

An old photo shows St. Mary's Hospital as Civil War veterans knew it. Wagon tracks indicate Brown Street was then a dirt road. The grey stone structure was a west side landmark in Rochester for over a century. Liberty Pole in front of hospital was erected to thank the Sisters of Charity for their care of wounded soldiers.

St. Mary's During Civil War Era

By REV. ROBERT F. McNAMARA

Rochester, New York, made a generous contribution of manpower and heroic blood to the preservation of the American Union. Rochester likewise contributed generously to that gentler need, the nursing of wounded and disabled Union soldiers. Two local institutions distinguished themselves in this regard. One was the Rochester City Hospital (now General Hospital), which opened on January 28, 1864. The other, seven years older and able by reason of its larger quarters to accommodate more military patients, was St. Mary's Hospital.

St. Mary's had been conducted from the start by the Daughters of Charity (commonly called the "Sisters of Charity") of Emmitsburg, Maryland. When members of this community arrived in Rochester in 1845 to take charge of St. Patrick's Orphanage and the girls' department of St. Patrick's School, they became the first nuns to be assigned to a mission anywhere in western New York.

The same religious community also established the pioneer hospital of western New York during the next dozen years. Their initial hospital was founded at Buffalo in 1848.

During the 1850's there was much agitation among Rochesterians in favor of setting up a local hospital. At length a Catholic group, backed by the Right Rev. John Timon, who as Bishop of Buffalo then had jurisdiction over Rochester, took definite steps toward launching a Sisters' hospital. On September 6, 1857, Father Michael O'Brien, pastor of St. Patrick's Church, assisted by a committee of physicians and laymen, purchased the old Derrick Sibley property in Rochester's "West End," across Genesee Street from the site of the old Bull's Head Tavern which had given the name of "Bull's Head" to the neighborhood. Three sisters were thereupon transferred from the hospital in Buffalo to take charge of the Rochester foundation. Sister Martha Brigman and Sister Felicia Fenwick constituted the "community." The "Sister Servant," or sister superior was Sister Hieronymo O'Brien (1819-1899), who was to become one of the noblest figures in Rochester history.

The hospital opened in two adjacent stables on September 17, 1857. Poverty and prejudice combined to hamper its early efforts. But Sister Hieronymo was not cowed by either of these antagonists. Poverty she met armed with resourcefulness and trust in divine providence. Prejudice she met armed with Christian charity. From the start, for instance, she impressed upon the public that St. Mary's welcomed "the sick of all denominations, or of none."

War Begins

A charity so catholic as this would surely embrace the poor soldiers who, after the outbreak of the Civil War, became disabled by wounds or disease. As a matter of fact, both the Federal and the Confederate authorities in these days when nursing was a laywoman's vocation was not yet fully established, turned almost automatically for nursing aid to the Catholic sisterhoods. Over four hundred nuns in all eventually served on the battlefields or in the hospitals. And over half of these nuns belonged to the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg.

The Sisters at St. Mary's Hospital made their first contribution to the cause as early as 1861. The Confederates opened fire on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. Taking up the challenge, the Federal government quickly called for volunteers to preserve the national union. In New York State, centers were appointed as rendezvous for the volunteer regiments of the various districts. One such center was the military depot at Albany. Unfortunately, a num-

A campaign is currently in progress in the Rochester area to raise \$10,800,000 to expand hospital facilities. Bishop Kearney, in a letter read in parish churches Sunday, said, "The Church has a long and honorable tradition of caring for the sick and the dying" and asked Catholics to respond to the hospital appeal "with courtesy and charity." Later this month, the Seton Ball, annual highlight of the autumn social season, will be held to benefit St. Mary's Hospital, Rochester's first hospital. Following is the story of how this hospital played an important role in the American Civil War just one hundred years ago. Father McNamara, author of the article, is a member of the faculty at St. Bernard's Seminary.

ber of soldiers gathered there fell ill.

The Sisters of Charity of New York State had already offered their services whenever needed. Those services were now needed, and desperately needed, at Albany. Therefore, the commandant, Brigadier General John F. Rathbone, sent out an appeal for nursing Sisters. St. Mary's answered by sending a nun (whose name, regrettably, has not been recorded). The crisis did not last long. By July first, the regiments collected at Albany had departed, and the depot was temporarily discontinued. But when General Rathbone informed the Sisters that they were now free to depart, he had the highest praise for the attentive care which they had given his ailing soldiers.

At least four other Rochester Sisters were sent off on a similar mission during the course of the war. In December, 1861, two attached to St. Patrick's Orphanage were appointed to the staff of the military hospital at St. Louis, Mo. Most likely these two were Sister M. Elizabeth Welty and Sister Julia Carroll. Two others given similar assignments are known to have come from St. Mary's itself: Sister Mary Ann McCabe and Sister Alphonsus Groell. Sister Alphonsus went to Lincoln Hospital in Washington.

As early as the beginning of 1862, some disabled soldiers were being received as patients at St. Mary's itself. The prospect of an increase of these military invalids prompted the hospital authorities to forge ahead with plans for the permanent hospital building. Construction of this structure, which was to continue in use until dismantled piecemeal in 1949 and 1959, began in 1863 and was completed in 1865.

U.S. Contract

A fair number of soldiers were treated in 1862, but it was only in 1863 that St. Mary's was officially designated a government hospital. Federal authorities sealed their agreement by a contract signed March 10. For several months, however, the surgeon general assigned relatively few invalids to the Rochester institution. The cost of transporting them was evidently a deterrent. By December 1863, the number of soldier-patients was down to seventy—far short of the number prepared for by the Sisters.

The same month, Dr. Axel Backus, the Rochester physician who was district U.S. surgeon and military inspector, hopefully advised the nuns to prepare to receive a hundred more soldiers in the immediate future. One hundred casualties from the Rochester area had been furloughed, and Backus was convinced that the government, at the end of the furloughs, would sensibly transfer them to the hospitals in their own locality. Unfortunately, the government did no such thing. The soldiers were ordered back to their hospitals of origin, so the Sisters continued for some time with a half-filled hospital.

In May 1864, the Rochester city fathers, agreeing with Dr. Backus that sick soldiers from

western New York would be better off quartered in hospitals in western New York, sent a committee to Washington to urge their point of view. The Committeemen, Mayor Nehemiah Bradstreet, and Messrs. Ambrose Cram and George W. Parsons, argued their case effectively with the U.S. Surgeon General. Official word—was forthwith sent to St. Mary's and to City Hospital to prepare at once for the reception of some three hundred sick and wounded servicemen.

This was welcome news, but it came almost too suddenly. The Sisters had to call upon many Rochesterians to aid in furnishing and equipping that portion of the new building which was already habitable. Henceforth soldiers and soldiers alone would be accommodated in the hospital proper. Some time before, the Sisters had rented Halstead Hall, a former sanitarium, which stood on the corner across Genesee Street, to house civilian patients.

The ailing soldiers arrived by train in the afternoon of June 7. There were 375 in all, some sixty of them bound for City Hospital, the rest for St. Mary's. Every effort was made to transport them to their destinations as comfortably as possible. Hackmen volunteered free rides for many of the soldiers. Others were conducted by street car. Cartmen were happy to deliver their luggage free-of-charge. Nine days later seventy-three more army invalids came to town by the Erie morning train. From that time on each month brought new contingents. As late as February, 1865, 398 soldiers were under treatment. We are told that the number was sometimes as high as 700. One old veteran asserted many years later that when he was a patient at St. Mary's, he was one in 1700. His failing memory had probably augmented the figure. Unquestionably, however, the hospital facilities were often taxed to the utmost. Provision had to be made at times in the corridors, and even in tents pitched on the hospital grounds.

How many soldier-patients did the Hospital take care of during the war? Some have said three thousand, others have said four or five thousand. The remaining ledger of military admittances offers little help here, since it covers only the period from November 1863 to November 1864, and the names it lists are often repeated. It is certain, however, that between March 10, 1863 and May 31, 1864, 414 soldiers were admitted, and between June 7, 1864 to February 23, 1865, 1800 more were received. Consequently, the Hospital accepted over 2200 servicemen in the period from March 1863 to February 1865. If we include the soldiers who entered the Hospital before the signing of the contract, and those who were assigned there under the contract after February 1865, the total would probably reach about 2500. (This seems to be borne out by the report for the year ending December 1, 1866, which St. Mary's sent to Albany: "soldiers treated, 2500.")

Victims

state that this was the grand total, it apparently implies it.) Although the government sent to the two Rochester hospitals only Union soldiers, and predominantly Union soldiers from western New York, the invalids were by no means all New Yorkers in their origins. They represented regiments from Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and even Minnesota. "Gunshot wound" was written in the diagnosis of perhaps a majority. But scores of the men were there because of other ailments: sunstroke, an assortment of fevers, venereal diseases, malnutrition and other gastroenterological afflictions.

Some of these invalids reached Rochester in a pitiable, even a desperate state. For want of proper care, the sick of the Albany regiment arrived at their destination in September 1863 in a condition that could only be described as "disgusting." Fortunately, the Sisters, by great effort, were able to snatch many of them out of the jaws of death. Even more appalling in appearance were the "living dead" released from Andersonville Prison in Georgia. A number of these who entered St. Mary's weighed no more than sixty pounds, and were full of fever and scurvy. Many of the skeletal ex-prisoners who had been nursed back to health and vigor through the patient efforts of the Sisters of Charity, lived to sing for many years thereafter the praises of their benefactresses. Not all the sick soldiers were so fortunate. Take, for instance, Private J. H. Lovett of the 16th Michigan Volunteers, who was admitted on February 20, 1864. The same hand that entered his name in the book of admission added: "This soldier was taken from the cars in a prostrated condition and delirious." Poor Lovett died the following day.

One winter the smallpox arrived to complicate matters. Two soldiers on leave — Black and Schermerhorn, as Sister Hieronymo later recalled—returned ill. They suspected it was chicken pox, but it turned out to be smallpox, and soon it began to spread among the servicemen. The Sisters strove mightily to calm the fears of those who were not yet victims and to hurry off the victims into isolation. The Superior herself wrapped up each new case from head to foot in a heavy blanket before he was taken to the contagious ward.

Meanwhile, it was necessary to keep the bad news from spreading into the city. The observance of St. Patrick's Day (the year was probably 1864 or 1865) threatened this prudent secrecy, since it was customary for the big Rochester St. Patrick's parade to march into the military hospital and regale the patients with music and song. Resolved to thwart the paraders on this occasion, Sister Hieronymo sent out another Sister of Charity to the approaching procession to assure them, without fuller explanations, that the soldiers were too sick at that moment to be entertained. Meanwhile Sister Hieronymo fell on her knees and prayed fervently to the day's patron saint. "St. Patrick," she pleaded, "if you did for Ireland all they say you did, banish the smallpox from this institution!"

The prayer was answered, and there were no further cases of the disease. But when Sister Hieronymo later recounted the whole episode to Bishop Timon, the Bishop, with a smile, replied: "I wonder that St. Patrick heard you at all when you used the word 'if' to him!" Thirty years after the close of the Civil War, Sister Hieronymo still spoke with tenderness about her soldier-patients. "The sufferings of these poor soldiers during the late war can never be told," she said. "They would drop on the floor ex-

hausted, or in the m with their sacks. The in terrible was pitiful

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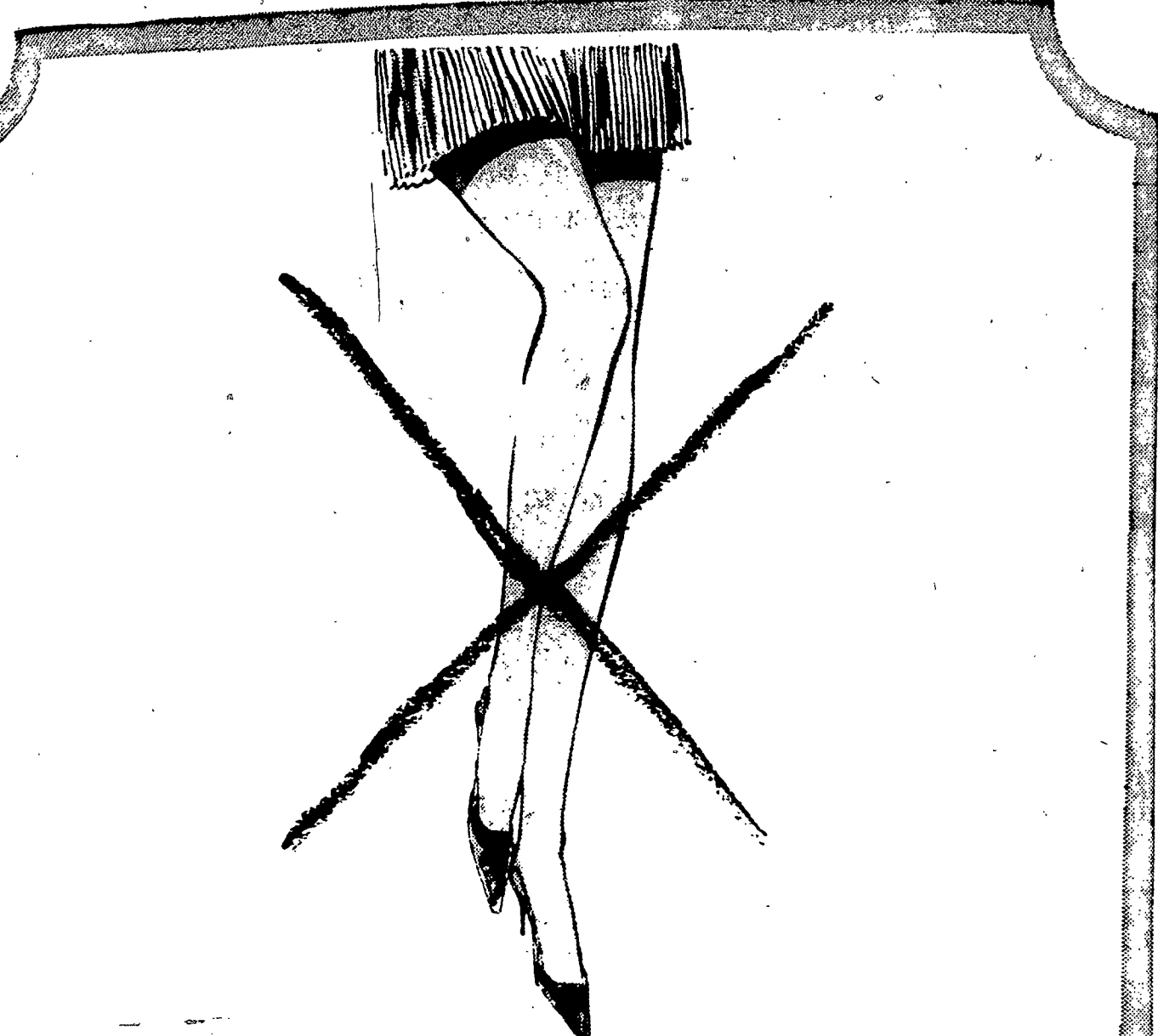
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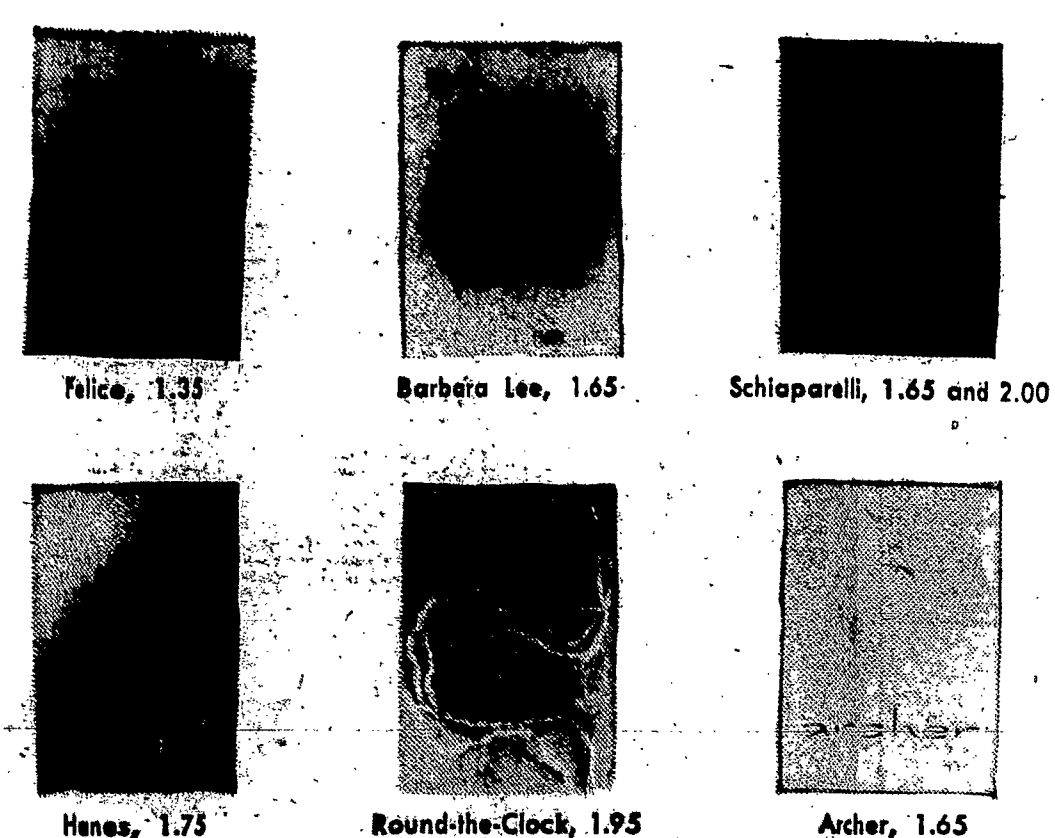


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