

Civilian Committee

The civilians of the 7th Michigan include men, women and children portraying non-military Civil War impressions. The role and activities of civilians are topics that tend not to be that well known among Civil War re-enactors. Therefore, it is necessary to continually research these topics in an effort to improve and correctly portray your Civil War impressions. Nothing can take the place of your own research and it is strongly urged that you do this. More and more references are made available all the time. Libraries, museums, personal collections and the internet provide invaluable resources for new and current members.

During the 29 years prior to 1860, women in the east had been lobbying for, or at least were aware of, not only rights for the black man and abolition of slavery, but also of their own rights. Through such means as the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which formally launched the women's suffrage movement under the leadership of Elizabeth Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, women began to demand a greater role in their destiny. These women were primarily interested in suffrage, control of their own property, and the right to obtain a divorce. Though their group was small in number, they were vocal. In addition, the years 1854 to 1856 brought about another area of influence for women - the Crimean War with Florence Nightingale. Miss Nightingale and her assistants were the first trained nurses ever to serve in a field hospital in time of war. Moreover, they were the first women to provide any such service in hospitals anywhere. These women proved to the world that women were in fact capable of enduring the hardships of a battlefield and of providing excellent care to the wounded and the ill. Their success was noted on a world-wide basis, and the field of nursing soon became a goal to which many young and educated women aspired.

With the surrender of Fort Sumter on April of 1861, the call went out not only for men, but also for women to serve as nurses in the general field hospitals around Washington. The Nursing Corps was under the direction and supervision of Dorothea Dix. Miss Dix required that all women in her unit be plain of face, widowed and at least 35 years of age. In addition, Miss Dix made certain that none of her nurses would ever serve at the front. Such restrictions did not sit well with the majority of the female population - many under 35 and single or married who had husbands, sons, brothers or loved ones at the front. It was shortly thereafter that the sanitary commissions came into existence. Their purpose was to see that the men at the front received their supplies from home, that they were well cared for if sick or injured, and that they were assisted in their whereabouts, etc. It is this group under the guidance of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell who provided the training in New York, and Clara Barton in the field that a large number of women were able to go to the front as nurses, and serve the war effort in this manner. The latter group was the forerunner of the Red Cross as we know it today.

In addition to the women who went to war as part of the sanitary commissions' efforts, there were a substantial number who simply went in order to be near their husbands, etc. While they had no official purpose, they did most often find themselves serving as cooks, laundresses and as nurses in the field hospitals. Since disease was rampant in

the camps, an extra pair of hands to help with the sick as well as the wounded was always welcome. Keep in mind that until the Civil War, soldiers whether sick or injured in battle could expect little assistance from the military beyond their initial surgery. There had not been field hospitals per se before the Crimean War in Europe or the Civil War here. The wounded were cared for in the homes of civilians or sent back home on their own. If a man needed care, a family member either had to send money to get him the care or come and personally see to his care. That was one of the primary reasons so many women followed their loved ones to the battlefield.

Michigan women played a variety of roles similar to those discussed above. In 1860, Michigan was still a frontier state; except for its lower tier of counties, it was still wilderness. The majority of the population could be considered to be living at a subsistence level. There were, of course, exceptions. Detroit had some semblance of an upper class at that time, as did Ann Arbor and Kalamazoo. The frontier nature of the state afforded women some privileges and rights not available to their eastern sisters. Michigan women, for example, could own property - many eastern states outlawed such practices. Moreover, educational opportunities were greater in Michigan than in the east - Hillsdale College, the State Normal School in Ypsilanti (EMU today), as well as Adrian and Kalamazoo Colleges all admitted women in the more populated areas of the state and were more liberal minded and more independent in their thought. Most women had worked alongside their husbands to run the farm and had their duties as wife, mother, and child-bearer. They also participated in the other operations and the decision-making of the farm. In short, they were used to working with their husbands - not taking from them. The frontier ladies' guidelines for proper behavior weren't as strict as those of ladies in the East; therefore they were better prepared to work harder at the war front. These were sturdy women who were used to doing whatever was necessary to get the job done, whether it was men's work or women's work.

Once war was declared, these women quickly and eagerly followed their volunteering husbands, sons, lovers, brothers, or other family members to the front. In addition, there were others who determined that they could be of service to the men at the front and so they left family and friends to go off to war. Their status, as far as the military goes, was difficult and sketchy at best. Most of those who followed the troops were not willing to serve as Sarah Emma Edmunds did on the front lines in uniform, but many did find their way to the battlefields as nurses or members of the sanitary commissions. Officially each unit was allowed to have one or two laundresses and one or two matrons. Some had more. The Second Michigan, for instance, went to battle with nineteen women. Most of these preferred to serve in the rear and not at the front. There were others, such as Anne Etheridge, who served at the front bringing bandages and first aid to the wounded. The greater number assisted in the hospital tents set up behind the lines. Elmira Brainard, for instance, served with the 7th Michigan in that capacity. Each unit appears to have had 4 to 6 women assisting in this manner. In addition, many of these women also assisted as cooks. The troops would give the women money or items they could use to barter for fresh supplies from the local farmers. The jobs performed by the women who accompanied the troops to battle can almost best be described as the 'extra pair of hands to do what needed to be done'.

The Michigan Soldier's Aid Society started in Detroit as early as April 15, 1861, although it was not officially established until November under the name 'The Soldier's Aid Society of Detroit for Relief of the Sick and Wounded of the Federal Army'.

Michigan's Society was one of the few run entirely by women. Annual dues were 25 cents. The ladies met three times a week at 164 Jefferson Ave. in Detroit to roll bandages and sew hospital garments. Their intention was to supply Michigan soldiers with mittens, nightcaps, flannel shirts, underclothing, socks, slippers, blankets, bed sacks, Bibles, and foodstuffs.

The Michigan Soldier's Relief Association, on the other hand, was a different group working in Washington. It provided money for stranded soldiers in transit, assisted widows with pension applications and claims for back pay, found lodgings for relatives come to Washington in search of wounded husbands, sons, or brothers, tried to locate Michigan soldiers in hospitals or cemeteries, wrote letters for the dying, sent the effects of the dead to their next of kin, distributed vast quantities of food, clothing, bedding, and sanitary supplies sent from home 'for our Michigan boys'. In practice the Association's business was whatever personal service Michiganders might need in the capital.

The Association traveled to the front and set up beside a road from a battlefield. They served hot soup, 'milk punch', gruel, rice pudding, lemonade and tea to walking wounded and passing ambulances.

Michigan Relief Agents were considered visitors at hospitals and had no authority or recognized status. They read and wrote letters, sat with the dying, brought in food sometimes in defiance of doctor's orders, listened sympathetically to all complaints, and in every conflict of authority or personality invariably took the side of the soldier patient.

(Some of the above is from Michigan Women in the Civil War.)