

## **A sketch of hospital life and work**

This item, composed by Nurse Anna S. Webb-Peck, details her experiences as a nurse during the first year of the Civil War. One of the prominent people that she came into contact with during the period was Mary Ann "Mother" Bickerdyke, who gained widespread fame for her work as a hospital administrator for the Union during the Civil War.

Creator: Webb-Peck, Anna S.

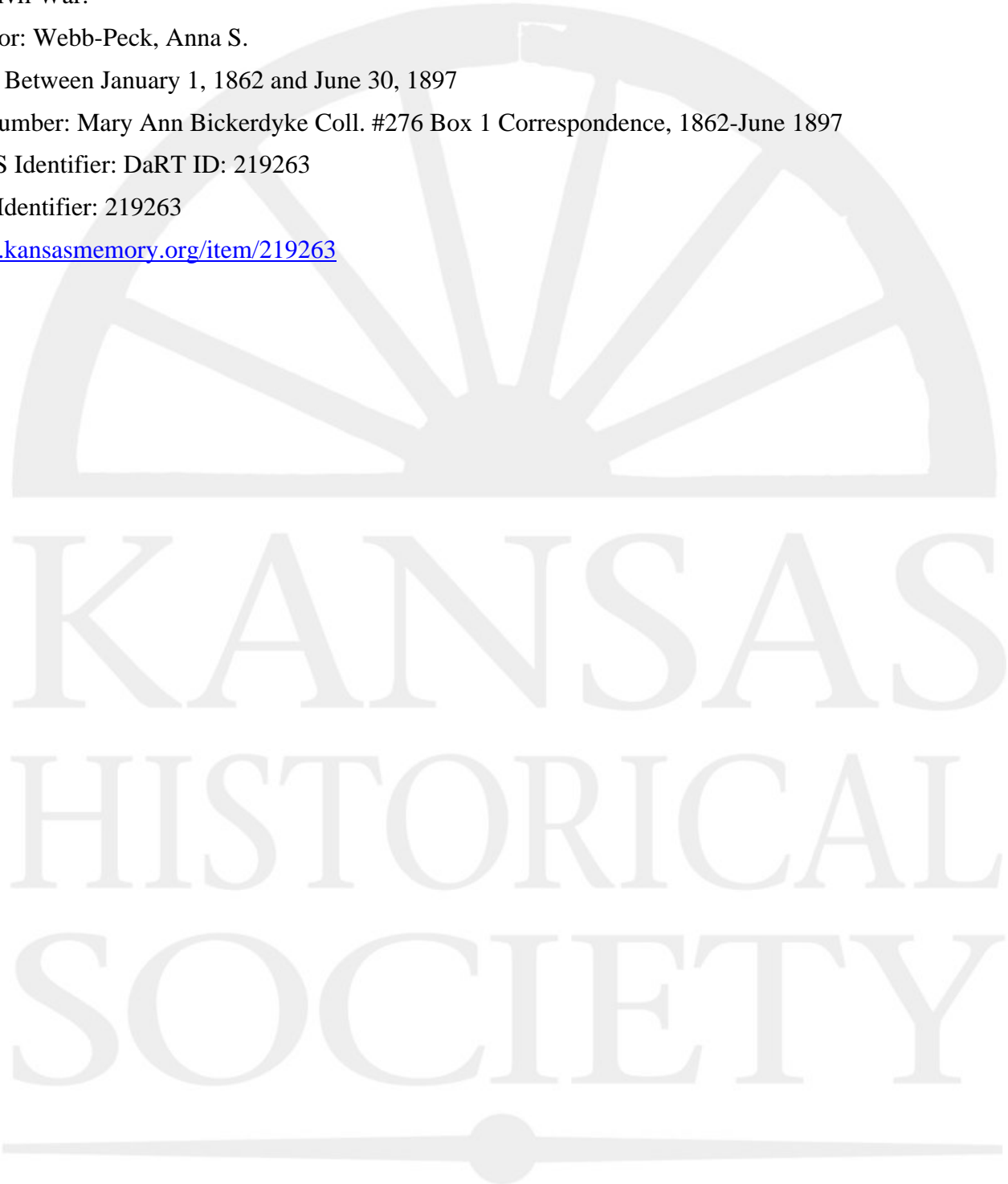
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### A SKETCH OF HOSPITAL LIFE AND WORK

BY

ANNA S. WEBB-PECK, NURSE IN THE WESTERN DEPT. U. S. VOL.

I propose to give a sketch of hospital life and work during the first year of my three years term of service. It will necessarily be very brief. I left Waukesha Wis. on the 8th. day of May, 1862. I reported to the Sanitary Commission, under the auspices of which I was sent out, <sup>from</sup> at Chicago, on the 19th. of May, 1862. On the morning of that day, there were six of us met at the depot, all strangers to each other, but all actuated by the same motives and destined for the same field of labor. I will mention the names and perhaps some ~~one~~ may have met with one or more of them or have had some friends under their care. First I will mention Mrs. Jeremiah Porter, wife of the chaplain of the 9th. Ill. It was her duty to accompany each corps of nurses sent from Chicago to their destination, and see them assigned to duty. I will speak fully of Mrs. Porter here, as I shall not allude to her again, except in one instance. She was ~~an~~ woman eminent for her piety, and the strong, yes, almost controlling influence she possessed: still so gentle one would on first sight, think her without any strength of character: She was finely educated, and years of work connected with her husband in his profession had given her that confidence without which no woman can appear to advantage. She was small in ~~size~~ stature, fine in figure, and always dressed with a neatness and elegance, that stamped her as the true lady wherever she appeared. More than all, her winning, smiling face, light <sup>showed</sup> ed with the love of the Divine Master until it almost ~~glowed~~



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radiating, ~~from~~ as it were, the effulgence of the very Shekinah, ready at all times "To warn, to counsel, or command", as occasion might require, placed her in the front rank of those who ministered to the wants of suffering humanity.

In the hospital ward, ~~ministering~~ ministering to the helpless, taking messages for loved ones at home, often the last, or writing letters, reading or singing, or at prayer, she was ready and efficient in all places. She often made a trip on some steamer, as it went north with soldiers who were being transferred to hospitals there; on her return she was always welcomed, whether alone or in company with those who were to be placed on duty wherever their services might be needed. She worked for, and with each department of the west until the close of the war, going with Sherman to the sea, and from there home for a rest. She died at Santa Barbara, Cal. on the 1st. day of January, 1888, aged eighty-three.

Although there were others who were her superiors in executive ability, who could do more manual labor, and have made for themselves names that will live in the annals of our country as long as it remains, there is not one who will live longer in the hearts of those who had the good fortune to be associated with her, than this remarkable woman.

Well might it be said of her as it was of another "She was a golden sentence writ by her maker". I will here give the names of the nurses who left Chicago with me on the 19th. day of May, 1862. First Miss. Kate Fargo of ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxx~~ Fon du Lac, Wis. 2. Miss. Louise Humphrey from Iowa, 3d. Miss McArthur from Joliett, Ill. 4. Miss. Richardson from Chicago, and 5th. Miss Jennie Smale from Chicago and

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6th. myself. On our arrival at Cairo, Ill., Miss. Richardson concluded to go no farther, if some one could be found to take her place. A Mrs. Blodgett, who was on duty at Mound City, was substituted. Miss. Richardson returned and we heard nothing more of her. On the evening of the 20th. we went on board the steamer, City of Memphis, bound for Pittsburgh Landing. There was but one other lady on board besides those already mentioned; and she was a Mrs. Derby, wife of a brigade surgeon who was in charge of the field hospital at Monterey, Miss. On our arrival at Paducah, Ky., Miss. Mary Safford came on board for a short time. She was called the "Florence Nightengale" of the army, as she had been in faithful service from the first. Nothing of importance transpired, and we whiled away the time by getting acquainted with each other and talking over our prospective work of which we knew nothing. On Thursday the 22nd., after dark, we reached Pittsburgh Landing. We expected to see a town or something that looked like one, but found that the Landing consisted of three buildings, one used as an express office, one as a post office and the other by the provost martial. The last two were log and the first a frame building, the only one we saw there. The river was crowded with shipping, and we were told that the new Uncle Sam a steamer, was never taken from her moorings but was used as a hotel, where all employes of the government were entertained free of charge until placed on duty, after reporting to their respective officers. We went direct to the steamer Polar Star and reported to the Medical Director, Dr. McDougal, whose office was on this boat. We were all assigned to Savannah, a town on the opposite side of the river -



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Savannah

er about eight miles back to-ward the north. We had to re-  
main there until Saturday, the 24th., when the hospital  
steamer D. A. January came from Hamburg, laden with sick and  
wounded soldiers which were being taken to Savannah prepar-  
atory to going north. She stopped just long enough to  
take us on board and there we had our first glimpse of  
what our work would be. If any thing like romance had been  
indulged in it disappeared "Like mist before the rushing  
breath of a tempest". Every part of the steamer was filled  
with sick and wounded. Some on cots, some lying out side of  
the cabin on the floor, using their knapsacks for pillows  
and others, who were convalescent sitting up, and some  
able to walk with the help of a cane or steady<sup>ing</sup> themselves by  
anything within reach. About six o'clock we found ourselves  
at our destination and thought that we were to be the guests  
of the quarter master for the time being. Here we had our  
first meal of corn bread and beans seasoned with bacon; cof-  
fee without milk. <sup>or sugar</sup> The table was set with tin cups and plates,  
so we had our first meal in regular soldier fashion. Mother  
Bickerdyke, who was here, sent for us to go to her quarters  
for the night much to the satisfaction of all. Her quarters  
were about half a mile back from the river and consisted of a  
house with two rooms and a log kitchen back with a small room  
used as a store room. The e was a low chamber over the  
frame part and <sup>in</sup> this we encamped for the night. The next day  
Sunday, the 25th., we reported to Dr. Chauncey Griswold, who  
was in charge of what was called the Seminary hospital. Here  
we were assigned to duty. The building was large and new,  
not having been finished inside. It was partitioned with

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boards into a dining room, linnen room, used also by the matron, and a dispensary. The work room was entirely separate and built of logs. The buildings were situated in a fine grove but the number of patients <sup>was</sup> ~~xxx~~ so large that tents were pitched throughout the grounds. Although a very social and pleasant man, Dr. Griswold was a firm believer in the strictest discipline, exacting of all the full discharge of duty. On Monday morning he assigned each to a seat at the table and allowed no change. After breakfast he assigned us to our respective wards, placing Miss. Fargo and myself in the wards comprised of tents. In rain or heat we had to make our accustomed rounds each day. Besides this division of the hospital, there were two others one in a church and the other at what was called "the barracks".

As we had our regular duties and a stated time for them, we had time for writing, or when we could get permission for visiting the other departments. As we had seen so many of the soldiers on the steamer it was pleasant to visit them wherever they were. The Tuesday evening after our arrival, Miss. Fargo and I visited the Church hospital. All the furnishings of a church had been removed so that the cots were placed the whole length and breadth <sup>leaving</sup> ~~for~~ just space enough for the attendants to pass between. The church fronted to the north and the windows were very low and close to-gether on the east and west side. It was nearly sunset when we entered and turned to the row of cots next to the wall on the west. We had noticed on the steamer, and after we came off, a pale emaciated boy who did not look a day over fifteen years of age and small for that. In our round of duty, we had looked for him, and spoke of him for he seemed so out of place being a mere



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child. As we walked down the aisle, we saw in front of the second window the little pale, pinched face of this boy. We stepped up to the head of the cot and spoke to him. The ~~xxxx~~ attendant said that he had been in a stupor the whole day and the Dr. thought that he could not last long. While we stood there the sun-set gun was fired, and with no intermission at second, and then a third. Why there were three guns fired at sun-set on this particular evening I never ~~learned~~ learned and in my <sup>three</sup> ~~three~~ years service this is the only time I ever knew of there being more than one gun fired at sun-rise or sun-set. At the first report the boy suddenly raised himself up toward and looked out of the window, for an instant fixing his gaze steadfastly on the sky a-glow with gold and jasper light of the dying day he stretched out his arms, exclaimed the word "Mother" and threw himself back on his cot, gave one labored spasmodic gasp and was dead. On opening his knapsack a furlough was found but he, poor boy, was laid to rest among strangers. On the 10th. of June, a telegram came ordering Mrs. Blodgett, Mrs. Fargo and myself to report to Dr. Derby in charge of the hospital at Monterey, I Miss. We had only an hour to get ready in and then went aboard a government transport which took us to Pittsburgh Landing, where we remained two days. We reported to the medical director who informed us we must wait on board the steamer New Uncle Sam until he could get transportation for us. On Saturday morning, June, 12th., an ambulance was sent and we started for new scenes of labor amid entire strangers. We passed through the battle field of Shiloh close to the old historic church from which so many mem-

Monterey,  
Miss.

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toes had been sent. Our ambulance driver, who was from Mich. , said he had sent mails to ~~some~~ some of his friends who had asked for something from there. Surely, if desolation ever marked a place it was here. It was like a plowed field and every vestige of verdure had been stripped from the trees, and everything bore testimony to the fierce conflict that had so recently taken place. The atmosphere was tainted with decomposition and the very earth impregnated with putrefaction for "Rider and horse, -friend, foe, were in one burial blent". About one P. M. we reached the camp of the 5th. Ohio cavalry, which was in the woods about twelve miles from our starting point. We had to remain at this camp until a messenger could notify Dr. Derby and he could send for us. I wish to say here that nothing could exceed the kindness that we received at the hands of this regiment, the best that they could get was spread before us and at night they pitched a tent and spread out the ambulance ~~equipment~~ <sup>cushions</sup> for us to sleep on. The next morning we started on our journey for Monterey where we arrived in the afternoon and found things in a deplorable condition. In all my term of service I saw no suffering to compare with this. The sick were all in tents ~~pitched~~ pitched in a long open field bordered with woods, but not a tree to cast a shadow over any part of the encampment. There were two buildings, one a frame where what few supplies they had were kept, and the other constructed of logs used for a kitchen. The quarters of the Dr. and his wife and the five nurses were in a temporary addition to the kitchen. We had canvassed cots but no mattresses or pillows. There were not half supplies enough for the sick, and neither surgeons or nurses enough to do more than a third of the actual duty



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needed. It was said, and I believe it to be true, that the deaths averaged one hundred and seventy-five daily. I only remained one week when I became so unfitted for work that I requested to be transferred to Savannah. This was done. There was no day while I was under Dr. Derby that I could go all through my ward and with other things we had to assist in the low diet cooking which, added to the intense heat, was more than I could endure. The hospital did not last very long as the mortality was reported and it was very soon closed, ~~up~~ ~~---~~. On my return to Savannah I found many of the soldiers gone and all things indicating an early departure from there. Mother Bickerdyke had established a laundry there soon after the battle of Shiloh, the wounded from that field being taken to this point as soon and as fast as possible. There was an ample supply of soft water and a Sanitary Commission furnished all needful articles but no ironing was done except what the ladies did for themselves; but the clothes were white as snow, and all neatly folded, so the ironing could be well dispensed with. On the last of June, all soldiers who would not be fit for duty at an early date and who were able to endure the journey were sent ~~xxxxxx~~ north. Those who had to remain were removed to what was termed the barracks. There were not many to remain, most of the nurses were transferred to other fields. Miss. Humphreys went home and did not return to engage in hospital work again, but went to Memphis and worked among the freedmen. Miss McArthur and Jennie Smale left and we did not know where they were assigned to duty. The three who remained were Mother Bickerdyke, Mrs. McCall, the matron of the German hospital

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and myself. As everything had been put in readiness for a speedy exit, we were at a loss to know just what to do; but a place was opened for us in a home of a resident there, who had ~~xxxxxx~~ shown himself just as friendly as could be to all. We were there two weeks and it would be unjust to pass this delightful place by without speaking more fully upon it. It was a luxurious southern home, surrounded with trees and shrub<sup>6</sup>ery, completely shelter<sup>7</sup>ing it from the scorching rays of the sun. The magnolia, the crepe myrtle and the Abyssinian locust rich in verdure and bloom, throwing out upon the morning air their delightful fragrance, where countless humming birds could sip to their hearts' content; and where fire-flies of every color, with their own peculiar metallic brightness, glistened like living jewels in the long twilight and deeper shades of evening. In reading "Uncle Tom's Cabin", years before the war, I had looked upon the description of St. Clair's home as a wide stretch of imagination but here it was in actual existence, a veritable reality. The household consisted of the husband, ~~and~~ wife and one child, ~~and~~ to-gether with five negro servants. The generous hospitality and the quiet rest from work to-gether with the restful surroundings, all contrasting so strongly with the scenes of suffering and want, to which I had so late been accustomed, has made those two weeks a hallowed remembrance and stands out like "The shadow of a great rock in a weary land". On the 12th., the little transport Progress was sent to take Mrs. Bickerdyke with her corps and supplies to Hamburg. There we remained on board a little leaky steamer, the "Batton Rouge" until the 21st., when we left the river to go to Farmington, Miss., where we had all been ordered to



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report for duty. Some idea of Mrs. Bickerdyke's work will be given when I say that when we left the landing there were twenty-seven government wagons besides her own splendid team and ambulance, her saddle horse and one belonging to Maj. Stearns who had gone <sup>north</sup> ~~west~~. We passed through the ground where Halleck and his forces were camped and saw the tree with the top sawed off and a ladder leading up so that one could sit or stand amid the branches and by aid of a glass overlook Corinth. It is recorded in history that the Federal General did watch Beauregard day after day from this observatory as he removed his supplies and then took off his full force leaving ~~Halleck~~ Corinth unguarded so that Halleck could march as peacefully in as though going out to dress parade thus covering himself with glory by gaining his "Bloodless victory". We reached Farmington which proved to be a field hospital. The white tents placed in regular lines, under the shade of forest trees, where all the underbrush had been cleared away, and the grounds, so well kept that the walks between the tents were like pavement. Everything was in excellent order but there was only one woman there and that was Mrs. Blodgett. There was a good corps of surgeons, the chief being Dr. O. M. Bryan of Ill. There was a stream of excellent soft water near by and Mother Bickerdyke realizing the truth of the text "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" established a laundry as soon as possible. She also had the superintendence of the diet kitchen which kept her busy. Large supplies of ~~Sanitary~~ <sup>were furnished</sup> goods so that all could be made comparatively comfortable. This hospital was closed on the 5th of Sept., and in the cemetery were left three hundred dead, every grave being marked with the name and number of the

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Corinth,

regiment of each poor fellow who had gone to his last long sleep in the defense of his country. On the closing out here Mrs. Bickerdyke went to Corinth while Mrs. McCall, Mrs. Blodgett and myself, together with the steward and his clerk and the ward-master were ordered to Jackson, Tenn. This was a delightful place about fifty-five miles from Corinth. The hospital consisted of three divisions designated No. 1, No. 2, <sup>and</sup> No. 3. No. 1 was a fine college, No. 2 a young ladies' seminary, No. 3 a church, all being under the supervision of one steward and the medical director; <sup>with</sup> but a chief surgeon with a good corps of nurses in each. We heard the cannonading distinctly on Oct., 3d., and 4th., and the hospitals were filled with the wounded who could endure being laid on platform cars and brought to Jackson. The rail-road was the smoothest I ever saw but many a poor fellow who had undertaken the journey from the field to the hospital was destined for ~~interment~~ interment before he reached the hospital. We had plenty of work but were well supplied with all necessities and many luxuries for the sick making the work more agreeable than it had been before.

M. A. Bickerdyke  
at  
Savannah  
Ga.

I will now relate some of the incidents in Mother Bickerdyke's services that came under my own observation. ~~xxxxxx~~ At the battle of Shiloh the wounded were removed as fast as possible to Savannah and Mother Bickerdyke was in charge of the nurses and hospital there. Some of the worst cases she had placed in her own house so that she could see them whenever she had time or as she said herself when she went to her quarters for rest. One man belonging to an Iowa regiment was wounded mortally, the ball entering near the heart



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too deep for extraction. The surgeon told her it would work its way downward, and as soon as it reached the heart all would be over. He was very cheerful, although he knew there was no shadow of hope for his recovery. One evening as she was in the room he called to her saying that he felt strangely. She placed her hand on his heart, felt only a fluttering, and she said to him "Your time has come, if you have anything to say, say it quickly". He looked up into her face with a smile and said "Tell my wife to meet me in heaven". He was gone. No repining no murmuring, but a joyous entrance into eternal rest. After we were placed on duty at Farmington, Miss., Mrs. Bickerdyke came to me with a faded, withered rose and a lock of hair, asking me to write a letter for her and enclose them and mail them to the parents of the boy who had died in her room while at Savannah. The story connected with the se mementoes is as follows: When Gen. Buell was taking his forces to <sup>re</sup> enforce Grant at Shiloh, he left all his sick in the hospitals at Savannah, among them was a mere boy, whom she had placed in her own room for she knew that he could not live long. While the poor fellow lasted he was cared for with as much solicitude as if he had been her own. He was unable to speak above a whisper and would watch her every move, every time she left the room his eyes would follow her until the door would close and when she returned they would light up with a seeming satisfaction. Roses were in bloom and there were some beautiful ones under the window of this room. On passing a bush one day she plucked one of the most beautiful buds and had it in her hand when she entered the room, as she stepped up to the cot where the wasted form lay a bright smile lighted up the dying face and the boy patient reached his hand for the rose and murmured "Mother".

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She gave it to him and he shortly afterwards fell asleep with the rose clasped in his hand and she found it in his stiffened fingers for he never awoke. She cut a lock of hair from his forehead and laid it aside with the rose so that when time would allow they could be sent to that mother far away in the northern home as the only remembrance from the dear boy who had gone forth full of life and vigor from his native state, of ~~NYXXYYX~~ New Jersey. Mother Bickerdyke's executive ability made her not only a "Presence but a power", where ever she appeared. On our way from Savannah to Farmington we were delayed a week at Hamburg landing, where a large field hospital had been established and was under the charge of Dr.

Gay. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ One evening after we had been to supper she came to me and asked me to go with her to a certain tent which she had determined to visit. I asked no questions for her manner indicated that she meant business. We went into a mess ~~mess~~ <sup>tent</sup> and found one of the boys washing supper dishes. His dish pan stood on ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> box fully four feet deep and six feet long. The top of it was as black as pots and kettles could make it and no mark was visible. Mother Bickerdyke said "What have you here?" The dish washer replied "I don't know as there is anything but this box and that was here when I commenced to work for the mess". She had the box turned over and on the side next to the tent wall ~~and~~ there was a mark printed ~~on~~ showing the contents to be hospital supplies. She requested the man to get a hatchet and open the box. To my utter surprise we took out four hundred shirts and socks by the dozen all of which were distributed where they did the most good. In another tent she found four barrels stowed away in an out of the way place, which had been sent by



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by some aid society. When opened the contents proved to be towels, soap, combs, lint and bandages which had stood there for months and to all indications would have been there until the close of the war had not the piercing eye of this remarkable woman in her strict adherence to duty distributed them for the use they were intended. In the tent occupied by Mrs. McCall at Farmington four large boxes had been left by the woman who occupied it before our arrival. She was a Mrs. Webster from Ill. and had left the boxes in care of the steward with instructions that he forward them to her if she did not return. One evening while we were sitting in the tent Mrs. Bickerdyke said "Mrs. Mc., What is in those boxes?" Mrs. McCall replied "I don't know, they were here when I came and the steward told me they were to be forwarded to Mrs. Webster". Mrs. Bickerdyke's eyes fairly snapped and she said with a peculiar look "The boxes are good enough for Mrs. Webster but I think we can use the contents here, I will have them opened". The boxes were opened without further delay and we found one hundred and forty-four pocket handkerchiefs stamped "Union Aid Society of Ohio" and more than twice that number not marked at all. In addition to the handkerchiefs were towels, napkins and numerous other articles that had been sent out on a mission of tender sympathy having been prepared by loving hands far away. Among other things was found six bottles of excellent wine which showed conclusively that Mrs Webster was not a prohibitionist although the circumstances seemed to indicate that she <sup>m</sup>could put down the evil. How any woman who was engaged in the service and knew the absolute need of everything of this kind could so far forget herself as to gobble supplies from her own department

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is a mystery beyond my comprehension. On leaving Farmington Mrs. Bickerdyke went to Corinth and was there during the fearful battle of Oct. 3d. and 4th. of 1862. Her ability in assisting the surgeons made her services invaluable at such a time. She could stand over the amputating table until even surgeons themselves would sicken and some times faint. At times her strength seemed almost superhuman which made her a nurse of unsurpassed efficiency. After everything was done at Corinth that she thought essential for her immediate personal supervision she went to Memphis and took the responsibility of transforming the far famed Gayoso house into a hospital which for convenience and neatness was never surpassed. She had all the facilities of establishing a laundry which she did as soon as she could after the hospital opened. In this way she saved thousands of dollars to the government which otherwise would have been lost. It was while here that she went north and returned with one hundred cows which were distributed among the different hospitals each sharing according to the number of patients accommodated. She brought other supplies at the same time among which were chickens one of the most important essentials for low diet purposes. The Sanitary Commission furnished what it could in the way of eggs, butter, vegetables and fruit both canned and dried. During the summer Mother Bickerdyke went north for a rest. On returning she reported at Nashville and from there went to Chattanooga. Shortly after she joined the forces of Gen. Sherman and was with him on the famous march to the sea. She remained in the work until the last superintending the laundries and diet kitchens, besides doing anything and every



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thing she could for those who came under her care. She did not wait for orders, but could see at a glance what needed to be done and either performed it herself or placed it in charge of some competent person whom she knew she could trust. Her courage, - she knew no such word as fear, - her indomitable energy, her planning and executing so swiftly and systematically <sup>where such</sup> that she brought "Order out of chaos" almost like magic. She went over the battle field at Ft. Donaldson after dark, with one attendant and by the light of a lantern looked among the fallen to be sure that no living sufferer had been left on the field. It is the memory of such deeds as these that has made her name honored and loved all over the country. Old soldiers will reverence her and teach their children to do the same. Wherever they gather some incident will be related and around the camp fire of the Grand Army and the hearthstone in the homes she will be remembered in the fullness of love for her great work and no woman deserves it or has earned the homage paid to her on her eightieth birth-day more than Mother Bickerdyke.