

### CIVIL WAR TREASURES: "Plenty of Vexations in a Surgeon's Life": A Civil War Doctor's Battle for Respect

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## Feature Essay

Fall 2012

**Taylor, Michael** *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: "Plenty of Vexations in a Surgeon's Life": A Civil War Doctor's Battle for Respect.*

"The avocation of a physician is one which of all others, imperatively demands the exercise of independence of thought," Dr. John Eastman Sanborn advised his students at the University of Iowa medical college in 1855. "True, you will find it easier in a shortsighted and mechanical point of view, to have others think for you than to think yourselves; to believe, than to know. But... your mission on this round globe is one of vital principles, not a dull search for mere enjoyment"<sup>1</sup>. In our "treasures" column this month, we examine the life of this pioneer doctor, who, during the Civil War, strove to live up to those words. Though he saw little action, his experiences, candidly related in letters to his wife that are now part of the LSU Libraries' Special Collections, reveal that members of the army medical corps often had more to worry about than battle wounds. For some, conflict with officers and other medical men over how much authority an army doctor should have and how much respect was due to a chief surgeon could be at least as great a source of anxiety and frustration.

Sanborn, a Harvard graduate, joined the tide of settlers moving west to the new state of Iowa in the early 1850s. Ill health compelled him to resign his post at the state medical college in Keokuk, but by 1857, he was practicing medicine in the small prairie town of Epworth. On October 3, 1862, he was mustered in as staff surgeon of the 27th Iowa Volunteer Infantry at Camp Franklin in nearby Dubuque. Almost immediately, Sanborn was astonished at how lightly officers took the health of their men. The 27th Iowa's first destination was Fort Snelling, Minnesota, where they were to help Major General John Pope put an end to the Sioux Uprising before it spilled onto the Iowa frontier. The fighting ended just as Sanborn arrived, allaying the doctor's fears of what a winter at Fort Snelling ("said to be the very bleakest and coldest place in all the north") would do to his men's health<sup>2</sup>. They were not, however, out of the woods. In the first week of November, the regiment received orders to depart for Mississippi to join Sherman and Grant in their pursuit of General Sterling Price. Sanborn was

annoyed at how they departed from St. Paul. The men were marched from the fort to the steamboat landing a full day before the boats' departure and left to sleep under the stars, without rations, on the cold rocky shore. "Plenty of vexations in a surgeon's life," Sanborn complained<sup>3</sup>.

The situation was little better after they embarked. The rations were still poor, the boat crews charged a high price for food, and Sanborn struggled to provide comfort to his sick men. "[T]he best of my efforts avail not to give them what I would call for myself ordinary conveniences... A private, on these rascally boats, gets about the treatment of a dog. They sleep on the deck, or barges, or among the machinery and on the freight... get the use of the washroom only by sufferance, and are abused generally." Sanborn had "separate and individual jaws" with boat officers, to no avail<sup>4</sup>.

The doctor also "jawed" with his own staff. Although he and assistant surgeon Albert Boomer were on good terms, his other assistant surgeon, David C. Hastings, and hospital steward Hiram H. Hunt were thorns in his side. He described them both dismissively as Thomsonian eclectics—believers in herbal remedies and the ability of the common man to cure himself. Hastings had "used a good deal of unkind and ungenerous influence" against Sanborn and Boomer; meanwhile, Hunt, "hoping to profit in promotion by securing my or Boomer leaving, is slyly using civilian influences against us" <sup>5</sup>. Hunt had operated his own medical practice for nearly ten years before the war, resented having to serve in a subordinate position, and was frustrated by the fact that the 27th "always got the fag end of everything" <sup>6</sup>. After one squabble, Sanborn considered resigning, but he eventually triumphed in his views. Although he omitted details of the case when telling his wife about it, "My medical friends and superior medical officers support me, and sustain my course. Dr. Hunt is soon to go, and I have ready to put in his place a man of character and integrity, who will carry out my wishes and obey my instructions, and not busy himself to backbite and undermine me" <sup>7</sup>. In June 1863, Hunt secured a transfer to the 21st Iowa Volunteers as its assistant surgeon<sup>8</sup>.

The 27th's officers, too, could be a source of irritation. "[T]he surgeon cannot gratify all their whining or requests," Sanborn asserted<sup>9</sup>. He was overjoyed when, in May 1863, his corps commander, Brigadier General Nathan Kimball, issued his General Orders No. 21, stating that hospital tents be used for hospital purposes only, ambulances be kept in good repair, and commanding officers obey the orders of the division's medical director and their regimental

surgeons regarding sanitary measures<sup>10</sup>. Kimball had been a prominent doctor in Indiana before the war, and Sanborn was glad to have found such a powerful advocate for surgeons' authority. "The colonel and every officer along down will learn that my medical orders must and shall be obeyed," he informed his wife back in Iowa. "Half of my trouble has been from a reluctance on the part of the colonel to carry out my wishes and obey my instructions. He evidently felt that HE is the high cockalorum, and when he wishes anything, no dog must bark, that I, the doctors, and the hospital and medical department were of little importance. I shall hold the reins now, myself, more vigorously than ever and shall insist on respect being paid to my position"<sup>11</sup>.

Sanborn's crusade was not merely for one personal respect. He sincerely saw a need for action, for by the time the 27th Iowa marched into Arkansas in August 1863, it had lost more than a quarter of its men to disease and disability. This was a common experience throughout the army, but it frustrated Dr. Sanborn, who could not understand the failure to take simple precautions. For example, on Christmas Eve, 1862, while marching in Tennessee, his regiment went without tents or shelter of any kind and suffered greatly from exposure. On one excursion the following spring, Sanborn took along a rubber raincoat, cap, and pants, anticipating lack of shelter. "Think of your husband, me, lying down and sleeping in the rain, in a southern forest or an open field, sleeping on the muddy ground, or raising myself off the ground by lying on a pile of rails or a heap of brush," he wrote to his wife<sup>12</sup>. In fact, he attributed the spinal condition, possibly spinal meningitis, that afflicted many of his men to having lain on the cold, wet ground<sup>13</sup>.

Unfortunately, Sanborn's letters to his wife have not all survived, but we can infer from the later ones that he continued to clash with officers. Writing from the U.S. General Hospital at Keokuk in February 1865, he grumbled: "The amount of it is, that I suppose [if] a man [is] to be a popular surgeon in this regiment, [he] must drink with the officers, play cards with them, treat them to good government whiskey, and swear enough to show that he is not above such things... With our present officers, there cannot be any harmony between us. I may tolerate it awhile longer, but shall probably end it sooner or later by resigning"<sup>14</sup>. Luckily the war was over before his patience wore out. Sanborn eventually returned to Massachusetts, where he became a prominent physician and public health advocate. He died in 1903.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> John E. Sanborn, "Professional Self-Reliance," Iowa Medical Journal, vol. 2, no. 4 (Apr./May 1855), 241-52.

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Sanborn to Rebecca "Jessie" Sanborn, Oct. 14, 1862. John E. Sanborn Letters, Mss. 3736, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. All letters cited below are from this collection, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> "March 5" [i.e., Nov. 1862]. Apparently misdated, this letter was begun on a steamboat near Maiden Rock, Wisconsin, and mailed from Dubuque. The 27th Iowa did not return to St. Paul after November 1862.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Apr. 5, 1863.

<sup>6</sup> [June 2-3, 1863].

<sup>7</sup> May 29-30, 1863.

<sup>8</sup> "Hiram H. Hunt," in A.T. Andreas Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa, 1875.

<sup>9</sup> Apr. 24, 1863.

<sup>10</sup> General Orders No. 21 of the 3d Division, 16th Army Corps, Jackson, Tenn., May 27, 1863. Sanborn Letters.

<sup>11</sup> May 29-30, 1863.

<sup>12</sup> Apr. 15, 1863.

<sup>13</sup> J. E. Sanborn letter, Mar. 31, 1863. Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War, vol. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Feb. 16, 1865.