" asked Lyman Allen. "If so, please let me hear from you. I could send a large number to Iowa, if they were wanted, as there are many brought up the river at this time."

Wounded in the leg, Thomas Ball wrote to his wife, "Now Serrilda I want you to give me your opinion about haveing about three of four darkies brought to your house when I come home to work for us." He suggested "three boys about twelve years old, one to help you about the house and garden and cook for the other two that plows and so on as I never expect to be able to follow the plow on account of my leg."

After Marjorie Ann Rogers's husband announced that he was thinking of bringing a fugitive slave boy home to Tama, she "wondered what I would do with another boy and he a black one. There was not a colored person in our town or ever had been that I knew of."

Northern communities were split on the issue of welcoming, much less hiring, African American refugees from the South. In one community white women offered them food and clothing; as Rogers insisted, they "must be made to feel they were among friends." But in some Iowa counties, the idea of hiring black refugees was met with violent rhetoric, protests, and mobs. Moses Mosely, who had come

to Mount Pleasant during this period, remembered townspeople complaining about "contrabands swarming into towns and other public places, taking the work from the free people and often making unbecoming remarks."

Letters and diaries reveal the emotional impact as families were torn apart. Raising four children on her own, Helen Maria Sharp wrote her husband in obvious despair, "i shall have to brake up housekeeping before long. if i was only out of the way folks would take care of my childen but to scatter them while im alive is more trouble than I can bare to think about."

In his fifties, John Cozad from Indianola pretended he was younger so he could enlist with his son, according to fellow soldier Cyrus Boyd. Cozad "had his hair colored black—held his head up and looked like a boy under age—and ran the gauntlet of Inspection and was sworn in Company 'G' as a private soldier. He wants to go principally because his *son* John has enlisted in our Company at the age of 17 and he is an only child and the poor old man cannot bear to have him alone so he goes along to look after him."

Through letters, couples expressed their yearning for physical affection. One soldier wrote, "I certainly would not object to having a nice quiet snooze with you this January night." Mary Vermilion confided to her spouse, "Longing to see you, to hear your voice, to feel your kisses on my lips." Harriet Jane Thompson wrote, "Do you not think of our bed at home when you lay down on your cot?" and, another time, "Oh, how I wish I could sleep with you tonight."

"War severely tested the marital stability of many Northern couples," according to Nina Silber. "During and immediately after the war, the divorce rate, although still miniscule with respect to rates today, increased significantly."

Far more than marital stability was at stake for relocated African Americans. "Many African Americans who agreed to make the trip north left spouses, families, and friends behind; were dependent on the trustworthiness of their benefactor and the soundness of his or her plans, and faced long, complicated, and dangerous journeys to unknown locations to live with white strangers for an indefinite length of time," Schwalm writes. They risked being "stranded" in the North, left to their own devices amidst hostility and suspicion, even kidnapped and resold in the South. For them, nothing was guaranteed.

Supporting the war, in both word and deed, became another expectation of women, despite the suffering and sacrifices already thrust upon them. A woman's job of caring for her family now extended beyond her home to the soldiers in distant army camps and hospitals—for were not these soldiers some other women's sons, brothers, and husbands?

Women were expected to participate in soldiers' aid projects, the enormous volunteer undertakings to provision soldiers beyond what the military provided. Local groups funneled food, medical supplies, cash, clothing, and other materials to larger state and regional clearinghouses for shipment and distribution in military camps and hospitals. In early March 1863, for example, Northern relief groups received an official dispatch stating that "General Grant's army in danger of scurvy." Soldiers' aid groups responded, and soon "a line of vegetables connected Chicago and Vicksburg," according to an official report. That month, midwestern states shipped a thousand barrels of food a week to Grant's army.

In dozens of ways, Northern women pitched in to help soldiers. They made small pillows to support wounded limbs, fashioned quilts (25,000 by one report) to fit cots and soldiers' packs. They knit socks and "scraped" lint. In one town in only ten days, a hundred women finished uniforms for 200 men. Women

in Keokuk made 25 straw-filled mattresses overnight when the river town's army hospitals ran short.

"I never before fully realized the immense good done by 'Aid Societies,'" admitted Iowa army surgeon Seneca Thrall. "Anyone being in our field hospitals after a battle, seeing the wounded brought in bloody and dirty, their clothing frequently necessarily cut from them. Then see them lay for two or three days almost naked, covered only with coarse and dirty blankets. Then see them, a few hours after sanitary supplies, sent by the ladies through 'aid societies.' The clean shirts, drawers, sheets etc. then only can you realize the good done."

In addition to "the private, needle-driven work of the aid societies," as Silber calls it, women staged large fundraisers called sanitary fairs. These fairs—with entertainment, bazaars, and raffles—were popular social events as well as effective fundraisers for the war effort. While some women crafted small items to sell, others prodded townspeople and farmers into donating food, supplies, and cash. A sanitary fair in Burlington, Iowa, netted donations worth \$25,000. Dubuque's weeklong Northern Iowa Sanitary Fair in 1864 raised \$86,000 in goods and cash (almost as much as a Chicago fair a year before). Sanitary fairs, writes Silber, "put women's patriotic work on public display in dramatic, large-scale venues."

Certainly thousands of women already had their hands full caring for family and farm. They had no extra time or resources for soldiers' aid organizations or chose other ways to help. Iowan Harriet Jane Thompson agreed to "work for the soldiers cheerfully but I will do it at home for I do not believe in these societies for they always end in a fuss." The women most involved were generally urban, middle-class women, with the financial and personal independence to devote themselves to volunteer work. Those who became leaders drew upon their skills to delegate, recruit, organize, persuade, and, no doubt, badger others to join the cause of aiding soldiers.

Not to be overlooked are the unsung contributions that African American women made to the war effort. They worked as cooks, nurses, and laundresses in army camps and hospitals. Schwalm estimates that "10 percent of over 21,000 paid [female] hospital attendants" were African American women.

In the North, they helped food production by working as farmhands. So did many white women—but Schwalm makes a critical distinction. White female farm workers were hailed as "heroines of the farm," making "patriotic sacrifices" for the war. Black female farmhands, on the other hand, were considered

DAVENPORT DAILY GAZETTE, SEPT. 3, 1862

LINT SOCIETIES.—By reference to the GAZETTE of yesterday morning, the little girls of our city will find a direct appeal made to them from the Surgeon General of the United States, that they revive their lint societies and go to work to pick lint for the poor wounded soldiers. Just to think, hundreds and thousands of soldiers, the brothers and fathers of little girls like yourselves, now suffering anguish from their bleeding wounds, when a little lint might stop the flow of blood and help to relieve their pain. Go to work little girls and pick lint—it will all be needed, more than your industrious fingers can supply.

An 1862 Davenport Gazette article urges children to "scrape lint." Scraping a knife across clean linen produced a soft substance for dressing wounds. Thousands of pounds were shipped to army hospitals. In Washington, Iowa, a prize banner for lint scraping was awarded to School District No. 5.

"rough" and "able-bodied." Doing heavy fieldwork was seen as no sacrifice; it was expected of them.

Schwalm makes another important point about black women's contributions. "Although it is the story of black enlistment and black soldiering that dominates most accounts of black agency during the Civil War, the flight of noncombatant women and children to Union lines also played a significant role in accelerating slavery's downfall, in creating a northern diaspora, and in making emancipation a national event."

Although public efforts to aid soldiers were extremely successful, efforts to help their families were less so. Facing wartime inflation without male wage-earners in the household, many soldiers' families couldn't even afford food or firewood. Soldiers generally sent all or most of their pay home, but their pay was often weeks behind schedule, and mail delivery was unreliable.

Various ways to organize family relief efforts were tried in Iowa communities, with varying degrees of success. As one Iowa woman complained to her husband, "We can't get any thing from the vollenteers aid society." Newspaper editors in many towns reminded readers to help destitute families. In Dubuque, a group of businessmen early on in the war volunteered to help local families, but the group soon disbanded. Historian Russell Johnson offers possible reasons why: the men saw benevolence as women's work; they tended to argue about how to organize the work rather than to simply do it; and because they expected a brief war, their commitment was short-lived.

In the first few years, there was a push for Iowa towns and counties to use public funds to help soldiers' families facing destitution, but this was not mandated by the legislature until 1864. The state law, according to Johnson, "failed to define all soldiers' families as worthy of relief. Local poor relief officers could still give or deny relief based on their perceptions of worthiness."

This notion of being worthy of help was not new. Americans had long believed that those who were impoverished had brought it on themselves by laziness or moral laxity. Because it was their own fault, the reasoning went, they were "unworthy" of charity or help. Soldiers, who were making patriotic sacrifices on the battlefield, were "worthy" of aid—but not necessarily their families. Furthermore, a wife should stay dependent on her husband, it was believed, even if his paycheck was delayed for months.

Historians disagree as to whether women's new roles during the war significantly broadened their opportunities in the years after. Certainly female medical and relief workers in the war years had demonstrated skills and self-confidence as they expanded their realm from the domestic to the public. After the war, some engaged their energies in the gradual professionalization of nursing and the public health sanitation movement. Some women, such as Amelia Bloomer of Council Bluffs, transferred their energies from soldiers' relief to suffrage work; others, to the temperance movement. Annie Wittenmyer, in fact, was chaplain and president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in its early years. She was also a leader in the Women's Relief Corp, the female auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic. Iowan Marjorie Ann Rogers, who had organized relief efforts in Iowa, continued to push for orphanages and other forms of assistance to children, widows, and the elderly.

But these postwar gains were the exceptions. Women wage-earners generally lost their jobs to returning soldiers. And even though women during the war had written 30,000 letters to the federal government (many of them to the president), this did not ensure them a voice in postwar politics or the public arena.

In fact, "most women who had experienced the upheavals and transformations of the Civil War era . . . returned to tending to their own households and domestic lives," Silber writes. Many headed west, "perhaps compelled to emigrate by male family members who, feeling restless in the postwar period, sought to recapture something of the adventure that they had known as soldiers." And, she concludes, "Tens of thousands of widows had to make do without their husbands, who had died as a result of Civil War injuries or illnesses." ❖

NOTE ON SOURCES

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