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# The Western Sanitary Commission

And what it did for the sick and wounded of the  
Union Armies from 1861 to 1865, with  
mention of the services of Companion  
James E. Yeatman therewith



Read before the Commandery of the State of Missouri  
Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States

February 3, 1906

By Captain W. R. Hodges



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## SANGUINARY CONFLICTS IN MISSOURI.

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### WOUNDED BROUGHT TO ST. LOUIS.

The Western Sanitary Commission was the result of a series of sanguinary conflicts in Missouri during the summer of 1861, at Boonville, Dug Spring, Carthage and Wilson's Creek. The last named was fought on the 10th of August, twelve miles south of Springfield, near the Fayetteville road. The wounded of our army, numbering 721 were brought all the way from Springfield to Rolla in ambulances and army wagons, and thence by rail to St. Louis, and so little preparation had been made for such an event there were not additional hospital accommodations for so many in the whole city. The new House of Refuge Hospital, situated two miles south of St. Louis, had been opened by Medical Director De Camp, on the 6th of August, under the charge of two Surgeons of the regular army, but it was unprovided with the requisites for such an emergency. The conditions at the time of the arrival of the Wilson's Creek wounded are thus described: "It had neither stoves, nor bedsteads, nor beds, nor bedding, nor food, nor nurses, nor anything prepared. The first 100 arrived at night. They had been brought in wagons 120 miles over a rough road, by hurried marches suffering for food and water, from Springfield to Rolla, and thence by rail to St. Louis and to the station on 14th Street. Then, having had nothing to eat for ten hours, they were put into furniture cars and carried the remaining three miles. Bare floors, bare walls and an empty kitchen received them. The kind-hearted Surgeon obtained from the neighbors cooked food for their supper, and lost no time in getting together the means for their comfort. The poor fellows were so shattered and travel-worn that they were thankful to get food to eat and hard boards to sleep upon,

and no word of complaint was heard from them. In the course of the week three or four hundred more arrived. Conditions were improving, but there was so great a difficulty in obtaining what was wanted that many of the badly wounded lay in the same unchanged garments in which they had been brought from the battlefield three weeks before, but in the course of a month all were made comfortable. The sick and wounded continued to arrive and other accommodations had to be secured without delay. All the wards of the Sisters of Charity Hospital and the City Hospital were filled. The sad and neglected condition of those brought from Springfield excited the sympathies of the patriotic people. The wounds of many had not been dressed since leaving the battlefield; others were suffering from unextracted bullets and pieces of shell, and the hospitals were unprovided with clothing to substitute for that which in many cases was saturated with the blood of their wounds.

#### WESTERN SANITARY COMMISSION FORMED.

At that juncture Miss Dix, the philanthropist, was in St. Louis, and the suggestion that a Sanitary Commission be formed here, to be subordinate to and act in aid of the Medical Department, was favorably received and carried into immediate effect. An order was issued by General Fremont creating the Commission and defining its objects and duties, and the members named were James E. Yeatman, Carlos S. Greeley, Dr. J. B. Johnson, George Partridge and Rev. W. G. Eliot, and it thus remained to the end of the war.

The first important work of the Commission was to fit up a new hospital large enough to accommodate 500 patients. This was done in the building at the S. W. corner of Broadway and Chestnut Street, and it was opened September 10th and placed under the charge of Surgeon John T. Hodgen, with a corps of competent assistants. It was called the "City General Hospital." In this building the Commission had its office in a small room in the second story. Mr. Yeatman gave his entire time to the work from thenceforth until

the end of the war. He had a man on a salary of \$30.00 per month to act as clerk, porter, store-keeper, and man of all work, and each member of the Commission would lend a helping hand in unpacking the boxes of sanitary stores arriving from New England and the various towns and cities of the West, prepared by the wives, mothers, daughters and sweethearts of the men at the front. These were distributed as needed to the hospitals, camps and regiments in and around St. Louis, and to posts in the interior of the State.

#### LEXINGTON—DONELSON—SHILOH.

In September following came the siege and battle of Lexington, Mo., which threw 300 more wounded into the hospitals of St. Louis, and within two months five additional hospitals were provided. The Commission fitted up two hospital cars on the Pacific R. R. with berths, nurses, cooking arrangements, etc., probably the first of the kind in the United States. The Commission continued their voluntary labors without abatement; appeals for contributions were made through the newspapers and were generously responded to by New England, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and other western States.

In February came the battle of Fort Donelson, where 2108 of our soldiers were wounded. A member of the Commission, probably Mr. Yeatman, accompanied by physicians, nurses, members of the Ladies' Union Aid Society, proceeded at once by rail to Cairo and thence by steamer to Paducah, with sanitary stores. The wounded had been brought to this point. The steamer, "Ben Franklin," was placed under their charge, and loaded with wounded, it was brought to St. Louis. It was then that the suggestion of hospital steamers was made by Medical Director Simmons and embodied in the report of the Commission, with the pledge that if the suggestion were approved the Commission would take the whole care and labor of carrying it into execution. The plan was approved by General Halleck, and the "City of Louisiana" was chartered, and on the 20th of March she was thoroughly fitted with beds and commissary stores, the

Commission completing her outfit at an expense of \$3,000.

Her first trip was to Island No. 10 under the charge of Mr. Yeatman, as a great battle was expected there. Soon after came the battle of Shiloh, and this boat conveyed 3,389 patients to northern hospitals. She was soon after purchased by the Government and re-named the "R. C. Wood" in honor of the Assistant Surgeon General of the U. S. army.

During the month of February, 1863, the Western Sanitary Commission distributed 13,250 articles of hospital clothing, food for the sick, bottles of cordials and stimulants, etc., and the members labored unceasingly, night and day in making the distribution.

## PEA RIDGE.

### TERRIBLE SUFFERING OF THE WOUNDED.

On the 7th and 8th of March, 1862, the battle of Pea Ridge was fought, and 980 Union soldiers were wounded. This battlefield was 250 miles distant from Rolla, the railroad terminus. The roads were of the worst description, through a half-civilized country, mountainous, without bridges, and without hotels, stripped of forage for teams, and food for men, subject to raids and murders by guerilla bands. It was impossible to bring the wounded to St. Louis. The army of General Curtiss was deficient in transportation, and the Medical Department was most miserably provided with means for caring for the wounded. Surgeons were without hospitals, clothing, stimulants or bedding for the wounded, and the supply of medicines was exceedingly limited. The country was thinly settled, mostly log houses, with few of the necessaries of life. The Court House at Cossville and all the principal dwellings were filled with wounded, and the same is true of Keitesville. A few of the officers were taken by ambulance to Springfield. The Commission at once despatched its Agent with hospital supplies to the front. In his report he says, "At Cassville I found two large tents, six buildings, including the Court House and Tavern, used as hospitals. The patients were lying on

the floors, with a little straw under them, and with knapsacks or blankets under their heads as pillows. They had no comforts of any kind, no change of clothing, but were lying in the clothes they fought in, stiff and dirty with blood and soil.

There were 400 Federal wounded here. The stores were turned over to the different hospitals, and never was a provision train more joyously greeted by starving men than this ample supply of hospital supplies by these sick and wounded soldiers. The Confederate wounded were treated with the same consideration as our own. There were two Confederate surgeons, and one said to the Agent of the Sanitary Commission; "We are Texans. Our army has treated us shamefully; they stampeded and left us here with our sick and wounded men, and I will tell you, sir, that for two days we had nothing to give our poor fellows but parched corn and water. Every Federal officer and man has treated us like gentlemen, and General Curtiss told me that so long as he had a loaf of bread we should have half of it." The Agent said, "I visited the hospitals at Pineville. No provision had been made by Price, and our scanty supplies had been shared with them. For 25 miles around every house was a rebel hospital. We had three there then. There was at this point a total absence of stimulants and men were dying for want of them. In one place I counted the graves of 40 of the 3d Iowa Cavalry.

#### GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COMMISSION.

In the meantime the beneficent work of the Commission became known throughout the North, and great quantities of supplies were received, and during the first eight months of its existence, 985 cases of goods from 18 States were distributed, and 74 hospitals had been supplied. The distribution reached the rate of 17,000 articles per week.

Early in June, 1862, the destruction of the Confederate fleet and the capture of Memphis opened the Mississippi to Vicksburg, and an extensive field for the Western Sanitary Commission. General hospitals were at once established

at Memphis, Jackson, Tenn., and Helena, Ark., and abundant supplies were sent to all points where needed.

The army of General Curtiss arrived at Helena in July after a march of nearly 800 miles by a circuitous route over the Ozark mountains and through the bottom lands of Arkansas, in a condition of great destitution, and the sanitary stores were received with the strongest expressions of gratitude. The great battles in Virginia and Maryland had cut off the supplies from the East, and the Commission sent 50 boxes of lint, bandages, etc., to Washington. An urgent appeal for help was sent out and generously responded to. Within a few months nearly \$60,000 was received from New England. In the fall of 1862 came the operations in Arkansas and the battle of Prairie Grove. An agent of the Commission at once proceeded to Fayetteville where the wounded were taken and supplies were distributed.

#### GRANT'S ARMY AT VICKSBURG.

During February and March, 1863, while the army of General Grant was occupying the low region of country above Vicksburg, exaggerated reports of sickness among the troops were published by northern newspapers.

Mr. Yeatman went down and made a personal inspection, and on his return published an account of his visit. While he found a large amount of sickness, his report tended to allay undue apprehension. He directed the Agent of the Commission to immediately establish his headquarters near Vicksburg for the distribution of supplies. After the assault by our forces on the 19th and 22nd of May, Mr. Yeatman made a second visit in charge of the steamer "Champion," accompanied by surgeons and nurses and dressers of wounds to the number of 55, taking with him 250 tons of sanitary supplies, besides cots, mattresses and everything necessary for the care of 1,000 men. At the time of his arrival all sanitary stores were exhausted, and the new supplies were received with gratitude. In his report he said: "Supplies were distributed most liberally wherever wanted. Blessings were invoked by both surgeons and men for this timely care

in providing for them, in the great extremity which always succeeds a series of battles, and which can only be fully provided for in this way. No parched and thirsty soil ever drank the dews of heaven with more avidity than did those wounded men receive the beneficent gifts and comforts sent to them through this Commission. 114,697 articles were distributed to General Grant's army prior to the fall of Vicksburg.

#### SOLDIERS' HOMES ESTABLISHED.

Mr. Yeatman made a visit to the army of General Grant in the winter of 1863, and became satisfied of the necessity for Soldiers' Homes at Memphis, Columbus, Ky., and other points, where men were constantly arriving, either going home discharged, on furlough, or returning to their regiments, being frequently without means to pay hotel expenses, and needing a place of refreshment and rest. Through his efforts a handsome residence was turned over to the Commission at Memphis, furnished, and a card was published inviting the weary soldiers to partake of its hospitalities. Homes were also established at Vicksburg, Helena, New Orleans and Cairo by the Commission, and 150,000 soldiers were entertained by them.

#### AID TO FREEDMEN.

In addition to its work of ministering to the sick and wounded of the western armies and navy, and of promoting the health of soldiers in the field, the Western Sanitary Commission felt itself called upon to devote a portion of its labors to the relief of the 40,000 freedmen along the banks of the Mississippi River from Columbus to Natchez. They were in a country stripped by the ravages of war, with no demand for labor excepting in a few localities, and without means of providing for food, clothing and shelter. In December, 1863, Mr. Yeatman returned from a special trip down the river to ascertain and report the actual conditions. He stopped at Island No. 10, Memphis, Helena, Goodrich's Landing, Milliken's Bend, Young's Point, the plantations of

Jeff and Joe Davis, and at Natchez. As an illustration, he found at Helena between 3,000 and 4,000 men, women and children, part of them living in a place back of the town called "Camp Ethiopia," in cast-off tents, caves, shelters of brush. Others were in the poorer houses of the town, 16 to 20 persons in a room, and in huts on the outskirts. The able-bodied men were compelled to work on the fortifications, in unloading coal and freight from steamboats, teamsters, and all manner of fatigue duty, for which they received no compensation, through neglect of officers to place them on the pay roll, and general indifference of military commanders as to their condition. At one time an order was issued forbidding their payment on the ground that their former masters would have a claim against the Government for their services.

#### THE LEASING OF PLANTATIONS.

The terrible destitution and sufferings of these helpless people and the injustice to which they were subjected so moved the sympathetic heart of Mr. Yeatman, that he went to Washington and presented the subject to the Government and made "suggestions of a plan of organization for freed labor, and the leasing of plantations along the Mississippi River." The high character of Mr. Yeatman was so well known that his suggestions were received with favor, and he was authorized to accompany an agent of the Treasury Department to Vicksburg to mature and carry them into effect. This trust he accepted, declining an official position which was offered him. About 600 plantations were leased, wise and humane regulations for the compensation of labor were enforced, schools established, and incalculable benefits were derived by the colored people who were encouraged in habits of self-reliance and saving. Large quantities of sanitary stores were distributed among those in dire extremity. From the efforts of Mr. Yeatman in this direction, National Freedmen Relief Associations were organized all over the Northern States.

## WHITE REFUGEES FROM THE SOUTH.

Assistance was also rendered to white refugees from the South, who came by thousands, many of them women with small children, often barefooted and wholly destitute, brought by steamers and landed. Their husbands had been killed in the war by guerrillas, or conscripted into the rebel army. One poor blind woman with six children walked all the way from Arkansas to Rolla, her little children leading her by the hand all the way over those hundreds of weary miles. From Rolla she was brought here by rail as a charity. Her youngest children she had never seen as they had been born since she became blind. Her children were adopted by Dr. Eliot and placed in a Mission School on 8th Street, and the mother was sent to a hospital where Dr. Pope performed an operation; the cataracts were removed from her eyes and her sight restored. Her children were then returned to her. In consequence of the invasion of Missouri by Price in the fall of 1864, thousands of Union refugees, wholly destitute, came to St. Louis. The military authorities authorized a charity ration and shelter, but all other expenses, clothing, hospital treatment, teachers for the children, etc., were borne by the Sanitary Commission. Its area of beneficence extended over the vast territory from St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico, and westward to the Rocky Mountains. Wherever troops were the Commission forwarded supplies. Every call for help from friend or foe was instantly responded to.

## ANDERSONVILLE PRISONERS.

In September, 1864, Mr. Yeatman suggested to General Sherman that it might be possible to ship supplies to our prisoners at Andersonville, as well as \$5,000 or \$10,000 in money to be expended for them as he might deem necessary. General Sherman requested that the supplies be sent. They were packed in boxes and marked, "Major Gen. W. T. Sherman, for the Andersonville prisoners." The prisoners were removed however, on the approach of our army and the boxes were returned. The next spring, however, they were re-

leased and they arrived at Vicksburg in a body on their way to the North. The Commission immediately forwarded the boxes with their original marks. Mr. Yeatman, in a letter to General Sherman, said; "When they saw the boxes marked Gen. W. T. Sherman, for prisoners at Andersonville, the men shed tears of gratitude and expressed their joy that 'Uncle Billy' had not forgotten them."

The reply of General Sherman to the letter of Mr. Yeatman reveals the heart of the great general in a light almost hitherto unknown. It was within about a month after he had ridden at the head of his victorious army down Pennsylvania Avenue, amid the plaudits of the multitude. Next to Grant he was the Nation's hero.

It was the hour for exultation. The cause for which he fought had won. From a school teacher, obscure and unknown, he had become the successful general; his fame for all time was assured. But to his friend, who had given four years of his life to the alleviation of the sufferings of the victims of war, he opened his inmost heart and cried, "Even success most brilliant is over dead and mangled bodies, the anguish and lamentations of distant families appealing to me for missing sons, husbands and fathers. I confess without shame that I am tired and sick of the war."

No wonder his men called him, affectionately, "Uncle Billy."

"HEADQUARTERS, MILITARY DIVISION OF THE  
MISSISSIPPI,

IN THE FIELD, MAY 21, 1865.

CAMP NEAR ALEXANDRIA, VA.

"James E. Yeatman, Esq.

My Dear Friend: On my arrival here from Richmond, by land, I found, among many letters, your valued favor of May 15, and was glad as you could have been to learn that those boxes of stores prepared by you, with such promptness, for the Andersonville prisoners, reached them at last. I don't think I ever set my heart so strongly on any one thing as I did in attempting to rescue those prisoners, and I had

almost feared that, instead of doing them good, I had actually done harm; for they were changed from place to place to avoid me, and I could not, with infantry, overtake railroads; but *at last* their prison doors are open, and I do think and hope that things have reached a point when further war, or battle, or severity, other than the punishment of *crime* by the civil tribunals, is past.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I confess without shame, that I am tired and sick of the war. Its glory is all moonshine. Even success, the most brilliant, is over dead and mangled bodies, the anguish and lamentations of distant families, appealing to me for missing sons, husbands and fathers. You, too, have seen these things and I know you also are tired of war, and are willing to let the civil tribunals resume their place; and, as far as I know, all the fighting men of our army want *peace*. It is only those who have not heard a shot, nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded and lacerated (friend or foe), that cry aloud for more blood, more vengeance, more desolation; and so help me God, as a man and a soldier, I will not strike a foe, who stands unarmed and submissive before me, but will say: 'Go, and sin no more.'

\* \* \* \* \*

"I thank you always for your cordial friendship, which is truly reciprocated.

"W.T.SHERMAN,  
"Major General."

### THE GREAT SANITARY FAIR.

In the spring of 1864, a great Fair was held in this city, from which the Western Sanitary Commission received \$554,591 in cash above all expenses. The total receipts of the Commission was \$4,270,998.55 from its organization to the end. A balance of a considerable amount remained on hand after the war closed, and homes for the orphans of Union Soldiers were established, and children raised and educated. Several scholarships were provided for the

children and descendants of Union Soldiers in Washington University for all time, where a collegiate education may be had without the cost of tuition. During the past forty years scores of bright young men have been the recipients of this wise benefaction. The fund is still held by trustees and the income is annually divided among the various charities of the city.

#### IGNORANCE OF SOLDIERS OF WHAT WAS DONE FOR THE SICK AND WOUNDED.

To the great mass of soldiers who served at the front, little is known of vast sums contributed by the people of the North, or of the noble work done by those who voluntarily assisted in the distribution of supplies to the sick and wounded. It was a great revelation to me when I happened recently to become interested in the history of the Western Sanitary Commission, presented to the Commandery by Mr. Yeatman, and from which the data for this paper has been taken. It is a great pity that the larger part of the soldiers of the Union Army should pass away in ignorance of the debt of gratitude they owed to those who contributed so lavishly of their means and time to the alleviation of suffering and destitution. Whole libraries have been written of the bravery and heroic deeds of soldiers in the field, but little is known of thousands who were working with loving hearts and willing hands to assuage the anguish of the sick and wounded of our armies. Hundreds of monuments have been erected to the valor of the soldier at the front, but almost nothing has been done in commemoration of the noble deeds done by the great army of workers at the rear, by the women and men of the North. Chief among them all was our Companion James E. Yeatman, President of the Western Sanitary Commission.

JAMES E. YEATMAN.

Mr. Yeatman was a Southerner by birth; a native of Nashville, Tenn. His father was a man of wealth, and our friend received every advantage of education and high social

position. After completing his education, he spent considerable time in foreign travel, and subsequently located in St. Louis. He was a staunch Union man when secession swept over the South, and was among those most influential in preventing the passage of the Ordinance of Secession by the Missouri Convention. His high character, wealth and standing in the business community gave him great influence with the authorities at Washington and enabled him to accomplish much good which would have been impossible otherwise.

He gave his entire time and energies for four years to the work of the Western Sanitary Commission. He made numerous visits to Washington and to the camps of our armies, and made reports based upon personal observation, and his recommendations were accepted as final and carried into effect.

#### FIRST MEMBER OF THIRD CLASS ELECTED BY COMMANDERY.

When this Commandery was organized twenty years ago, a provision of the Constitution of the Order permitted the election in the ratio of one for each 100 members, of gentlemen, who in civil life had rendered conspicuous service to the Union Cause, during the Civil War. James E. Yeatman was the first one thought of in that connection. The membership was tendered to him and accepted. The membership of the Third Class was intended for such as he. In after years its purpose having been accomplished, the Constitution was amended so as to preclude elections of members of this class. Mr. Carlos S. Greeley, the Treasurer of the Western Sanitary Commission was the second member of the Third Class elected by this Commandery.

Mr. Yeatman's deeds of kindness did not cease with the Civil War, nor did they cease until the end of his long life. His great heart was ever overflowing with love for his fellow men, with scarcely a thought for himself. He lived abstemiously and at slight expense, but at the end it was found that he

left no fortune; his wealth had all been given to the sick and unfortunate. I believe that there are few parallels in the history of this country.

#### BRONZE TABLET SUGGESTED.

It has been suggested that the Companions of this Commandery owe it to themselves, to put into permanent form some token of acknowledgment and appreciation of the eminent services of Companion James E. Yeatman; that the original members should not pass away without some expression of gratitude, and in some way make known to this and future generations that they were not indifferent or unmindful of what he had done for them and their suffering Comrades.

A beautiful High School Building has been erected near the old Fair Grounds in North St. Louis, as a Memorial to our Companion and named the "Yeatman High School." It is proposed to place his statue therein, and a series of cartoons have been executed by Mr. F. L. Stoddard, a talented St. Louis artist, the means being furnished by private subscription, illustrating scenes in his life and his work in connection with the Western Sanitary Commission.

I propose that the Companions of this Commandery place upon the walls of the Yeatman High School a bronze tablet expressive of their appreciation of his four years' service to the sick and wounded soldiers of the Union Armies from 1861 to 1865.

So confident was I that you would gladly respond to this sentiment, I consulted with the President of the School Board the other day, and he said they would be delighted to give the tablet a conspicuous place in the Yeatman High School.

Companions who desire to contribute to a fund for this purpose, should forward the same to the Recorder. As the cost of the tablet will probably not exceed \$250.00, large contributions are unnecessary, but it is most desirable that all should feel that they have a personal interest though their donations be ever so small.



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