

"Each woman is required to have a certificate of good character from head-quarters before she can assume duty within the lines."¹

Duty within the lines? Certificate of "good character"? Who was the woman these regulations were describing?

She was unique in that she was a part of the only class of women recognized as "official" in the 1861 Hand Book of Army Regulations². All other women, including officer's wives', fell into the broad category of "camp followers".³

These officially authorized women were in charge of keeping the army's clothing clean.

The laundresses who followed the armies of North and South to war have been little noted in history. This may be due in part to the lack of educational opportunities afforded the middle and lower class woman and the lower rung social status an enlisted man's wife held.⁴ Even the men who kept journals and diaries or wrote volumes of letters seldom mentioned a laundress. Only in scattered orders, reports, and the occasional letter do we learn about these women who were in such a unique position within the armies of Blue and Gray.

The presence of laundresses with the U.S. Army dates back to 1802. According to the regulations, the laundress received housing, a daily ration of food, the services of the surgeon and payment at an official rate⁵

To become a laundress, a woman had to be appointed by the company captain. Said one officer, "It is the captain's privilege to make or unmake them (laundresses)".⁶

The army regulations did not state any relationship requirements for laundresses, but laundresses were expected to be married to, or at least significantly related to, a man in the company.⁷ The *Regulations of 1863* went even further in indicating that the government wanted the laundress to be married to an enlisted man because the maximum number of married enlisted

¹Le Grand, Louis, M. D., *Military Hand Book and Soldier's Manual of Information*, Beadle and Company, New York, New York. 1861, p. 35-36.

²Reiter, Joan Swallow, "The Old West: The Women", *Time Life Books*, Alexandria, Virginia, 1978, p. 71.

³*Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴Stallard, Patricia Y., *Glittering Misery: Dependents of the Indian-Fighting Army*, Old Army Press, University of Oklahoma, Norman Oklahoma, 1992, p. 56.

⁵Reiter, pp. 70-71.

⁶Stallard, p. 59.

⁷Reiter, pp. 70-71.

men allowed was dictated by the number of laundresses the company needed.⁸ While the regulations never quite reached the point of mandating marriage for laundresses, the implication was clear. Married laundresses were what the Army wanted and the regulations reflect that desire: "No woman of bad character will be allowed to follow the army." Each laundress was required to carry "on her person" a certificate testifying to her good character. These certificates were obtained from headquarters and signed by no person of less rank than the colonel or chief of the corps.⁹

The character of a single woman wanting a position where she might be the only woman present in the company of many men could all too easily be suspect--in any century!

While being married to a man in the company may have been the army's desire, it was not always met. Mrs. Hannah O'Neil served as laundress for Company H of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment. She followed her son who served in that company.¹⁰

Mrs. O'Neil was not the only laundress with the First Minnesota when they left the state for Washington. A newspaper report noted the passing of the First Minnesota Regiment through Chicago, listing those who traveled with it June of 1861. "There accompanies the regiment seventeen officers servants, nine laundresses, and five horses for officers."¹¹

Each company was allowed four washerwomen according to the *Army Regulations*, so a full infantry regiment could have included as many as 40 women serving as laundresses¹².

There are records of units with that many laundresses. Bernt Olmanson served in the Second Minnesota Infantry Regiment, Company E. He wrote home that "We have about forty women in the regiment" referring to laundresses.¹³ The troops stationed in the Department of Texas Headquarters in San Antonio, had full complements of laundresses in February of 1861. The Third Infantry and Second Cavalry each had 40 laundresses. The five companies of the First

⁸Stallard, p. 57.

⁹*Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861 with an Appendix Containing the Changes and Laws Affecting Army Regulations and Articles of War to June 25, 1863.* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863, p. 112.

¹⁰Captain Charles P. Adams Personal Papers, Minnesota Historical Society Collections, unpublished. Adams served with Company H, First Minnesota Infantry.

¹¹St. Paul *Pioneer & Democrat*, from a June 26, 1862, article quoting a *Chicago Tribune* article that appeared June 24, 1861, St. Paul, Minnesota.

¹²*Army Regulations*, p. 24.

¹³Lowry, Thomas P., M.D., *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell*, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, 1994, p. 32.

Infantry had 20, and the nine companies of the Eighth Infantry had 36 for a total of 136 laundresses. The numbers reported were specific as the commanding officer, Colonel C. A. Waite, was requesting transportation for his troops to "such points as the Lieutenant-General commanding the Army shall direct."¹⁴ The Federal Army was somewhat less than welcome in Texas in the early months of 1861.

The Confederate Army also made provisions for laundresses within their ranks. In an official field return from Johnson's Brigade in southeast Virginia and North Carolina in May of 1864, the 17th and 23rd Tennessee Regiments reported 15 laundresses between them. The 44th and 25th Tennessee Regiments reported six laundresses and the 63rd Tennessee had one. Even their Provost Guard reported having a laundress.¹⁵

Since a company laundress had most of the benefits of a soldier, she was expected to follow soldierly discipline. At least one laundress was court-martialed for using "disrespectful language" to the officer of the day. She was found guilty and sentenced to be discharged from the regiment, but the commanding officer remitted the sentence and allowed her to stay.

Another laundress in Fort Boise was accused of attempted murder in 1866. She claimed the assault she made on her husband was with a tin cup; her husband claimed she used an ax. The laundress wrote that she arrested and confined in the guardhouse. She had to appear before an officer who ordered her drummed out at the point of fixed bayonets. Laundresses were not immune to army punishment¹⁶.

The quarters provided to a laundress varied with the quarters provided to the company she washed for. The husband of a laundress lived with her, leaving the barracks or rows of company tents for his home on "Suds Row" -- the name given to the laundresses' area of the fort or camp¹⁷. The quarters at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, were in a long building that was divided into segments for individual families, each home being nearly 380 square feet. Cooking and washing areas were in the basement of the building. The post surgeon said, "I have never elsewhere seen laundresses so well provided for."¹⁸

¹⁴The War of the Rebellion: *A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, published by the United States Government, Series I -- Volume I (S#1) Chapter VII, electronic media by Guild Press, Indiana, 1996. Hereafter noted as "O.R."

¹⁵O.R. Series I, Volume XXXVI/2

¹⁶Stallard, p. 59-60.

¹⁷Reiter, p. 71.

¹⁸Stallard, p. 55.

Garrison duty might find a laundress with quarters in a building, but an army tent served others just as well.

The quarters for Mrs. O'Neil of the First Minnesota was a tent that "was as good as any in the Company up to the time when she burnt the end out of it by her own negligence," according to Company H's captain, Charles P. Adams. According to the captain, Mrs. O'Neil expected him to replace it. The captain refused. They obviously had a difference of opinion on the matter, as Mrs. O'Neil tore the tent into pieces in order to "compel" Captain Adams to give her a new one.

Mrs. O'Neil was a less than ideal laundress if Captain Adams is believed. In a letter defending his actions toward her, he refutes charges leveled at him by Mrs. O'Neil.

Captain Adams wrote, "Mrs. O'Neil's rations were issued to her regularly every day that she was in the Company up to the day she left, in quantities greater than she was entitled to draw by my order and at no time was any portion of them withheld."

He also described a time when Mrs. O'Neil had her son staying in her tent with her to care for her when she was ill, noting that the son "was not detailed for such duty by the commanding officer". Adams stated that Mrs. O'Neil's work load did not require assistance when she was well, leading to the speculation that a soldier might have been detailed to assist the laundress if she had a large work load and the commanding officer saw fit to do so. Captain Adams hints at the reluctance he felt at letting her son attend her when she was ill as "her sickness, when it did occur, was the effect of drinking to excess, as it usually followed periods of well known inebriety."¹⁹

In another incident involving laundresses doing more than washing socks, a private in the Second Minnesota Infantry noted that some of the laundresses in his regiment "make lots of money natures' way. One of them had a bill today against a soldier for forty dollars."²⁰

Clearly there were women, like Mrs. O'Neil and "some" laundresses with the Second Minnesota Infantry, who lived up to the stereotype of the kind of women who followed the army.

Still, most laundresses under official sanction appear to have been women of better character. After all, they needed to carry that certificate and, more importantly, were usually related to a man in the company. A husband's presence and the Army Regulations would have

¹⁹Adams letter.

²⁰Lowry, p. 32.

worked to keep a woman at somewhat higher standards of conduct in the same manner it did for men from the same town reporting on each other in letters home.²¹

A laundress was part of the company, so the army provided her and her equipment with transportation when the company moved. That was not always easy as the laundresses of Company F, New Mexico Volunteers found out. They were placed on a boat with the company to cross a river just below the post at Fort Craig, New Mexico. The boat "sank forward and went down." Eight men from Company F drowned. No losses were reported among the laundresses.²²

Some officers grumbled about providing transportation to the laundress, believing the laundresses were an unnecessary hindrance. One such officer wrote, "Transportation of all the laundresses' paraphernalia, children, dogs, beds, cribs, tables, tubs, buckets, boards, and Lord knows what not, amounts to a tremendous item of care and expense."²³

As officially recognized by the army, laundresses were allowed to follow even when other women or excess personnel were banned. Major General U. S. Grant issued Special Field Order Number 18 from his headquarters in the field near Oxford, Mississippi, on December 9, 1862. This order specifically excluded women and children from being with the army in the field and directed that the wing commanders see that the order was complied with. All women and children were to be sent to Holly Springs or "some point north of that place". It went on to direct "Negro women and children and unemployed men" to be sent to Grand Junction, Tennessee. The final sentence of the order dealt with laundresses. "This is not intended to exclude authorized laundresses, hospital nurses, or officers' servants" from accompanying the army.²⁴

Major General Quincy Gilmore wanted to strip unnecessary baggage from his army as he operated in Florida in the first months of 1864. On February 4, he issued an order regarding women with his army. His order read, in part, "You will see that no females accompany your

²¹Mitchell, Reid, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*, Chapter Two "The Northern Soldier and His Community", Oxford University Press, New York, New York, 1993, pp. 19-38.

²²O.R. Series I--Volume XL VIII/2 (S#102).

²³Stallard, p. 64.

²⁴O.R. Series 1 -- Volume XVII/2 (S#25).

command, and will give strict orders that none shall follow except regularly appointed laundresses, who will be allowed to accompany the baggage of their respective commands."²⁵

The laundresses were the only women allowed to remain with Gilmore's army.

And what of Mrs. O'Neil of the First Minnesota? She followed her company. Captain Adams notes Mrs. O'Neil's presence on the march from Washington when the paymaster visited the regiment.²⁶

Pay for a company laundress was not provided by the Army. "The price of washing is prescribed, and is paid out of the soldiers' regular monthly pay", said the *Military Hand Book*.²⁷

Army Regulations clarified the fees by explaining that the price set for washing was to be determined by a Council of Administration. This council probably considered a wide variety of factors in determining what was a fair price, including fair market value for the services in the local area.²⁸

The pay of a company laundress probably varied greatly. One source stated that "an energetic washer-woman could earn \$40 a month".²⁹

Mrs. O'Neil received "a half a dollar" from each of the men she washed for.³⁰

Applying a little math may yield some possible answers. A full company of 100 men was authorized four laundresses, or 25 men per laundress. At fifty cents from each man, a laundress could make \$12.50 if every man had his laundry done. Not every man hired his laundry done. Some men chose to do their own wash, some couldn't afford the cost and there were certainly those few who wore the garment until it fell apart before "giving the vermin a parole" and throwing the article away without ever sampling the benefits of laundering.³¹

No evidence has yet been found to support how many men a company laundress washed for, but 10-12 men at a "half a dollar" each would have put a company laundress in a comparable pay bracket with civilian laundresses working in a laundry. This probably would have been a factor considered by the Council of Administration. Another factor may have been how many

²⁵O.R. Series I-- Volume XXXV/1 (S#65).

²⁶Adams Letter

²⁷Le Grand, *Military Hand-Book and Soldier's Manual of Information*, p. 35.

²⁸*Army Regulations*, p. 24 and 71.

²⁹Reiter, "The Old West: The Women", p. 71.

³⁰Adams Letter.

³¹Lyman, Darryl, *Civil War Word Book*, Combined Books, Inc, Conshocken, Pennsylvania, 1994, p. 74.

officers the laundress washed for. At least one council set the rate for officer's laundry at two and a half time the rate set for enlisted men.³² Washing for an officer was definitely more profitable in that command!

In a civilian laundry, washers were usually paid by the week or month. Virginia Penny did a survey of employment for women in 1863. About working in a laundry, she wrote that it was recommended to pay the women only board while they were trained to do the washing, "then pay them by the week or the piece. If by the week, \$6.00 a month and their board, or allow them \$1.50 a week to pay their board." She continued her survey. "I called at another laundry, where I was told all the girls receive \$1.75 per week for board money."³³ If army laundress washed for about a dozen men, and the Army provided her "board" of rations and a tent, she was about equal with her civilian counterparts.

Getting paid involved paper work. A company laundress needed to keep an account of who owed her for washing and how much they owed. This seems to indicate a washer-woman would have been able to read, write and figure well enough to maintain accounts of the money due her. In the First Minnesota Infantry, the men were paid on the road from Washington. After they were paid, the regiment was mustered and "each paid all she (Mrs. O'Neil) claimed". Mrs. O'Neil, however, didn't keep an account book. She demanded money from all the men she washed for and there was no way to prove who owed her how much money and who didn't owe her anything. After that incident, the men she washed for all paid her by the piece as the laundry was done, so she could have no claim on their pay at any later time.³⁴

The irregularity of the pay master led men to "charge" their laundry services and this brought specific orders regulating the laundresses' pay. In an order to the recruiting service, new recruits needed to have their accounts "audited and verified", the amounts entered on the roll and the "receipts" due to the laundress and sutler paid by voucher. This amount was deducted from the recruit's pay at "their first subsequent payment".³⁵

In General Order No. 17 issued by the Adjutant and Inspector General, a laundress was still to collect her due even if the soldier were court-martialed and directed to forfeit all pay. Not

³²Stallard, p. 59.

³³Penny, Virginia, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Women's Work*, Walker, Wise & Company, Boston, Massachusetts, 1863. Reprint edition by Mrs. Martins Mercantile, 1996, pp. 431-433.

³⁴Adams letter.

³⁵O.R. Series III -- Volume II (S#123).

only was the sum due the laundress exempted from the forfeit, but any money that would become due her from subsequent service during the time of sentence was also exempt and would be paid to the laundress.³⁶

The pay may have been one incentive for a woman to choose the life of a company laundress. A rate of \$5-\$7 a month, combined with her husband's pay of \$11 a month for privates in 1861,³⁷ could give the couple a monthly income of nearly \$20.

Another reason a woman may have taken on this kind of life was simply to be with her husband. It was a way to share in her husband's experiences and quite an adventure for a woman of the 1860's.

Still, it was not an easy life. A laundress needed a lot of equipment to fill her role of keeping the company's clothing clean. It was hard, heavy work. A 25 gallon oak tub weighs about 35 pounds--without water--and a laundress needed at least two such tubs. Other equipment she needed included buckets, boilers, laundry sticks, scrub boards, soap crates, starch, bluing, ropes, fire grates, and basic household items needed for her own camp "home".³⁸

The home the laundress provided for herself and her family was one of the arguments used when the Army began talk of phasing out the institution of laundresses. One general concluded that the presence of the laundresses "tended to make the men more cheerful, honest and comfortable." He felt the enlisted men enjoyed visiting the laundress and her family, partaking of the home atmosphere. He found laundresses to be honest married women and often were wives of the best soldiers.³⁹

Another officer concurred. He thought the laundresses had a good influence on the soldiers who like to see and talk to them occasionally. "It makes them more contented," he said.⁴⁰

Providing some of the "home" atmosphere was an important side job for the laundress, even if she provided such a link unknowingly. The description of "kind at heart" and "always prepared to help when needed" alluded to more than washing socks and boiling underwear.⁴¹

³⁶O.R. Series II -- Volume VIII (S#121).

³⁷Le Grand, *Military Hand-Book and Soldier's Manual of Information*, p. 62.

³⁸Living History research done by author and experience from carrying said oak tubs.

³⁹Stallard, p. 64.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 63.

One aspect of those extra duties was acting as nurse or assisting the surgeon. Women often used home remedies for illness and injury and these skills would have been applied by a laundress in camp just as well as a wife at home on the farm.⁴²

The company laundress had a many faceted position. She "followed the troubles and dared the dangers of the service".⁴³ She made a home for herself and her husband wherever the army went, cooking, mending and doing what keeping a "house" in the 1860's entailed. That home extended beyond her own family to the men of the company, especially those men who were younger or in search of a reminder of their own homes.⁴⁴

She would have needed to be hard working, kind hearted and tough as nails. Any laundress who "gained the respect of the enlisted men" was a woman well worthy of that respect.⁴⁵

⁴²Stallard, p. 61 and Reiter, p. 71.

⁴³Stallard, p. 60.

⁴⁴Reiter, p. 71.

⁴⁵Stallard, p. 60.