

Southern Women Fought Civil War In Many Ways

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Southern women fought the Civil War with knitting needles, cookstoves, hand molds, hoes, spinning wheels and dogged determination.

In the early months of the war, the summer of 1861, the men were insisting they would take care of the Yankees in no time and be back for the harvest or, at least, be back for Christmas.

Records reveal that as soon as their men marched off to training camps, the women began pooling their resources and pitching in for the long haul.

Some women made individual efforts, with a wealthy few able to equip whole companies. Most women, though, joined together in cooperative efforts to make the most of their individual skills and, no doubt, to ease their heartache and loneliness. They named themselves, elected officers and adopted rules of procedure.

They called themselves the "Ladies' Industrial Association," "Home Guard Society," "Palmetto Girls," "Soldiers' Clothing Association," etc., the most popular name being "Soldiers' Relief Association" preceded by the name of the town or community.

Assembly line techniques were adopted as each woman found her special skills. Some cut, some sewed, some knitted and some packed boxes, while others gathered the raw materials. There were even "begging committees."

School girls added their labor to that of their elders. Some volunteers were old enough to remember when they labored similarly for Revolutionary War soldiers.

There were not enough spinning wheels, looms and sewing machines to afford a moment's idleness. When one operator tired, another immediately took her place.

Those who could knit and read aloud at the same time did so. Groups heard, rather than read, the latest novels such as "Great Expectations" and "Les Miserables."

South Carolina's Story

The making of a state



Getting the supplies to the troops and hospitals was an uncertain and vexing task. In the beginning the ladies were dependent upon some local planter or professional man taking goods in wagons to Virginia.

Soon, men like Dr. Robert Barnwell, a South Carolina college professor, and the Rev. John Bachman, an eminent Charleston minister, had devised ways to coordinate the shipping, reduce waste and most effectively use the women's handiwork. Barnwell is said to have set up the best organized field hospital in the Confederacy.

The Confederate Quartermaster Department began sending bolts of cloth to Ladies Aid Associations to convert into coats, pants, caps and haversacks. One young woman, with more ambition than ability, attempted a soldier's coat. When she brought it in, some more experienced seamstresses pointed out that she had put the sleeves in "hind part before."

Merchants contributed fabrics, and mills opened their doors one day a week for women's groups to come in and purchase cloth for the making of garments. When there was no cloth available, the curtains came down and the tablecloths were removed. Even carpets were taken up to make tents and blankets.

There was a great deal of piecing together and much raveling to make new yarn. And much experimentation. Rabbit hair and black silk were carded together to make a gray silk yarn for officers'

gloves. "These gloves were sometimes really handsome, with large, stiff gauntlets, crocketed," said the Charleston "Mercury."

At Abbeville a man brought in two huge, slippery elm trees. The rough bark was stripped off and the fragrant inner bark was tied into bundles and shipped to a Virginia hospital. The surgeon wrote his gratitude and begged for more. In the days before antibiotics, the bark was known for its ability to combat bacteria and was used for the treatment of throat inflammations and cholera.

To raise money for needed supplies, the women held raffles and auctions. The most elaborate bazaar of all was held inside the Statehouse in Columbia in January 1865. Bunting and palmetto fronds were draped over the speaker's desk and booths were set up over the hall by each of the Confederate states. Many items came from Southern sympathizers abroad: Parisian bonnets, gold ornaments, almonds, sugar plums, ostrich plumes and French colognes.

One month after the elaborate fund-raiser, the city of Columbia was burned by Sherman's Army.