



"Surely these are scenes over which angels might weep, and devils hold high carnival."

Wars & Mid-1900's

Civil War & the Story of a Local Nurse

I cannot see the bravery, the heroism or the glory of war, for there is a film over my eyes when I think of the upturned faces lying stark and cold in the moonlight . . . I cannot hear the cries of victory for they are drowned by the cries of the dying, the groans of sufferers and the sobs of homeless children begging for shelter and bread.¹

Support of what was clearly an atrocity to women such as Carrie Winchell of Ithaca, was considered a duty to many others. When the Civil War raged in the years following 1861, women in Tompkins County, like women all over the country, frantically knitted and sewed clothing to send to the embattled troops. Many of them had a boy of their own at the front; in fact, as many local men died from that war as from the dreaded tuberculosis during 1825-75.²

Sarah Palmer, a thirty-three-year-old Ithaca widow, announced her intention to go to the battlefield and personally nurse wounded soldiers. She was deluged with harsh criticism; townfolk declared her "demented — bereft of usual common sense" to venture to that place which was so definitely "no place for a woman." But she was decided. On September 3, 1862, Sarah kissed her two children good-by, leaving them with relatives, and left her Ithaca home to join the 109th Regiment.³

Palmer spent three and a half years traveling with the regiment from battlefield to battlefield, hospital to hospital. She cleaned and dressed untold numbers of wounds, comforted dying men, and tried to relieve injured soldiers of their sometimes agonizing pain. Her vigil was constant, her duty clear, and her work demanding. She related in her autobiography:

One day [Charlie] called me to him in great alarm, and said, "I think I am dying, I feel such a strangeness *there*," pointing to his amputated arm. I undid the bandage, and there, rioting on

the fresh festers of the wound, were a score or more of white crawling worms. They had produced the uneasy feeling, and as I picked them off he grew quiet again.⁴

Oftimes the amputated limb seemed to lie distorted in the great festering heap, and they begged that it may be laid straight. Strange this sympathy which the member gone seems to have with the frame-work left.⁵

The following excerpts from her diary were written during the last months of the Civil War.

March 8

The day is lovely, but I hardly enjoy it. I am so worn with constant toil. I am hungry, too, for I have not had time to eat, and no one to relieve me for a moment, I have visited nearly all the tents, and done all I could to make the inmates comfortable.

March 29

A terrible battle must be raging at the front; we hear the cannonading like near thunder, and the battle is so close we can hear the cheering of the men as they go to the wild charge.

April 1

I have a narrow bed, and last night I took in a great fat Irish woman for a companion, and consequently kept awake all night for fear one of us would fall out of bed.

April 2

The wounded have come in. . . . Oh, how my heart throbs with its anxious waiting. Who may these wounded be?

April 3

Still they come in, with about fifty more of the rebels. They look starved and wild, but here they will have enough to eat, and will be cared



for as our own men. How strange it seems to see them lying so close to those whom they met so lately with bloody intent – now all powerless to harm them, even if rage had not died out of their hearts.

April 4

I am very tired. I think I can hardly stand upon my feet another moment; and then someone wants me, and I find I am not yet exhausted. . . . I feel the need of female society – these rough men, kind as they are, cannot sympathize with a woman . . . but there is no one here for me, and I must keep the sad thoughts in my own bosom.

April 5

We have fourteen hundred men now in our hospital. I hear their groans all night long, and my work is very heavy. So still seems the air without the constant roar of cannon, it whispers of the advent of peace.⁵

The whisper became a ringing song. On April 9, 1865, Sarah Palmer joyfully wrote that Lee had surrendered, and "Oh! soon we shall go home!"⁷

Before she left, however, there was the matter of her well-deserved back salary; a war nurse was entitled to twelve dollars a month and soldier's rations, and Sarah was due ten months pay. "I needed the money sadly," she wrote, "and was determined to omit no formality which would keep it in reserve."⁸ But Sarah was sent around in circles looking for the right forms, the proper permission – one delay after another. She was troubled at first, then exasperated. Could it be they did not intend to pay her at all? She tried once more, approaching the paymaster.

Now I was a woman, and I was footsore and weary, and I wanted my money, and I said, "Well, you look very cosy here, and I will take a chair while you think the matter over, for I shall not go away till I am paid by somebody," and I sat down . . . Perhaps they saw defiance in my despair, for presently the paymaster sharply ordered the clerk to see how much it was, and pay me, for a woman sitting there

in the office all day was a nuisance not to be endured. The clerk handed me the money, and I said to the *very gentlemanly* paymaster, "The war is at its close, and we nurses are about to lose a good job of twelve dollars a month, while you will be out just one hundred and twenty, to say nothing of what you can browbeat out of just such women as myself," and bidding him "good-day," I left, very much to his satisfaction, no doubt, certainly it was to mine.⁹

"Woman does not make war,"¹⁰ she said, and with pay in hand, Sarah Palmer returned home.

World War I

The "War to End All Wars," though dire in consequence, did little to inspire any kind of lasting peace. But at the time, it was felt that to guard against future bloodshed, Americans must contribute generously to this brave and glorious cause.

During the years of U.S. involvement from April 1917 to November 1918, women were encouraged to seek out jobs in the war industry. Locally, the Ithaca Gun Company was small and could not accommodate an influx of female employees. Morse Chain, on the other hand, manufacturers of the uniquely-constructed "silent chain," was doing a booming business. Having twice doubled its capacity, and having made three moves since it was established in Trumansburg in 1893, there was ample room on the payroll of 1,500 for several hundred more women.

The majority of women answered the call by pooling their domestic talents and producing quantities of knitted articles. This plea went out in the *Ithaca Daily Journal* of September 7, 1917:

Many of the men who are going out to fight for you are unprovided with warm sweaters. Will as many of you as can, knit either a khaki or grey sweater – khaki preferred – according to Red Cross directions?

As the war progressed, the pressure to turn out still more goods increased. On October twentieth, the same newspaper reported:

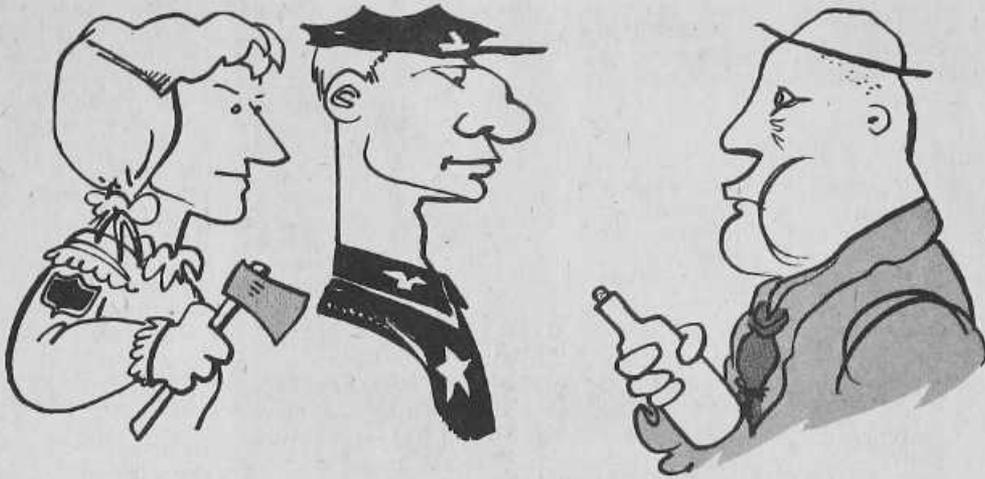
Tompkins County has been asked to make 3,000 sets of knitted wear for the soldiers. So far only 150 sets have been turned in at headquarters.

Message – You're not *working*, ladies! Actually, many women *were* working hard, "sometimes taking their knitting to church,"¹¹ as one local resident remembered. But much of the effort was in vain, as only articles knitted according to exacting Army and Navy regulations were acceptable. Mary Emily Cornell, daughter of Ezra Cornell, recalled:

There were a good many women in our church who had been trying unsuccessfully to knit socks. I volunteered to take a pair of socks down to the navy relief headquarters for inspection, and if they passed muster, to teach the others the correct way to knit them.¹²

In addition, housewives were asked to sign cards pledging to conserve food wherever possible. Moreover, they were encouraged to display that card in prominent windows of their homes. "The window card is a badge of patriotism" was the slogan of the drive. Predictably, most women did not hesitate to sign, but surprising to everyone, there was one contingent of area women who "refused to help." These housewives said they did not "intend to have the government running their kitchens"; they felt such coercion constituted an infringement on their freedom as





homemakers. In fact, resistance was so great that the *Ithaca Daily Journal* printed an article entitled, "Some Women Mistake Purpose of Food Pledge" to explain to this pocket of resistance the nature of their "erroneous ideas."¹³

Again, the great majority of women were overwhelmingly cooperative. In fact, most women put such vehement energy into the war effort that many women's projects were postponed for the interim. Plans for a Women's Community Building were shelved and local suffrage activities slackened.

But the war finally did come to an end. On Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, an unforgettable day for those war-weary Americans, the whole country burst into a glorious round of celebration and thankfulness. One woman from Ulysses remembers the church bells and school bells ringing merrily as a festive parade marched down the center of town. She tells of how she threw open her windows and made sure the children looked out upon the beginning of the "new millennium of peace."¹⁴

Prohibition

The Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, enacted in January 1920, outlawed the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. However, the outright flaunting of this law ushered in one of the most colorful periods in American history.

Was there any evidence of "bootlegging" – the illicit distribution of liquor – here in Tompkins County? "Oh, *was* there! I guess there *was*! Some of our best people!" exclaimed one local woman. Some of the most outwardly pious church-goers were bootleggers "on the sly." Drinking got to be the "clever thing" to do, along with all sorts of miscellaneous law-breaking. "Oh, it was bad," confirmed another local. "Ithaca, Tompkins County – everywhere."¹⁵

Apparently bootlegging was most prevalent in the larger towns, where the market was large and the chance of discovery and social censure small. Ithaca and Trumansburg, then, were labeled as the worst offenders with Groton close behind.¹⁶

One local man commented that he was "surprised that there wasn't more drinking on the part of women." Farm wives certainly had enough liquor in the house, he said, but he "never did see one drunk. Never remember going to the village store, and seeing a woman who'd been drinking."¹⁷ Of course, some may have imbibed in the privacy of their own homes.

Fifty years later, the daughter of a local hotel-keeper described the effect of Prohibition on her family.

My family was very much affected by Prohibition. . . . My father was a fine hotel man. You never saw anybody drunk. But in town there were all those saloons where they sold to people until they dropped. Before the temperance, you could go to the hotel, and never know a bar was there. But after temperance, they would all bring their bottles to their rooms and drink much more. It took away the whole tone of the place. My father lost money and lost money until he left with five dollars in his pocket. . . . He was very bitter. . . . It broke his heart.¹⁸

"Now," this same woman said with a gesture of futility, "you can't turn a T.V. program on without the first thing they do is drink something."¹⁹

The Depression

The Great Depression of the 1930s did not hit residents of Tompkins County as severely as those in neighboring cities and industrial towns (such as Auburn). Industry here was to a large extent tied up in the colleges, which emerged relatively unscathed. Nevertheless, the Depression had undeniable repercussions on the area, according to the recollections of several local residents:

- We had to be so very careful . . . didn't always have just what we wanted . . . but we never went ragged, and we never lacked for affection.
- *Nobody* had any money.
- I can count on my five fingers the ones who needed to be fed . . . There were more neighborly actions done; food was provided.
- 'Course there's a lot of them that didn't live too high off the hog, but nobody starved.
- Didn't mind because everyone was doing the same thing.²⁰

Interestingly, hard times meant the blurring of formerly rigid class lines, at least in Trumansburg and Ithaca. People turned to free entertainment like bridge clubs, amateur clubs, and dances. "Had some awfully good times," one woman remembered. "All those parties."²¹

Goods and services were all cheap. Labor was often contracted for as little as 35 cents an hour. Because money was tight, salaries would sometimes be paid in foodstuffs. "My husband got a goose once," admitted one woman.²²

Many poor souls from the hard-hit cities fled to relatives or friends in rural towns. "One of my very best friends



At the coed clambake:

The Ithaca Gun female contingent were not invited to attend their male co-workers' clambake, so they organized their own. The company newsletter of September 1944 recounted the tale: "Four score and ten strong we assembled at the foothills of that well-known little burg of Newfield . . . opposite the beautiful little Newfield trout stream better known in Indian lore as "Wishy Washy." There, we conducted a female clambake which we will long remember. There was an abundance of steamed clams, clam chowder, sweet corn, fried chicken, hot dogs, piccalilli. I might whisper there was also a small quantity of that light amber foaming nectar which inebriates - but there were no casualties. (It is a known fact the girls drank more beer and ate more clams than the men.) We are all looking forward to another outing next year."

crawled back," remembered one local woman. These newcomers "added to the life of the town,"²² she said, by bringing in more bridge players, amateur actors, singers, and friends.

World War II

Paul Best, manager of the Ithaca office of the United States Employment Service, announced in August 1943, two years into the war, that "it will be up to the housewives who have never worked and never planned to work to enter industry." At that time, 38 percent of war industry employees were women. "We expect that to increase in the next months to at least 50 percent," said Best.²⁴

That hordes of local women flooded the industries is a matter of record and remembrance. One old-timer from Morse Chain says, "They were in all the departments then. . . They did everything." Another remembers, "They had a lot of women there for machine work. My daughter worked there."²⁵

About that time a munitions factory (widely referred to as "The Dump") was built about ten miles north of Trumansburg. Consequently, thousands of workers moved to the area, and scores of Trumansburgers opened their homes to boarders. Many women left their children with a grandmother or aunt and went to work there themselves. The money this brought into that little town totally transformed it. "I swear every house in town was painted almost overnight," one woman declared. "The economic boom the war gave to Trumansburg was amazing."²⁶

And the boom the way gave to women was equally amazing. Once again, as was the case in World War I, women constituted a valuable and respected part of the labor force.

Those who did not need or want to work in industry could easily fill their spare time in any number of war-related capacities, including knitting sweaters, rolling bandages, running day-care centers, helping to make surgical dressings, staffing at the recruitment center, training women for wartime services, teaching courses in air raid precautions, managing war bond drives, salvaging materials, teaching

physical fitness, or simply keeping full the cookie-jars at the recruitment office.

The attitudes of these female members of the work force changed drastically over the period of their employment. When they entered the labor force, 95 percent of the women nationwide declared they would return immediately to their homes when it was over. By the end of the war in 1945, 80 percent had decided to stay.²⁷

But their period of usefulness was over. Peace was declared on September 2, 1945. On October thirtieth, the *Ithaca Journal* printed this article on Morse Chain:

It is with much regret that the company said "good-by" to many of the wives of service men and others who were such a great help to them during the emergency. Now that peace is won and they have earned their share in Victory, they will be returning to home-making and other peace time occupations.

It was with similar regret that they left. Jobs for the returning veterans took priority despite the fact that many women had shown surprising skill in the workplace - both a national and local pattern. A resident was once overheard describing the abilities of women workers in Tompkins County, "Well, the men have learned that a woman could learn to do a good job on the machine. . . . Speaks well for the fair sex."²⁸

Both Ithaca Gun and Morse Chain did retain some female employees after the war. But when the great majority of women were given their walking papers, they had no choice but to leave.

The Fifties

Five years after the war was over, people were anxious to forget the frantic pace of wartime and to re-establish normalcy. All over the country, the pace of life was gearing down. One local woman said of these lackadaisical years, "A mild life, pleasant, though not very constructive. . . . I think if we had those kind of times now, we wouldn't get anywhere."¹⁹