The Surgeons of the Civil War

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I come to you tonight as a member of the surgeons of the Civil War. I am marching with the rear guard of this almost extinct body of heroes. To their memory I would add a few words of praise. To the surgeons of the present great war I bring a message of cheer, of hope and well wishes.

Indiana sent to the Civil War 136 regiments of infantry, thirteen regiments of cavalry, one regiment of heavy artillery, twenty-five batteries of artillery, and numerous recruits.

These organizations were provided with 500 surgeons to care for the sick and wounded. One surgeon and two assistant surgeons were assigned to each regiment. In times of peril extra civilian physicians were sent to reinforce the medical department, and when the danger seemed great the governor himself went to the front to look after the welfare of the boys on the fighting line. Our great war governor, Oliver P. Morton, never forgot the men he sent out to battle for their country.

Indianapolis had a population of a little less than 17,000 inhabitants when the Civil War began. It had no hospital, no street cars, and but few of the modern conveniences of cities.

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The surgeons of the Civil War met with handicaps that the surgeons of the present day will not encounter. We were not trained — the wars prior to 1861 gave us no practical experience. The surgeons of the Mexican War came home from their two years of conflict, but they bequeathed to us no printed records.

The surgeons of the Civil War assigned to the Indiana volunteers came from rural villages, and were general practitioners. So far as I can determine, there was no medical man in Indiana in 1861 who was practicing surgery exclusively. At that date there was no medical college in the state. There were few noted surgeons in the United States. Many of our surgeons had never seen inside of the abdomen of a living subject. The age of medical specialties had not dawned upon the profession.

I can only speak for Indiana, but I make no doubt that many of our surgeons of the Civil War had never witnessed a major amputation when they joined their regiments; very few of them had treated gunshot wounds. Let us be sparing of our criticism of these men. Whatever else we may say for or against the medical men of Indiana at that period I want to say for them that they were patriotic, and willingly entered the service.

The only approach to our present day Red Cross was the Christian Commission — well meaning in its purposes but limited in funds. We had no Y. M. C. A. in our camps. We had chaplains to care for the religious wants of the men, assist at the burial of the dead, and preach
Dr. G. W. H. Kemper
to us in the open air. Occasionally an itinerant evangelist visited us and sounded the gospel trumpet. We were short in books and papers, but our men were orderly, moral, and I may say even religious.

We were not provided with trained nurses—male or female, as at the present day. Florence Nightingale, with a band of noble nurses went to the British army in the Crimean War in 1854, but she did not publish her book on nursing until 1859. Our women in the 60's did not accompany the armies to the front. They remained at home and toiled, and wept, and prayed as they scanned the lists of dead and wounded after our great battles. I saw but two women on a battlefield; after the battle of Farmington, Tennessee, in October, 1863, these women suddenly appeared upon the field with a bucket of water and tin cups. I don't know whether they were Union or Confederate in sympathy, but they gave a cup of cold water to the wounded—to the men clad in blue and clad in gray. If I knew their names I would honor them here tonight.

When we consider the medical men of sixty years ago, deprived of present day advancement in our art may we not congratulate them for doing their work as well as they did? Doubtless, they frequently erred, and may have performed amputations when the same member might be saved today.

Our regimental outfits were meager as compared with the present war. Our surgeons had not heard of the gospel of extreme cleanliness, as Lister did not announce his principles of
antiseptic surgery until 1867—two years after the close of the Civil War.

Anesthetics were not as helpful to the surgeons of the Civil War as they are to surgeons at the present day. A distrust of anesthetics existed in the early part of the Civil War mainly due to the fact that surgeons then were not accustomed to the use of these agents. Chloroform was first used fourteen years prior to the beginning of the Civil War, and its management was not so well understood when that war began. This was the agent furnished to troops in the field—rather because it took less space in transportation than ether. The whole question of anesthesia is much better understood at the present day than it was fifty years ago.

Antitoxin and the various serums were unknown to us, and new sciences or departments of knowledge have sprung up out of veritable darkness for the advancement of medicine and surgery since that period when we toiled in the dim light of the morning preceding the midday light of discovery.

I hope no one will infer that I would speak slightingly of the surgeons of the 60's—far from it. There were giants in those days. There were medical men in the Civil War whose minds rose like mountain peaks above the handicaps of that age!

The medical men of the Civil War furnished Surgeon-General Otis with data and statistics from which he and his assistants constructed the "Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion," in six large quarto volumes
—three devoted to medical, and three to surgical topics. The three volumes on medical subjects comprise 2,951 pages; the three volumes devoted to surgery comprise 2,714 pages—a total of 5,665 pages. The volumes are illustrated with valuable engravings of a high order of art showing the ravages of disease. Besides these six volumes many valuable circulars and extensive articles in medical journals were contributed by Civil War surgeons. One quarto size circular of one hundred pages is devoted to "Hip-joint Amputations," and is illustrated with numerous engravings—seven of which are finely colored pictures of successful amputations of the hip-joint.

Confederate surgeons, also, contributed many valuable articles pertaining to medical and surgical topics.

Those who contributed medical and surgical items of the Civil War deserve great praise.

The surgeons of the present war enter the service better trained than the surgeons of the Civil War. They are supplied with valuable remedies, and every needful surgical appliance. They are aided by competent nurses. They have the Red Cross, the Y. M. C. A., and millions, nay, billions of dollars at their service, and no one complains of the expense. No appeal is unheeded.

Of the several thousand surgeons who served in the Civil War a comparatively small number remain alive. The great majority of them have fallen asleep, and "have gone on that unreturning visit which allows of no excuse and admits of no delay."
"And the names we loved to hear  
Have been carved for many a year  
On the tomb."

Of the 500 surgeons who were commissioned by Governor Morton and went from Indiana, possibly less than one dozen remain alive. Recently, I asked in our state medical journal for the names of survivors—five answered the roll call, and I know of five others. All are old. I am about as young as any of them, and the snows of seventy-eight winters have fallen upon my head.

The men in the ranks during the Civil War were generally volunteers. I count it one of the greatest honors of my life that I was a private soldier—a volunteer in the army of 75,000 that responded to the first call of Abraham Lincoln. These were the three months men; later, in the three years' service I was in the medical department.

The biblical story records that when the brave hero, Gideon, crossed the river Jordan to punish a band of Midian cut-throats, and when he had captured Zebah and Zalmunna, their leaders, he said to them: "What manner of men were they whom ye slew at Tabor?" And they answered: "As thou art, so were they; each one resembled the children of a King." I would apply this description to the young men of the Civil War who came to the rescue of their country—each was every inch a king.

Sometimes in our G. A. R. councils we "old boys of 1861 to 1865," almost envy the young men of today who are going abroad to fight the
great battle for the world's democracy. And yet, why should we? Why desire that the shadow on the dial of history go backward ten degrees, or go forward ten degrees? Have we not lived in the greatest era of history and noble deeds?

Joel Chandler Harris says: "It is good to grow ol'." I am glad that I am old and that my lot and days have been cast in a century that has been a bank of knowledge, of wisdom and of great deeds. Much of it I have seen, and a small part of it I have been. Surely I have no cause for regret. I have looked into the face of Abraham Lincoln and heard him speak. A man once said to me that he would be willing to have his hair as white as mine if he could have seen that great man.

May I say a few words for the songs and airs of the Civil War, for we still rely upon them for inspiration. As yet, no song writer of decided merit has come to the assistance of the soldiers of the present war. We have gifted women at the present day, but of their number no Julia Ward Howe has written a poem that will supersede the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." If we desire to enthuse an audience we fall back upon "Marching through Georgia," and "Dixie." If there had been no prison pen we would not be singing "Tramp, Tramp, the Boys are Marching." The eye still moistens at "We Shall Meet but We Shall Miss Him," and various other songs of that period—songs which "have power to quiet the restless pulse of care."
When we came to the rescue of the flag in 1861 there were thirty-six states in the Union, and the flag of that period carried that number of stars. Four years later when we emerged from the Civil War our great leader was a martyr, but not a star had been lost from the flag. Twenty-four thousand four hundred and sixteen of the sons of Indiana gave their lives for the preservation of the Union and the honor of the flag.

That same flag, sweeping so victoriously over the battlefields of Europe carries forty-eight stars; may it come home crowned with glory, and not a single star tarnished.

The members of the Grand Army of the Republic will follow the boys of the present war—boys who are our sons and grandsons—with a pride for their success, and prayers for their safety.

Our band is soon to die, but while life continues we shall never lose our interest in the welfare of the land we love so well.

As belated travelers who wait at a wayside station for a delayed train, and yet know it will surely come, so we comrades of the Civil War are waiting for the last command.

The burdens of life fall heavily upon us; that weariness for things new creeps on with age, and we are inclined to seek rest and remember the days of old, and so fail to see the new visions of the future—nay, we are dreaming dreams.
And as the shadows lengthen toward the sunset of life, pray for the departing spirit that it may enter a haven of rest. God bless the soldier of the Grand Army of the Republic—mustered out!

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