

This vampyre, Nostalgia

It was a "monster," wrote a reporter, "that wanders listlessly up and down our camps," causing men to "droop and die. . . . It is languor, debility, low fever, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, death, and yet, through all, it is only that sad thing they call Nostalgia."

As early as the 1750s, nostalgia was a medical diagnosis in Europe and a subject of discourse among doctors. In the United States, the terms nostalgia and homesickness filtered into medical parlance by the Mexican War and became increasingly familiar as the Civil War wrenched men from the familiarity of family and home.

Unlike today, when nostalgia is defined as a sentimental, wistful, and too rosy remembrance of one's own past, nostalgia was "a physical illness that could suck the life out of a soldier," a notion that "had been slowly emerging in American culture during the antebellum period," according to historian Susan Matt. "It became far more widespread during the Civil War as doctors and laypeople north and south came to see acute homesickness not just as an emotional condition, but as a physiological one as well."

The Manual of Instructions for Military Surgeons on the Examination of Recruits and Discharge of Soldiers, published in 1864, listed the symptoms: "appetite fails . . . excretions are impaired . . . sleep is disturbed . . . emaciation comes on . . . stupor and delirium."

After the war, the government's official *Medical and Surgical His-*

tory of the War of the Rebellion tallied 5,000 cases and nearly 60 deaths attributed to nostalgia. Iowa soldier Cyrus Boyd wrote, "More men die of homesickness than all other diseases—and when a man gives up and lies down he is a goner." Boyd exaggerated. There were far more lethal diseases, but the idea that soldiers died of homesickness was commonplace.

"The poor fellow died of Nostalgia (homesickness), raving to the last breath about wife and children," one army doctor reported. "Deaths from this cause are very frequent in the army."

Historian Judith Andersen says, "This condition was thought to set in when soldiers were thrown into the tumult of war: viewing combat and experiencing the shockingly different environment of war (marching, illness, poor living conditions). It was noted that nostalgia, in severe cases, could lead to death because of the recruit's absolute hopelessness and that this was more likely to happen with young recruits."

How, then, should nostalgia and homesickness be treated? Some said to fill the day and night with structure and activity. Play rousing music to lift the spirits. Boyd advised his comrades to "keep the mind occupied with something new and keep going all the time except when asleep." But advice differed on whether connections with home comforted the morose soldier or actually worsened his condition. Did foods "that tasted like home," letters from family, local newspapers, even church services in camp

soothe the soldier, or exacerbate his longing? It was said that, "Union bands sometimes were forbidden to play 'Home, Sweet Home' or other songs that might render soldiers melancholic." Union Major General Benjamin Butler wrote to his wife: "Don't write me to come home any more. You have made me so homesick now I am almost unfit to duty."

Many army doctors and officers considered symptoms of homesickness a sham, signs of indolence, cowardice, and weak character. "Homesick" men should not be mollicoddled, but shamed and ridiculed.

But women who worked in army hospitals thought differently. They did not deny the feelings of their patients suffering from "soldier's heart." Nor did a Chicago news correspondent who wrote: "Who shall dare to say that the boy who 'lays down and dies,' a-hungered and starving for home, does not fall as well and truly for his country's sake as if a rebel bullet had found his heart out? Against it the Surgeon combats in vain, for 'who can minister to a mind diseased?'"

—by Ginalie Swaim

NOTE ON SOURCES

Major sources are Judith Andersen, "'Haunted Minds': The Impact of Combat Exposure on the Mental and Physical Health of Civil War Veterans," in *Years of Change and Suffering*, ed. James M. Schmidt and Guy R. Hasegawa; and Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness: An American History*.