



2ND MINNESOTA BATTERY OF LIGHT ARTILLERY

The Sanitary Commission

The Sanitary Commission was a volunteer organization formed during the Civil War to raise funds and supplies for the armies of the North. The Sanitary Commission also provided oversight of the sanitary conditions of military hospitals. Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix and Fredrick Law Olmstead were all involved with the Sanitary Commission.

Quilts were of special importance—both for sale at Sanitary Fairs to raise money and to keep soldiers warm. Sanitary Commission quilts for the soldiers were to be made of scrap fabrics in simple patterns so they would not take as long to make. Strip quilts were in fashion at the time and the wide sashing helped the quilts sew up even faster. The recommended bedroll size was 48 x 84 inches. Advertising in 1861 noted that quilts should be “8 feet long, 4 feet wide, of cheap, dark prints wadded with cotton.”

It is estimated the Sanitary Commission sent 250,000 quilts through their official channels, each stamped on the back with their name. Only four are known to exist today. Countless other women took the Sanitary Commission’s advice for making quilts to send to the soldiers of their own families and communities.

The Christian Commission

The Christian Commission came into existence late in 1861, organized by concerned clergymen and leaders of the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association). They formed the commission with the mission of promoting the spiritual and temporal welfare of soldiers and sailors. The commission gathered funds from public donations of both goods and money. Their duties were to hold regular worship services in the field for the soldiers and to distribute necessary articles as best they could.

The Commission was best known for the religious tracts and Bibles they handed out to the soldiers. It is estimated that, during its existence, the Commission passed out 328,879 Bibles, 6,818,994 religious newspapers and tracts, and sent 1,079 representatives, called delegates, into the field.

The Christian Commission delegates often moved with the armies, but when the army was in camp, the Commission offered lending libraries of books for the soldiers to use to improve themselves by reading. Near larger hospitals, the Commission set up facilities called “diet kitchens.” Each diet kitchen was managed by two or three women and they prepared special foods for wounded or sick soldiers not able to eat the regular hospital food. There were 157 women employed by the Christian Commission during the war.

Other tasks the Christian Commission took on were helping bury the dead, assisting the wounded to hospitals, distributing limited medical supplies, clothing, and small items such as soap, ink, and sewing kits to medical officials and individual soldiers.

“Three days of each week are devoted to sewing for the soldiers. Often we sew steadily for days at a time, that is when we are getting up a special box to be sent by some soldier, who has been on a visit home and is returning to camp.”

Diary of Susan Bradford Eppes, July 1862

“My son is in the army. Whoever is made warm with this quilt, which I have worked on for six days and the greater part of six nights, let him remember his own mother’s love.”

From a note sent with a quilt now archived with the
Christian
Memorials of the War

Not just in the North

Southern women also made quilts to support the Confederate troops. Due to the high price of fabric and severe shortages in the South, southern women cut up heirloom quilts to make smaller quilts easily carried by soldiers. They used carpet, drapes and linings from their dresses to make blankets and quilts to send to the Southern troops. Later in the war, Southern women spun cotton and made homespun fabric for quilts and clothing. Diaries tell about the roughness of the homespun fibers, making clothing from bed ticking, and anything they could salvage. Cost and lack of availability forced women to resort to using newspaper as quilt batting.

Southern women also made special quilts, especially early in the war, to be sold to raise money to buy gunboats for the south. Many of these quilts were appliquéd. Some of these quilts were purchased and given back to the owner so they could be resold. These women became known as the "Gunboat Ladies".

Sanitary Fairs

Sanitary Fairs were fund raising operations taken on by those who wanted to support Civil War armies. Held in both North and South, the fairs were organized primarily by women. Fairs sold items that were donated by the communities in which they were held; the majority of the donors were women. Items sold included baked goods, jams and jellies, needlework, and every other kind of project imaginable. Some fairs offered picnic basket auctions, dances, or competitions with all proceeds going to support wounded soldiers. The following is drawn from a lengthy article that appeared in the Anoka Star newspaper, April 30, 1864.

Patriotic Appeal for the Sanitary Fair

The noble mission of this great patriotic festival should be made known to every hamlet in the land, and the success of the fair should be made commensurate with the success of our cause and the greatness of the nation.

Our Government, though providing for its armies with a liberality unprecedented in the history of other countries, is not authorized to supply many comforts which sick and wounded soldiers need.

It is the object of this Mississippi Sanitary Fair to afford this relief. Within in the past three years, the western States have expended more than \$1,000,000 in behalf of our disabled soldiers.

Every recovery is equivalent to a new recruit, and patriotic charity must now contribute with lavish hand to prevent the unnecessary decimation of our armies by exposure and neglect.

The Executive committee hopes to raise \$500,000 by the Mississippi Valley Sanitary Fair. Every saleable production on earth or sea, every work in all the numberless branches of industrial and mechanical art, every article cheap or costly, perishable or enduring, useful or luxurious, literary or aesthetic, native or foreign, which is registered in the inventory of the world's wealth, is earnestly solicited and will be gratefully received at the hall of the Mississippi Valley Sanitary Fair.

A young woman of Newburyport, Mass., has sent to Mr. Lincoln a pair of woolen socks, on the bottom on each of which is knitted the secession flag, and near the top the stars and stripes, so that when worn by the President he will always have the flag of rebellion under his feet.

Anoka Star, April 2, 1864

Contributions of clothing, and comforts, as well as money, are needed.

The Commission requests, that on Thanksgiving Day collections be taken in all the Churches of the Land, for this labor of love. Let not Anoka be behind other towns in this good work. Of course the day will be observed by our Churches. Let all go in obedience to the request of the President, and go prepared to do something for the soldiers.

Anoka Star, November 21, 1863

Christian Commission

Report on a lecture given by Rev. Wells at the Methodist Hall.

A contribution was taken up and about \$50 given by way of appreciation of the good work. We must not forget, however, that we have another work to do by way of manifesting our appreciation of, and regard for, our armies in the field. I allude to the duty we owe to the families of our absent heroes. Let there be a full meeting of citizens at the Methodist Hall on Tuesday evening next to consider this matter. Let the mothers, wives and daughters be present, and let the fathers, husbands and sons be there, prepared to do as circumstances may develop the necessary of doing.

Anoka Star, April 30, 1864

The girls in our sewing society say that if any of the members do send a soldier to the war they shall have a bed quilt, made by the society, and have all the girls' names on the stars."

Diary of Carolina Cowles Clarke, May, 1861

Sewing for a Cause

This was not a new enterprise for women of America; they had been sewing quilts and raising money to support many projects for years before the Civil War. A quilt in the Smithsonian Museum was made by a group of women in 1853 as a fund raiser for the fire department of South Reading, MA. Other quilts raised money to support the cause of abolition. When the Civil War began, women continued sewing to raise money and awareness for the welfare of the soldiers.

Some women's groups were quite enterprising making as much as they could by first selling the right to place one's name on the quilt, then selling raffle tickets for a second round of income. History even records some of the winners convinced to "donate" the quilt back to the group so it could be raffled off a second time! It was especially fortunate if the signatures of dignitaries or famous personalities could be added to the quilt. A quilt's value increased with the notoriety of the signers either because people wanted their own names added to a quilt with their favorite actor or politician and would pay more for the privilege; or because they wanted to collect that person's signature and would bid higher/buy more raffle tickets in an effort to win the quilt.

Raising money for worthy causes did not stop with the end of the Civil War as women turned their money making projects into benefits for orphans funds, temperance movements, and suffrage causes as well as many local projects such as the fire department ladies of 1853.

Some slogans used on “abolition quilts” came from popular magazines and were repeated on many quilts of the period:

May the use of our needles prick the consciences of the slaveholders.

The political economist counts time by years; the suffering slave reckons it by minutes.

The greatest friend of Truth is Time; her greatest enemy is Prejudice.

Although there were some who frowned on the idea of women being involved in any commercial venture, patriotism won out as fairs became more and more elaborate. Women created beautiful quilts often of fine fabrics such as silk. Flag quilts or quilt with patriotic themes were highly popular styles, but one of the most favored was the Album Quilt, also known as a Signature Quilt. New block designs began to appear that were created specifically to accommodate a place for a signature or a bit of prose, advice, or poetry from the signer. Ladies magazines began to include patterns and suggestions for making signature quilts or for gathering significant signatures on their squares.

Comforts or comfortables were usually tied quilts.

Album quilts were sometimes called beggar’s blocks as the makers begged for scraps of women’s dresses or shirts as souvenirs as well as their signatures. Again, the more famous the donor of the fabric, the more valuable the quilt.

Did escaping slaves look for maps hidden in quilts to lead them to freedom on the Underground Railroad? The lack of a surviving “map” quilt seems to argue against this, but it is still quite possible that a quilt of a specific pattern hanging on a line might have been used as a signal. Some verbal evidence suggests that a Tumbling Block quilt hung out to air quilt spoke of an impending escape, or a quilt with rows of “Flying Geese” pointed the way to safety along the route. One story said a Log Cabin quilt with a black center square (most log cabin quilts have a red center square) indicated a safe house for escaping slaves. This part of the story does not withstand the truth test—the earliest log cabin quilt reference is 1863 when the Underground Railroad system had changed dramatically with the start of the Civil War and such a signal was no longer necessary.

Researched and compiled by the reenactors of the 2nd Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery. Visit our website at <http://www.2mnbattery.org> for more information about our soldiers and our organization.

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