

Pioneers in Professional Dietetics – Twelfth in a Series: Mary Livermore: Excerpts from Original Account of Sanitary Commission Service

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Born in Boston, Massachusetts, **Mary Ashton Rice Livermore** (1820-1905), is known for being a force for social change and women's suffrage in the 19th century United States. Her service with the US Sanitary Commission (USSC) during the American Civil War (1861-1865) is believed to have influenced much of her work following the war (1). Married to Minister Daniel Livermore in 1845, the family moved to Chicago in the 1850s, where Mary worked with her husband, and volunteered her services during a cholera epidemic. In 1863, she was recruited by USSC president Henry Bellows for the Chicago branch of the Commission – later named Northwestern Sanitary Commission. (1) She later wrote a detailed account of her service during the war (2). The following are selected excerpts the author believes will be of interest to research dietitians:

Chapter V describes the Northwestern Sanitary Commission, headquartered in Chicago:

Many deliveries of food and other supplies were stored in the Madison Street building. Compared to a well-run food pantry of today, one can imagine that food donations of the 19th century – despite their welcome nutritional value – would be challenging to store and keep for long periods of time. Livermore remarks, “The odors of the place were villainous and a perpetual torment. Codfish and sauer-kraut [sic] pickles and ale, onions and potatoes, smoked salmon and halibut, ginger and whiskey, salt mackerel and tobacco, kerosene for the lamps, benzene for cleansing purposes... these all concentrated their exhalations in one pungent aroma, that smote the olfactories [sic] when one entered, and

clung tenaciously to the folds of one's garments when one departed. We called it 'the perfume of the sanitary,' and at last got used to it, as we did to the noise” (2, p 156). Perhaps more impressive is the impact of the distribution, as she later writes: “Here were packed and shipped to the hospitals or battle-field 77,660 packages of sanitary supplies, whose cash value was \$1,056,192.16” (2, p 157).

Chapters XII through XV describes Livermore's service to hospitals along the Mississippi:

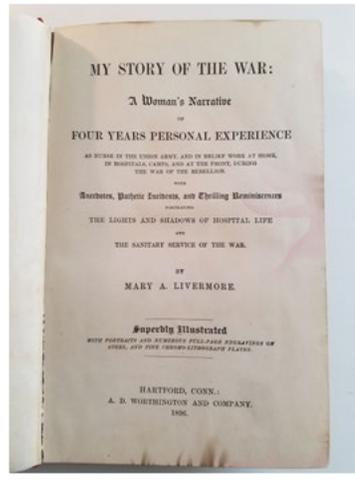
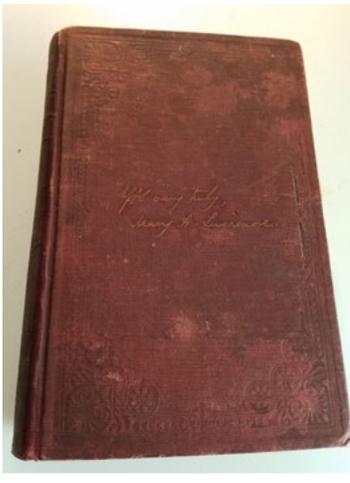
Hospitals along the Mississippi River were on land, and aboard ships. Both needed regular food and sanitary supplies – particularly during General Ulysses Grant's Vicksburg campaign, during which starvation was common, malnutrition severe – and hospital conditions poor. “Immense shipments of supplies were sent down on sanitary boats, with men and women of executive ability, who attended to their safe transmission and equitable distribution... It was with one of these shipments of sanitary stores, and as one of the relief corps, that I went down the Mississippi in March, 1863” (2, pp 281-282). This expedition covered hospitals from Cairo, Illinois south to Vicksburg, with the ambitious task of visiting every hospital along the route (2, p 282).

Scurvy must have been of primary concern: “Our assortment of stores comprised almost everything necessary in hospital relief; potatoes, onions, sauer-kraut, and vegetables – chiefly for the scorbutic patients, who constituted a majority of the sick – farina, corn starch, lemons, oranges, pearl-barley, tea, sugar, condensed milk, ale, canned fruits, con-



Mary Livermore

densed extract of beef, codfish, jellies, a small quantity of the best of brandy” (2, p 283)...along with clothing, bandages, other medical supplies – plus private boxes from families which we call “care packages” today. In addition to wounds, she also observed despondency and depression among soldiers – one of the emotional symptoms which dietitians today know to accompany clinical scurvy. Throughout the chapters reported here, much of the service of Livermore and her Sanitary Commission delegation involved simply giving cheer and encouragement during the extensive hospital visits. According to Brockett and Vaughan, “Mrs. Hoge and Mrs. Livermore, of Chicago, visited Grant's camp in front of Vicksburg, more than once, and by their exertions, saved his army from scurvy” (3, p 48).



Chapter XV focuses specifically on Livermore's attention to special diet in one field hospital:

A regimental field hospital at Young's Point, Louisiana, serving 150-200 men was to be broken down and its patients transferred to St Louis; here Livermore "received permission to do anything I pleased for them within certain specified limits; and the head surgeon seemed much gratified that I manifested an interest in his men" (2, pp 319-320). Livermore took charge of cooking, special diet, and cheering of the men – many of whom were so weak from malnutrition and disease, they appeared to lack the volition to brush away the buzzing flies and other insects which swarmed all over them. Several days of compassionate care by Livermore and her staff – including reading to them and letter-writing to families – revived many of them and improved mood and a sense of hope and relief from suffering and homesickness (2, pp 320-322).

SUMMARY

It is hoped that this sampling of excerpts from Livermore's 700-page volume demonstrates for the reader the early tradition of detailed documentation which is one of the foundations of research and practice in dietetics today. She provides facts and figures regarding the magnitude and scope of the Northwestern Sanitary Commission in this single document. In addition, her listing of food items gives us some idea of the food technology and attention to a variety of food groups and nutrients, many of which hadn't been identified or discovered as such yet! Given that the Commis-

sion is believed to be the forerunner of our current public health system, dietitians in community and public health will note how far it has advanced since the early days. *My Story of the War* is also rich in qualitative data, characteristic of personal accounts in any historic period providing Livermore's subjective experience and worldview in the context of the post-war period. She also devotes chapters to highlight several other Sanitary Commission women whose contributions she believed to be significant.

For those interested in diving further into Mary Livermore's account, an 1889 printing is available digitally through Indiana State Library (4). As summer begins, remember that wherever RDPG members are located, you are not far away from a museum, library, birthplace, or interpretive historic center. In your travels, why not take in some history and find out more about a favorite pioneer in dietetics this summer?

REFERENCES

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