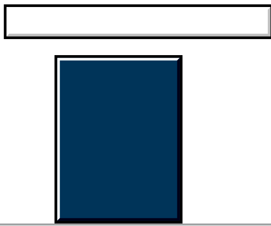

A new exhibit at the Clendening Library displays Civil War medicine at its cutting edge

Clendening Library's new exhibit on Civil War field medicine

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"...four men came toward us carrying a litter upon which lay a man shot through the thigh. Glory be to God, my ignoble stomach did not turn itself loose in wanton sympathy with the poor fellow's blood, but, intent only in its own liability to a similar fate, maintained a cold and selfish equilibrium. I was cured of blood horrors forever."

This excerpt from the diary of Union hospital steward Theo V. Brown provides a vivid window into the battle experiences of many Civil War medical personnel. These young doctors and nurses were so important that, for their own safety, they were usually kept behind the lines - hence the title of the Department of History and Philosophy of Medicine's new exhibit: "Held in Reserve: Field Hospital Medicine during the American Civil War."

Brown's reminiscences - all 26 chapters of copperplate script in a 19th-century notebook - can be viewed in the Clendening library, as part of a carefully curated display put together by archivist Nancy Hulston, librarian Dawn McInnis, and museum research assistant Ryan Fagan, to commemorate the sesquicentennial of a particularly turbulent period in U.S. history.

The exhibit explores, among other things, a variety of Civil War medical myths. For instance - contrary to Hollywood portrayals of suffering soldiers downing whiskey and chomping on bullets as the only way to ignore the swift descent of the surgeon's knife - anesthesia was in fact widely used then. Applying cloths soaked with ether or chloroform to a patient's face, however, meant not only temporary loss of consciousness, but also a stage of excitement where, while unaware of the actual surgery, he would moan and thrash about agitatedly. Given that most field surgeries were done out in the open, providing passersby with a good view of the proceedings, it is not surprising that they came

away convinced of the patient's apparent discomfort.

"You get a glimpse of medicine at its cutting edge then - even if it seems lacking to us now - and how techniques, especially surgical, often evolve quickly during times of crises," Hulston says.

"We have this tendency to engage in some level of hyperbole and romanticize the Civil War," Fagan says. "But many of the soldiers weren't killed in battle - they died of disease." Those four years of bitter fighting left more than 600,000 dead, two-thirds to disease and infection. Knowledge of microorganisms was non-existent then - Pasteur and Lister may have been well-known names in Europe, but their respective ideas on germ theory and antiseptics had yet to travel across the pond.

"During the Civil War, field surgeons simply wiped their instruments off and put them right back in the case," Hulston observes. "Also, many young men came from rural, isolated places to join the war. They lacked basic immunity and ended up dying of childhood diseases, like measles."

"To me, what makes the Civil War really tragic was that it occurred right on the cusp of germ theory," Fagan adds. "Surgeons and doctors of the day were dealing with battlefield wounds in just one dimension - the physical nastiness of it all - and there was terrible misunderstanding when it came to handling infection."

Visitors to the exhibit can also learn more about prominent women in the Civil War - Dorothea Dix, for one, who oversaw more than 3,000 Union nurses, and whose brusque manner inspired her nickname, "Dragon Dix." Clara Barton risked her life to bring supplies and support to Union soldiers, who called her the "Angel of the Battlefield." Seeing firsthand the critical need for even basic first aid knowledge during the war, Barton founded the American Red Cross in 1881, followed by the National First Aid Association of America, to "kindle a torch of human help for human woe" and reduce "the helplessness of ignorance," as she expressed in a letter to family and friends. Mary Ann Bickerdyke searched for wounded soldiers in the dark, carrying a lantern into disputed areas between both armies, and after the war she built a boarding house in Salina, Kan., for disabled veterans and served "her boys" until her death at age 84.

"I was really impressed, reading about these women and their Civil War experiences," says McInnis, who put together this section of the exhibit. "Dix was one of those extremely focused, organized women who undoubtedly irritated a lot of people, but she got things done. Calling her a "dragon" - I can see how someone might have said the same thing about Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War."

One other noteworthy aspect of the exhibit, although seemingly peripheral to the war itself, is a display documenting popular music of the time, including the Confederate "Bonnie Blue Flag," and "All Quiet Along The Potomac Tonight." Besides medical personnel, regimental band members were another group frequently held in reserve - indicating the importance of music to soldiers on both

sides.

"There were certainly moments of pure terror, but much of a soldier's life during the war was really tedious - sitting around campfires, playing cards, doing drill and the like," says Fagan, who managed this display. "They were happy to pick up a fiddle or banjo whenever possible. Many probably thought of themselves as down-home musicians first and soldiers second. Music did a lot to make them feel whole and human, even under horrifying circumstances. It was essential to their psychological well-being."

"Held in Reserve: Field Hospital Medicine during the American Civil War" runs through November 10, and is co-sponsored by the Clendening History of Medicine Museum, John B. Wornall House, KUMC Human Resource Department Diversity Office, KU Endowment Association and the Clendening History of Medicine Library.

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