

IOWA HISTORY



(Photo Library of Congress)

Chickamauga Creek was the source of water for soldiers at Camp Thomas in Georgia during the Spanish-American War.

Iowa Soldier's Mom Investigates

“Whatever you hear that is bad about the division hospital—do not discount it,” Evelyn Belden of Sioux City warned. She had recently returned from a month’s visit to the US Army’s Camp Thomas at Chickamauga, Georgia, in the fall of 1898.

Evelyn’s son was serving with the 52nd Iowa Volunteers during the Spanish-American War. She used that as an excuse to visit the camp saying she wanted to see how he was doing. But she also had heard the rumors that were circulating in Sioux City and other places. Soldiers had written letters home about the horrendous conditions at the Georgia camp. And Evelyn wanted to check out the situation for herself.

Upon her return to northwestern Iowa she reported on her findings. The first words out of her mouth told it all. She said she was happy to be back home and out of that “accursed spot” in Georgia. She was “thoroughly incensed” at the “criminal management” of affairs at the camp. And she was “boiling with rage” at the terrible conditions she witnessed. Especially troublesome were conditions she saw in the hospital where men were being treated for typhoid fever and other infectious diseases that swiftly spread throughout the filthy army camp.

Evelyn interviewed soldiers, surgeons at the camp hospital, and residents of the nearby city of Chattanooga. She learned that there was no water in the camp that was “not absolute poison.” In the woods adjoining the camp the “ground was often covered with human feces.” She found maggots crawling on the faces of sick men. Flies were also a problem. She reported that in some cases they were so thick that as men lay in their beds the flies “almost obscure” their

features. And it wasn't uncommon to see insects in the noses and mouths of bedridden men who were too weak to swat the pests away.

Dr. Van Buren Knott, a Sioux City surgeon stationed with the 52nd Volunteers, was doing what he could for the Iowa boys. He carried pails of ice water almost a mile to men sick with typhoid under his care. When he complained to the major in command of the hospital the superior officer sarcastically replied, "Maybe you could improve things." The exchange led to a physical confrontation between the two. The major ended up "sprawled on the ground" thanks to Dr. Knott's punch to the face. And Dr. Knott claimed he welcomed a court martial if it meant there would be an investigation of the camp hospital. His actions may have caused military higher-ups to question the loyalty of the Iowa doctor, but Dr. Knott gained the "undying love" of the men of the Iowa Volunteers.

Evelyn said she had heard reports of retribution for soldiers who had written home about the deplorable conditions. A corporal who had complained was relieved of his stripes, sentenced to the guard house, and forced to spend his days shoveling dirt.

But Evelyn saw nothing but patriotism from the men of the 52nd Iowa Volunteers, "Incidents which I saw convinced me that there never was a band of men more devoted to the interests of their country."

Sources

"The Days of the Martyrs," *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Sept 5, 1898.

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