

# *Sister Ohio*



*A Memory of the Civil War*

LUCY SEAMAN BAINBRIDGE

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A visit to Washington with my mother, in 1864, brought about an immediate change in my life. We were guests at a public dinner where one of the speakers told of the need of nurses at the war front—a vital need, for which there was no adequate supply. At that time our country had no trained nurses; the women who took upon themselves that duty had only their home-experience and common-sense on which to rely. I went into service with hardly that much knowledge, I was so very young.

Through the courtesy of *The Outlook* I am able to include here an account of my work as printed in the issue of May 28, 1919, bearing the title: *Sister Ohio. A Memory of the Civil War*.

The speaker at the dinner was the Ohio Military Agent, head of the Ohio Soldiers' Aid Society. He told of the terrible suffering at Fredericksburg, and continued: "The conditions are worse than in the winter of 1862, when so many dead and wounded lay along the banks of the Rappahannock and the Army of the Potomac was so sorely pressed. Without going into the causes or blunders which brought this, the fact is that by the river and in the city streets and on the floors of the houses our men are sick, wounded and suffering, helpless and dying. It is an awful condition there."

Strange talk for a dinner table, but it was a time of war!

"I am here to send down a relief party to do what it can for those poor, brave boys of ours," the Military Agent went on.

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“In our State, furloughs have been granted so that great numbers of our young men may leave business, and the Rev. Mr. Prugh, an Ohio clergyman of good standing, will be the head of the party. There is also ready to go one efficient woman; she will arrive to-morrow, but I cannot send one woman alone.

Turning to my mother he asked: “Will you go? You have had wide experience and could give most valuable help. Can you not go down with the party? And take your daughter along—she can help.”

Because of a telegram she had received informing her of sickness at home, my mother was compelled to answer that her going was impossible.

“But you may send my daughter,” she added, “and I will go as far as Acquia Creek with her to see, whether or not, she can be of any use.”


It was no gala party on that transport which took us down from Washington to meet the train from Fredericksburg. There was nothing before us but work for suffering, dying men. It was understood from the first that hardly the ordinary courtesies of social life were to be observed. If women were to go into that kind of service, they were to be ready to do fully their part, and in no sense to become a burden to the men who were so greatly needed. This was understood.

Oh, what a procession that was from train to transport! Men hobbling, limping, staggering— each man able to help lending a hand to those utterly helpless. There were few stretchers; blankets, and even sheets, were used for carrying the men who could not walk. Wounded, sick, and faint, they reeled from the railway to the friendly boat, where they gladly lay down on the hard boards. A narrow pathway was left between the feet of the two rows of men packed closely together

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on the floor of the transport. The few doctors were indeed busy, and very quickly used my mother's practical knowledge of nursing and medicine. In the midst of groans, creaking of machinery, and swash of the river, and no one to direct her, what could a girl do? Only this: A pail was found and filled with water; then lips were moistened, dried rags soaked with blood around the wounds wetted, and bits of old flannel shirts, made to serve as temporary bandages, eased up by the water. Water! Water! Water! How the men on that hard floor, packed closely together, craved the comfort of it on face and hands and wounds!

“Good!” said the doctor, as he hurried by. “Now make some punch—can you? We must keep these fellows alive till we get them to Washington.” All through that night—long for the poor men but short to us who worked—we fought pain and death. Kneeling on the floor beside the men, one and another looked up as the comforting water or the spoonful of punch touched his lips, and said feebly, “Oh, bless ye! God bless ye!”

 On reaching Washington our boat was quickly emptied. The men were lifted into ambulances and sent to the hospitals, but many were laid away in quiet rest at Arlington. We made ready promptly to return for another boat-load. “I shall be very pleased if you will spare your daughter to go down to the base of supplies with our party,” said the Military Agent gent, very cordially, to my mother. “All of them ask this, and Mr. Prugh, the leader, will take her under his wing.” And so I went to the Front.

There was no pretty nurse's cap or white uniform to wear, but just plain, every-day clothes—a gingham dress and apron; no dainty and becoming white veil with a red cross over my

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forehead or on my arm. My distinguishing mark was simply a badge of red silk pinned on my left breast, on which were printed in gilt the words "Ohio Relief." Thus I went down the Potomac under the special guardianship of my leader, whom I called Father Prugh. At Port Royal on the Rappahannock, White House Landing on the Pamunkey, and, finally, at City Point, I had experiences of war which memory will never lose. How much was accomplished is a problem for the arithmetic of eternity!

The State of Ohio gave us stores of condensed milk, dried, toasted bread, crackers, sugar, canned fruits, jellies, and so forth, and our Practical State sent to each of us women a good umbrella, to be used against sun and rain. Away down within the boom—boom—boom of the cannonading, close to the Front, what could our party of untrained though willing people do? Surely, What could a mere girl really accomplish? Yet, after all, woman's work is made up of little things, and these "littles," put together, make the whole. So with that thought I worked.

Because of lack of army supplies, or because they were tied up with red tape, more poor fellows were brought wounded and helpless back from the Front than there were tents to cover them. On the grassy floor they were laid close together, with an orderly to care for them as best he could. When the tents were filled to the utmost, other men from the battle and rifle pits were left outside on the grass.

One very hot day a soldier lay with upturned face exposed to the pitiless heat of the Virginian sun. The bandages around his arm and leg were stiff and hard with blood. Was he black or white? Dirt, powder, and sunburn made it difficult to determine. Was he dead or asleep? He did not move. To inexperienced eyes he did not seem to breathe even, but water on

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the rags about the wounds, water on his lips, water on his face and head, had the desired effect, and his eyes slowly opened. With such material as I could find in the vicinity, a little improvised tent was put up over his head, face and neck. One of the doctors, coming hurriedly by and seeing my attempt to protect the man from the hot sun, called out, "Bully for you, Miss Ohio! I'm awfully busy, but I'll try to come back and give you a little help with that fellow. Feed him some punch."

Among the wounded men lying in one of the tents another day—men recently brought from the very Front and waiting to get to Washington—was a soldier who called out, "Say, Ohio Relief, what's your name, please?" "Pointing to my badge, I replied, "There's my name." "Well, Sister Ohio," said the soldier, "I am from that State too, and the worst of it is I am hungry, and the orderly has too much to do to bother with me. What are you going to do for a fellow who wants to eat and can't feed himself?" Both arms were shot through and he was helpless. I soon found that he was ready for bread-and-milk, and liked it better than anything else. So my supplies of crackers, toasted bread, and condensed milk were put to good use. I fed my wounded Ohioan for several days, until he was carried to a Washington hospital.

Many months afterwards, this same soldier, in the uniform of a Major with his left sleeve empty, called at my home in Ohio, and said: "You see, I found out your name and who you were. So I have come to thank you and to have some bread-and-milk with you. But you won't have to feed me this time."

Later, this soldier honoured me with the suggestion that I take bread-and-milk with him all his life!

Outside a tent, under the ropes which held it in place, lay a soldier-boy, groaning, and doubled-up with pain. "I'm just sorry for him, Miss Ohio," said the orderly, in a kindly voice,

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“but he can’t be ‘lowed in the tent; it’s chuck full of wounded men now. He’s got the cramps and he don’t stay in one spot very long. He was over the other side until a few minutes ago. I’m too awful busy to ‘tend to him.” In my supplies were medicines for dysentery, and so I went to work. Careful feeding, regular medicine, a warm blanket on the grass, with the added oil of kindness, did the work, and in time the lone boy was in fair condition for the next boat-load to Washington.

When other duties to the suffering soldiers allowed a respite, Father Prugh held a short, informal service of song and cheer, in each tent. Here a girl could really help.

**F**rankey was a Michigan boy. Our duty was first to the men of Ohio, and after that to any one else. The lad had been terribly hurt, shot through both arms and one leg, and his wounds were full of gangrene and vermin. Frankey had lied about his age and had run away from home to enlist. He was only a boy.

“Miss Ohio,” said the doctor, “that little fellow thinks he is to have a furlough and that he is to go home to his mother. But he isn’t. He’s going to die. Don’t make him feel badly—but—oh, well, do as you like.” The boy responded to every kindness and wanted “Sister Ohio” to take care of his precious possessions—green-and-yellow skein of sewing-silk taken at Fairfax Court-House, and a ring he had cut out of a nut when his leg had been hurt, but when he could still use his arm. He talked of his furlough and his mother and the Sunday School, and how glad he was that he had been in the fight. At last his mind was turned to the thought that, perhaps, he might not be able to go home to his mother; that his furlough was to be a very long one, and that in the Father’s house he would meet his mother and tell her how sorry he was that he had lied. At

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the service that Sunday afternoon he asked that we sing his favourite hymn. It may sound a bit old-fashioned now, but the boy loved it—*"There is a happy land, far, far away."* He tried to join in the singing; and when we sang the hymn—*"I have a Saviour in the Promised Land,"* he wanted us to go over it twice. Before the next boat-load was shipped to Washington, Frankey had entered into the land where there is no war. He said "good-bye" that Sunday afternoon and gave me as a token of remembrance the tiny skein of silk; the other things I was to send to his mother. "Please, Sister Ohio," he said, "you tell her I am all right inside, and you are my sister, you know. Maybe I won't be here to-morrow, so will you kiss me 'good-bye,' 'cause my mother ain't here?" So I kissed him.

At the end of a row of men lying on the ground in one of the tents, one day, was a man so wounded that he had severe hemorrhages. "Don't waste any time on him, Miss Ohio," an orderly said. "He is a goner; he will never get to a hospital." The poor fellow knew it himself, all too well, but, as I sat by him, he said, "Will you write to my wife and tell her to make my children know that I gave my life for my country? I want my boy to know about his father. Tell them I thought of them." The story was written in full. I added a tiny lock of hair and a special message from the father to the boy who bore his name, and as I read it to the suffering man, his gratitude was expressed in a whispered "God bless you." As night came on I gave him a verse of comfort and strength from God's Word, and as I left him he said, longingly, "Sister Ohio, please come here first in the morning, and if—." At the first break of the dawn I was there, but his place on the grass was empty. A sudden severe hemorrhage—and his spirit had been released. The body had been taken away, for there was no time for delay. I hurried to the cemetery. There were so many

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who had died in the night, and there was so much to do for those who were suffering, that there was no time for services. But as that body was laid underground, "Sister Ohio" was kindly allowed by the man in charge to have the spade of earth held for a moment while a verse and a short prayer were repeated.

*W*hen the Army base was moved to City Point, there was much delay in the arrival of the stores and goods. There were tents, but beds and blankets did not come until later. Our food was of the simplest sort for a day or two. Johnny, a drummer boy, detailed temporarily to the Christian Commission tent near by, all unseen, rolled in a can of peaches under the edge of the canvas of our tent, and later came peeping in to say, "Well, Sister Ohio, I'm from good old Bosting, but just you count on me if you need anything." When he went back to the Front, he asked for a little piece off the side of my blue-check apron as a memento of our friendly acquaintance. Many years,—yes, very many years afterward—a bald, gray, bent man, worn and disabled, called to see me, and asked if I were Sister Ohio, and did I remember Johnny, the drummer-boy at City Point?

While it was true that at City Point we only had a tent, yet each of us had a big shawl, and there was a log for a pillow and a grassy floor to lie on. On the first night an officer came along at dusk and said: "There is a lady alone whom we want to accommodate. She has business with Headquarters. All we can do is to ask you ladies to take her in as your guest to-night." We gladly gave her a share of our log pillow, and I divided my warm shawl with her as a covering. It was dusk when she came, it was early dawn when she left. So our guest, Clara Barton, who later organized the American Red Cross,

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and was its first President, did not know who had been her hostess. Years afterwards, Dr. Amory Bradford, of Montclair, held a series of meetings in his church, giving one day to addresses on the work of women. There were three speakers—a lady from Boston, Clara Barton, and myself. With the permission of Dr. Bradford, I was allowed to introduce the speaker who followed me. I had never seen Clara Barton since the night we had spent together under my blanket-shawl at City Point. I told the story of the stranger who came to us that night in the tent, and then presented Miss Barton to the audience. With her cloak thrown back, showing its gay lining, the medals on her breast flashing, and her face full of light and life, she extended her hand and, clasping mine, said: "I have often wondered who the girl was who gave me a part of her pillow and warm shawl, and I have always wanted to thank her for her hospitality, and to meet her again—and now I say, God bless you." The hearty cheers of that big audience one can never forget.

My evenings at the Front were all needed for writing letters—letters to mothers, wives, and sweethearts. One very warm night as I sat at my deck, which was the top of a packing box, writing by the light of a candle, the entrance curtain of my tent was pushed back and a man, not a soldier, came in to have a social chat with my tent-mate, a widow. I was introduced; that was all. I had many letters to get off, and was not there for any social calls. Late that night, when my widow friend was out on some errand, a tap on my tent pole roused me. "Who is there?" I asked. "What is wanted?" A man's voice replied, giving his name, and making it evident that he had utterly mistaken my character and my mission. My sharp reply was followed by my taking up a hatchet with which I had opened a box, and, clanging it down upon a pile of nails

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which lay there, saying, with a tone and emphasis which he could understand, "The first man who crosses the threshold of this tent will be a dead man." The vile creature did not walk away, he *ran*—with all his might.

For the first time in all her experiences at the Front "Sister Ohio" called upon the kind services of Father Prugh and the staff of royal young men with him. That midnight caller left for Washington the next day.

Furlough-time was up for some of the party; the widow had special business to attend to in Cincinnati; and so I went to my home in Cleveland, Ohio.

*D*uring the many years which have come and gone since the days of which I am now writing, I have received a few letters. One to myself, and one to my son, are added here:

*Fort Leavenworth, Kansas,*

January 9, 1881.

DEAR MADAME: You are no doubt surprised at a letter from an old friend. I hope you have not forgotten your little soldier friend, who knew you down with the Army of the Potomac. I was of the Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteers. After that I went into the Navy and was shipwrecked. Good-by, and God bless you is the prayer of your old friend,

JOHNNIE DOYLE.

*Treasurer's Office, Trumbull County,*

Warren, Ohio, September 10, 1903.

November 5, 1861, I enlisted in the 6th O. V. Cav. Re-enlisted January, 1864, and on May 28, 1864, was severely wounded at Erron Church or Hawes Shop, Virginia. The Army moved, and the sick and wounded were sent to White House Landing on the Pamunkey

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River. Tents at the landing were put up for us soldiers, and well I remember your mother (then a young lady) with an older lady from Cincinnati, Ohio, going around among the soldiers looking for Ohio boys, as they were sent by the Ohio Relief to care first for Ohio soldiers. How well I remember boys from other States wishing they were from Ohio!

One day one of the boys from my regiment was walking around with his arm in a sling (he was wounded in the arm) and suddenly his arm began to bleed very bad. The boys called and one of our soldier nurses came and took him to the doctors who were amputating limbs. But soon the poor fellow came back, and such a look as he had when he said the doctors said he had to die, as mortification had set in and an amputation would do no good. I shall never forget that poor fellow's look. But he rapidly grew worse, and lay down upon the ground (we had no cots then) suffering very much. A doctor came in and the soldiers asked if he could not do something for him. The doctor replied: "My poor fellow, I can't do a thing for you." He soon died and was carried out for burial just as your mother came in. How she did hurry out to see if she was too late to get a lock of his hair to send to his wife and family with a letter! I wonder if she remembers it. The Army again had to move and change its base of supplies. The sick and wounded were put in transports. Another comrade and myself were put on the transport *Connecticut*, and your mother saw that our cots were placed side by side and she gave us a bottle of wine to keep our strength up during our trip to Washington.

Very truly yours,  
J. A. SAGER, TREASURER.

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