



COURTESY OF MISS MAYMIE TURNER
MRS. ANNIE WITTENMYER

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. X11

ISSUED IN SEPTEMBER 1931

NO. 9

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The Wittenmyer Diet Kitchens

One morning in January, 1862, a woman walked into a military hospital at Sedalia, Missouri, and glanced keenly about the large room filled with cots, each one holding a sick or wounded soldier. It was breakfast time and the attendants were moving about with trays. As the men looked up in surprise at seeing a woman visitor at that hour of the morning, some of them may have recognized her, for many of the patients were Iowa men and the woman was Mrs. Annie Turner Wittenmyer of Keokuk, already experienced as a relief worker among the soldiers.

As she stood there surveying the crowded room, Mrs. Wittenmyer was surprised to see on one of the cots her youngest brother, David Turner, a lad of sixteen. He had just waved away the attendant carrying his breakfast tray.

"If you can't eat this you'll have to do without, there is nothing else", was the response of the waiter.

The sister stepped to the side of the cot and glanced at the rejected tray. "On a dingy-looking wooden tray", she wrote later, "was a tin cup full of black, strong coffee; beside it was a leaden looking tin platter, on which was a piece of fried fat bacon, swimming in its own grease, and a slice of bread." No wonder the young soldier, sick with typhoid fever and acute dysentery, looked upon such food with distaste. The meeting was indeed fortunate for the sick boy, who was nursed back to health by his efficient elder sister.

The incident, however, had a more far-reaching effect, for it made Mrs. Wittenmyer realize in a concrete way the need of special diets for hospital patients. At this time Mrs. Wittenmyer was a woman in her middle thirties — born on August 26, 1827. Her hair was already snow white, but her keen blue eyes and fair complexion denied the suggestion of age. For almost a year she had been going about the camps and hospitals along the Mississippi River where Iowa regiments were to be found, bringing good cheer, food delicacies, and supplies for the men in the hospitals. She had helped to organize the Keokuk Soldiers' Aid Society and partly through her efforts the women of Iowa were mobilized to furnish money, jellies, potatoes, fruit, sheets, hospital garments, and whatever else was needed to make the men a little more comfortable.

As she went about her work distributing these goods, doing errands for the wounded, helping in all sorts of emergencies, Mrs. Wittenmyer was more and more impressed by the wretched provision made by the government hospitals for feeding the patients who were very sick or desperately wounded. The fare served to these men was almost exactly the same as the rations issued to the men in the field.

The food would be condemned to-day as unsatisfactory for well soldiers and, indeed, attacks of scurvy were all too common. But for men sick with typhoid fever or running a high temperature as a result of infected wounds — and most wounds were infected in those days — bacon, beans, hard tack, and coffee were evidently unsuitable food. Moreover, most of the cooking in the hospitals as well as in the camps was done by soldiers detailed for that work, most of whom did not care for the job. Many of the patients needed a satisfactory diet more than they needed medicine. But military red tape could not be expected to distinguish between a well soldier and a sick one: certain rations were provided for each soldier — if no dishonest contractor or surgeon intervened.

The aid societies, the United States Sanitary Commission, and the United States Christian Commission, had attempted to supply delicacies for the critically ill patients, but distribution was difficult. Women like Mrs. Wittenmyer could not be present in every

hospital all the time, and spasmodic gifts of lemonade or broth were unsatisfactory.

Moreover, the surgeons were frequently unwilling to have visitors distribute food promiscuously in the wards, although it is difficult to see how anything — except poison — could have been more harmful to most sick men than the food regularly served. If, on the other hand, the delicacies provided by the women at home were turned over to the commissary for distribution, they often failed to reach the men for whom they were intended.

Mrs. Wittenmyer pondered the problem of suitable food for sick and wounded men, and in December, 1863, an idea came to her, as she says, "like a divine inspiration". She proposed that special diet kitchens be established in the larger military hospitals, with two experienced women as supervisors or dietary nurses. The diet for each patient needing special food was to be prescribed by the attending surgeon, prepared in the special diet kitchen, and served to the patient according to the name or number on the diet slip.

Although her suggestion was at first opposed by the hospital surgeons, some experiments with these special diet kitchens convinced the commanding officers and surgeons of their worth. The United States Christian Commission took up the work and in May, 1864, Mrs. Annie Wittenmyer resigned her position as

State Sanitary Agent of Iowa to devote all her time to the organization, management, and supervision of special diet kitchens in the army hospitals. By the close of the war more than a hundred of these kitchens had been installed, where such delicacies as toast, chicken, soup, milk, tomatoes, jellies, tea, gruel, and vegetables took the place of army fare or supplemented it.

The government furnished most of the supplies and the attendants required in these diet kitchens, but additional delicacies, including such things as jellies and preserves, were donated by private relief agencies. The two women supervisors in each kitchen were chosen by Mrs. Wittenmyer, who was the agent of the United States Christian Commission, and their expenses and maintenance were also provided by the Christian Commission. In October, 1864, the War Department issued a special order permitting Mrs. Wittenmyer and "such ladies as she may deem proper to employ" to visit United States general hospitals "for the purpose of superintending the preparation of food in the Special Diet Kitchens", upon the request of the surgeons. The quartermaster's department was ordered to furnish transportation.

It was not always easy to secure, as supervisors in these diet kitchens, women who were sympathetic, efficient, and tactful; and the work required these qualities in a high degree. The following directions

sent out by Mrs. Wittenmyer in July, 1864, indicate the standards she set for the women workers in the diet kitchens:

INSTRUCTIONS TO MANAGERS OF SPECIAL
DIET KITCHENS

In accepting your present position of responsibility, you place yourself in the service and under the general care and direction of the U. S. Christian Commission; and in my absence you will be under the general direction of the Field Agent of the Department, and will look to the nearest Station Agent of the Commission for assistance and supplies.

The following statements and requirements must receive careful attention, and be scrupulously observed:

1st. Your work in the Kitchen is to assist the Surgeons in giving comfort and restoration to languishing men, who are in need of carefully prepared nutritious food.

2d. The order of the Surgeon in charge, is the law of the Kitchens, as it is of all other hospital arrangements.

3d. Under the direction of the Surgeon in charge, it will be your duty to prepare such articles of diet, and only such, as are ordered or approved by the Surgeons in charge of the sick.

4th. You will keep open to the inspection of the Surgeon in charge, an account of all the stores received from any source outside of the hospital, and at the end of each month, send to me at Louisville, Ky., a statement of the expenditures from such sources, and an invoice of the stock on hand, accompanied by a requisition for the supplies needed for the coming month.

5th. In addition to the monthly report, you will communicate with me at Louisville, Ky., at the end of each week,

noting any incident of interest you may choose, and giving a general statement of the condition and working of the Kitchen.

6th. Great good may be daily accomplished by bringing kind words and Christian sympathy and solicitude, with articles of comfort and necessity, to the cots of the sick and wounded; but all such visits to the wards must be by the Surgeon's permission, and in strict conformity with hospital regulations.

7th. A spirit of censoriousness and evil speaking and intermeddling, unchristian anywhere, is doubly mischievous here, and dangerous to all concerned. First impressions of what can and ought to be done in a large hospital, are very likely to need the correction which extended experience and candid observation are sure to give.

8th. Neatness and simplicity of dress, are intimately connected with your success.

9th. A uniform Christian deportment, above the shadow of reproach, and the avoiding of the very appearance of evil, is absolutely necessary.

10th. Your work has its foundation in Christian self-sacrifice. The only possible sufficient motive for you, is a desire to do good to the suffering. For this you will be willing to forego, in a large degree, home comforts, and especially that of social intercourse, in order to give yourself, with a single aim, and with all your might, to the work you have undertaken.

But even these special diet kitchens had to fight against graft. A woman helper in charge of the special kitchen in the hospital at Madison, Indiana, complained to Mrs. Wittenmyer of the food, especially the coffee. Mrs. Wittenmyer sent Miss Lou E.

Vance, one of her shrewdest women assistants, to the hospital with instructions to find out what was going on and report. Miss Vance got her first clue when she observed that the attendants had been ordered to deposit all the coffee grounds in a barrel beside the kitchen door. When she asked them why they kept the grounds, they replied laconically, "It's the surgeon's orders."

She learned from further questioning that the surgeon had given orders that the coffee grounds so collected be dried on the commissary floor. When she inquired what was done with them after that, she received the non-committal reply, "I don't know", and a general laugh. Sure enough, when she visited the commissary room, she found piles of coffee grounds, but the only reply she could get from the men was that they "guessed" the surgeon was going to sell the dried grounds.

Miss Vance, however, was no mean detective. She poured some of the coffee served at the hospital on some white pine boards and decided that it had been adulterated with logwood — an extract used for dyeing. She was quite sure then that she knew what was being done with the coffee grounds. To prove her theory she picked out one of the attendants who looked rather meek and asked him point blank why the men in the commissary room put logwood in the coffee for the sick and wounded men to drink. The

boy turned pale and stammered, "We have to do it; it's the surgeon's orders."

Miss Vance immediately sent the news to Mrs. Wittenmyer, who advised her to secure affidavits from the men without letting the surgeon know about it. She herself started at once for Louisville, Kentucky, where General Robert C. Wood, the Assistant Surgeon General, had his headquarters. With the proofs in her hand, Mrs. Wittenmyer asked to have a private interview with the General. Immediately she stated her charges against the doctor at the Madison hospital.

The officer was astonished and exclaimed, "Why, he is one of my best surgeons."

"But my opinion of him is that *he ought to be hung higher than Haman*", Mrs. Wittenmyer replied.

And then she presented the proofs, so positive that the Assistant Surgeon General was convinced. "I will punish that man to the full extent of the law", he declared. Mrs. Wittenmyer urged that the case be turned over to the Governor of Indiana, but General Wood insisted that this would be a reflection on his own honesty and injure his standing in the service. Finally Mrs. Wittenmyer consented to have charges preferred by a military commission and the General agreed that she should select the commission. But as soon as the commission appeared at the hospital at Madison, the guilty surgeon telegraphed his resignation to Washington and he himself was soon far away —

unpunished. The hospital, however, benefitted by his absence.

On the whole, the diet kitchens seem to have answered a very real need and to have been fairly successful. Some of them furnished rations to as many as a thousand or fifteen hundred of the very sick patients at one time. During the last eighteen months of the war more than two million rations were issued monthly from the diet kitchens, some of which were established almost under fire. Even if they did not furnish "mother's cooking", the appetizing foods sent out from these special diet kitchens must have greatly increased the chances of recovery for many patients.

Mrs. Wittenmyer remained in charge of this work until the war was over. The hospitals were gradually emptied and the sick and wounded men went home to eat once more the food prepared by wives or mothers. Of her General U. S. Grant said: "No soldier on the firing line gave more heroic service than she rendered."

RUTH A. GALLAHER