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Annie Wittenmyer

An appeal from Iowa soldiers in southern hospitals, which was signed by 480 persons, was read to those attending a "sanitary fair" in Des Moines in the early fall of 1863:

We are grateful for all the kindness shown us. We appreciate your noble charity, which reaches us in camp — in the hospital and on the battlefield — but we prefer you should forget us, and leave us to struggle with our fate as best we may,—if you will but look after our wives and children, our mothers and sisters, who are dependent upon us for support. A severe winter is before them and we are rent with anxiety as we remember their slender resources and our meager and irregular pay. Succor them, and withhold your charity from us.

As a result, a call went out from Soldiers' Aid Societies for a convention to be held in Muscatine, October 7-9, 1863. At this meeting it was decided to establish a home for soldiers' orphans at the earliest possible date. An appeal was published on November 17, setting Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1863 as the date for making contributions

to the project. Signing the document was Mrs. Annie Wittenmyer, president.

Contributions of money, clothes, furniture, and other property, convertible into money, flowed in from all over the state. Iowa soldiers, suffering every hardship of war, contributed from their small pay the remarkable sum of \$45,262.62.

The project was underway. Particularly active in the work of establishing the home were Judge Ralph P. Lowe and Mrs. Wittenmyer of Keokuk; Judge C. C. Cole, Des Moines; Mrs. P. V. Newcomb, Dr. J. J. Burtis, John L. Davies, John F. Dillon, and Hiram Price of Davenport; and Mr. and Mrs. N. H. Brainerd, Iowa City. Providing an effective leadership for this group was Mrs. Wittenmyer even though she was heavily involved in duties in connection with the war's sick and wounded.

Annie Turner was born at Sandy Springs, Ohio, on August 26, 1827. When she was 20 years old she became the wife of William Wittenmyer, a merchant of Jacksonville, Ohio. He was a man of considerable wealth and many years older than she. The Wittenmyers moved to Keokuk in 1850 and the next year bought the site for their new home.

After the house was built Mrs. Wittenmyer set up, in her own home, a private free school-room for the poor children of Keokuk. She also established a Sunday school, using the warehouse

facilities to which the school had been moved. Three of the four children born to the Wittenmyers died in infancy. She loved children and, possibly, this thwarting of the maternal instinct led her to feel such compassion for the children of others.

When the Civil War came, Annie Turner Wittenmyer was a widow living in her home with a son, Charles A., too young for military service. However, with three brothers in the service it was only natural that she become involved.

The strategic location of Keokuk brought its residents early news reports from the fighting fronts; they watched men depart for the war zones; and they watched wounded and dying men being carried from boats docked on the city's waterfront. The women of Keokuk soon realized that these men needed aid and the Soldiers' Aid Society came into existence in Keokuk and throughout the state. As executive secretary of the Keokuk society, Mrs. Wittenmeyer was assigned the task of ascertaining the needs of soldiers in camps and hospitals so that state aid could be more efficiently handled.

She had visited army camps in April of 1862 and on her return wrote a letter that was printed in Keokuk's *The Gate City* and later copied in the press of the state. She wrote that "lint and bandages were not needed for the sick soldiers in the hospitals, but ticks in which to put straw for

beds, pillows were needed for their heads instead of knapsacks, cotton sheets and garments instead of army clothes, and dried fruit and delicacies to take the place of army rations."

Mrs. Wittenmyer was appointed Sanitary Agent for Iowa in 1862 and Secretary of War E. M. Stanton gave her a pass to go through the lines with her supplies. This took her into camps, prisons, and hospitals as she administered to the needs of the wounded and ailing. One of her great contributions was the establishment of hospital diet kitchens. Before she took a hand, all soldiers had been fed alike, regardless of their physical condition. After the diet kitchens were organized under Mrs. Wittenmyer's direction, soldiers received specialized foods as recommended by the doctors.

With all of her duties, Annie Turner Wittenmyer had not forgotten Iowa or its children orphaned by war.

She first mentioned them at a meeting of the Soldiers' Aid Society in Iowa City on September 23, 1863.

Those attending the following month's meeting in Muscatine passed a resolution calling for an asylum for children, set up an organization, and named Mrs. Wittenmyer to the board. The birth of today's Annie Wittenmyer Home was imminent.