

THE SPLENDID LITTLE WAR .

-- John Hay to Theodore Roosevelt

The Sisters of the Holy Cross
during the Spanish-American War
1898-1899

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"Records of the work of the Sisters of the Holy Cross engaged with the sick soldiers in the Field Hospital at Camp Hamilton, Lexington, Kentucky, from September 6, 1898 till the Hospital was broken up November 25, and the troops moved to Columbus, Georgia, to Americus, Atlanta, and other places.

"Then at Columbus from that date till they moved to Matanzas, Cuba, for which port they took the Transport Panama, January 14, 1899.

"Their services not being needed, they returned home Feb. 1, 1899."

Preface

Sister Emerentiana, CSC

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"When the United States became involved in War with Spain in relation to Cuba and the Philippine Islands, it created some stir even in the silence of the Convent. Many of the older members who had nursed the soldiers in the conflict between the North and the South wondered if their services would be again required, while the younger members listened to the oft told tales of hospital life in Cairo, Memphis, Mound City, and other places, with envious feelings, as they became actuated by the spirit of sacrifice mingled with love of country."

In August 1898 Mother General Annunciata offered free use of our hospitals in the states of Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio, even though they were small and could accommodate only sixteen or eighteen patients.

Also in August Mother Annunciata (McSheffrey) received a letter from Miss Ella Loraine Dorsey, Ex-Vice-President^{General} of the Daughters of the American Revolution, urging her to assign Sisters with hospital experience "to serve God and their Government" by caring for the sick and wounded returning "from the fatal shores of Cuba." The conditions of service were the filing of forms through the Hospital Corps of the Daughters of the American Revolution (which the Surgeon-General had made his "Civil Service Board for Women Nurses"), the taking of the oath of allegiance to the United States, the signing of contracts, and

accepting \$30 a month pay. The call limited the age to fifty and requested as many Sisters as possible.

The first Sisters assigned were Sisters Lydia (Clifford) and Galasia (Baden) from Anderson, Indiana; Florentia (Stack) and Joachim (Casey) from Jacksonville, Illinois; Valentina (Reid) from Saint Mary's; Philip (Horan) and Cordelia (Gahagan) from Holy Cross Hospital in Salt Lake City; Camillus (McSweeney) and Benita (O'Connor) from St. Mary's Academy, Salt Lake City; Cornelius (McCabe) from St. Alphonsus Hospital, Boise, Idaho; and Genevieve (Conway) from Sacred Heart Academy, Ogden, Utah. Sister Emerentiana (Nowlan), not a nurse, was sent to assist in any way needed. The first group of four left Saint Mary's on September 6 via Chicago and arrived in Lexington, Kentucky, at Camp Hamilton.

"But that first and last vision of the camp is worth more than one suffers to achieve it. It is a spectacle which few of us have ever seen before and few of us will ever see again -- the white army tents of 10,000 troops pitched on the green Kentucky hills, which roll softly away bearing the shadows of the great trees to where the September suns rise and set in a sky as beautiful as paradise.

"It is a wonderful sight. And what is strange the vast array of tents gives one an impression of peace;

they rest so tranquilly in the still light of the afternoon....

"Some of the soldiers told us afterwards that our entrance to the Hospital grounds was the most beautiful sight they ever saw, but the reality of what was before us, was just dawning on our sight and mind, as the long rows of tents became visible, and we did not feel so fine at all!"

Very little preparation for the Sisters had been made; their first meal consisted of beef tea, bread, butter, and scrambled eggs.

"Two tents were assigned us, three cots in each, and with the three trunks, the entire space was filled.... (P)rayers had to be said before the beds were prepared or else said in bed, Getting settled the first night was an amusing performance never to be forgotten and getting dressed in the morning was as great a difficulty. We borrowed a tin bucket from the kitchen, with some waterⁱⁿ which we all dipped our towels, to wash our faces."

The Sisters were placed in charge of the typhoid ward with fifty very ill patients. Two of the Sisters stayed up all the first night. Over 600 men were sick, but the worse cases were typhoid. The schedule included breakfast at six, dinner at eleven-thirty, and supper at five, with work from breakfast time until nine or ten at night.*

The Sisters from the West, arriving the next day, had no tents and, until theirs were ready, asked hospitality

* One of the first men the Sisters met was the Rev. Albert Bader, later chaplain to the 12th New York Regiment, who was kind and helpful to them. Each Regiment had its chaplain.

of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Lexington, who treated them like members of their own community.

There were diversions in the camp from the beginning. "Farmer" Thomas of the 160th Indiana Regiment, Company E, "frequently keeps his comrades in an agony during the night by giving women's suffrage orations and portions of Aristophanes until the boys -- unable longer to withstand his seductive voice -- seize the speaker and silence him by violence."

Meanwhile, Miss Dorsey had written to Mother Annunciata suggesting that the Sisters buy church property from the Cuban government, property which had reverted to the government when the Spanish left. This property could be used, Miss Dorsey wrote, as a school, farm, sanitarium, and hospital. Miss Dorsey, who had Cuban affiliations, offered to help with negotiations. The General Council deferred a decision.

Also, in September 1898 Governor Asa S. Bushnell of Ohio asked for and received the services of the Sisters from Mt. Carmel Hospital in Columbus to accompany sick soldiers from the Tampa area to Columbus and Cleveland. Sisters Edburga (Petsch) and Brendan (O'Connor) traveled with the troops from Tampa through Fernandina, Huntsville, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Knoxville to Columbus.

Out from the tents the Sisters were moved into what was called "The Sisters' Barracks" or "The Pavilion," made of rough boards with half-inch cracks later covered

with weatherstripping. The weather was hot and Sister Lydia requested palm leaf fans. The building accommodated eighty to one hundred women.

Lay nurses arrived from New York and elsewhere. A doctor reported to the Sisters that he was amazed at the improvement of the patients since the Sisters had come. Major Edgar A. Mearns told General Joseph C. Breckinridge that one Sister was worth two hundred men nurses and that the Sisters had saved many lives. The work was hard and even necessary supplies short at hand, but all worked willingly. Sister Lydia was promoted to Chief Nurse in charge of the Pavilion.

"There is a great deal of complaint about the men detailed for nursing at the division hospital being worked too hard. An adjutant of one of the regiments told The Herald (one of the Lexington papers) that the nurses at the hospital go on duty at seven o'clock in the evening and are not relieved until two the next afternoon. They have five hours sleep and rest and report for duty again at seven o'clock. It is said that in consequence of this long stretch many of them are becoming sick from over-work."

Major Mearns sent a circular letter to the nurses, giving governmental rules, including the following:

"No nurse shall be employed in any ward, or on any duty more than twelve hours continuously; morning roll call at 6:00, evening 7:45, lights out 9:00." On her part, Mother Annunciata wrote to the Sisters, "Let there be neat-

ness in clothing and in person: teeth and nails spotlessly clean; let everything around the sick be clean, clean, clean; let everything in the sick-room be cheerful and bright; the brightest and most cheerful must be the sweet, gentle face of the Sister; the cooking should be well and tastefully done, and the serving as dainty and tempting as possible; to each other ever be kind, considerate, and polite."

Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg and Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Louis arrived later in September, in all fifty-two, and had the usual problems with accommodations, lanterns, washbasins, and so on. One among them was a Black nurse, to whom many of the lay nurses took acception. Because "Photography is all the style now at Camp Hamilton," a picture of all the Sisters and lay nurses and their chaplain was taken for the Government and sent to General George M. Sternberg by order of the War Department.

As sick men were cured and returned either back to duty or to their homes, Miss Dorsey reported to Mother Annunciata that the Cuban occupancy and the Porto Rican (sic.) garrison together with the general hospitals would keep up the demand for nurses for at least two years, and the President (of the United States) greatly preferred the religious orders for such work. However, about this time, Dr. Capt. N. C. Garrett, surgeon, showed a decided antipathy towards the Sisters, placing lay nurses over them. The Sisters were assigned to other wards.

In October the hospital at which the Sisters worked was changed into a general hospital although it continued as a division hospital as well. Troops stationed at Camp Hamilton were from New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Mississippi, Indiana, and Arizona. There were two troops of Blacks at nearby Camp Weil. At the camp only company officers, relatives, and friends were allowed to visit the sick because of "the indiscriminate trampling of visitors who come only to see how things are carried on."

The men of the First Territorial of Arizona from Ft. Whipple were most interesting because of a group of Cherokee Indians. "They retain much of their Indian clothing, such as mocassins and ornaments. They paint themselves like real warriors. On their boots they have painted pictures of birds, eagles, monkeys, pipes, etc. They are, in most instances, well educated, having graduated at Lawrence, Kansas."

"One of the lay nurses at Lexington, a graduate from the Brooklyn Hospital, was thoroughly in love with her profession, an expert nurse, but she shocks some of her companions with her enthusiasm for rare and dangerous diseases, describing leprosy as 'lovely' and 'cute,' yellow fever as 'interesting.'" These statements, reported in the newspaper, were retracted the next day by the reporter, with apology.

Once two women from the WCTU arrived at Camp to ask

for the abolishment of canteens. Because canteens were an institution of the army by an act of Congress since 1888 when the post trader was abolished, they could make no headway.

In September the military attaché of the Russian Embassy in Washington, Count Yermoloff, made a tour of volunteer camps of the United States. He had been in Cuba watching the armies of both the United States and Spain and sized them up for the benefit of the Russian army.

It was decided that the troops and sick should be quartered in a climate where, during the winter, they could drill and have free open air exercises. Because it was easier to maintain discipline near smaller towns, it was further decided to move to the middle south states, especially to Georgia. Augusta was selected for headquarters. Two lay nurses accompanied the 160th Indiana Regiment, the last of the Charity Sisters returned to their own missions, other Sisters and lay nurses went with the rest of the troops.

About two weeks before the nurses were to leave for Georgia, they had indicated the places to which they preferred to go, with no assurance of going there. They were sent, principally, to Columbus, Americus, Macon, and Albany. Sister Lydia and seventeen contract nurses were to report to the commanding general J.A.Wiley and the surgeon in charge, Major J.J. Kyle, at the First Brigade Hospital in Columbus. In all forty-eight lay nurses and Sisters left Lexington for Georgia in three sleepers and one baggage car.

Camp Hamilton, Lexington, had been established on August 23, 1898; on November 21 an auction sale of camp horses, mules, and buildings was held.* The last troops left around November 15 except patients sent to the hospital at Ft. Thomas near Cincinnati. About fifteen dead were left in the Lexington Cemetery because the bodies had not been claimed. The last of the patients were placed in St. Joseph's Hospital in Lexington. Major Mearns left Ft. Hamilton for Columbus on November 28.

At Camp Conrad in Columbus, a lieutenant wrote that the Georgia girls were beauties! The nurses found Sisters of Mercy from Knoxville already there. All Sisters and lay nurses occupied a dormitory with kitchen and dining room. There were only thirty or thirty-five patients with typhoid, measles, or pneumonia.

Camp Conrad near Columbus was beautifully and healthfully located, surrounded with pine trees; the hospital was only a short distance away. The Chattahooche River flowed nearby with its miniature waterfall and old rustic bridge. Nearby, also, were the ruins of an old cotton mill with machinery valued at \$500,000.

For the work of the nurses at Ft. Hamilton, Sister Lydia received a letter from the Surgeon-in-Charge of the General Hospital, Major Mearns, in part as follows: "In you, Sister Lydia, our Chief Nurse, Major Glennon and I have always reposed absolute confidence. Your executive ability, zeal and tact have been without a parallel in our experience. For you we

* The people of Lexington had offered to build wooden barracks at their own cost if the soldiers would not move south.

have the deepest feeling of friendship and gratitude. Your faithful and untiring efforts have added greatly to the success of our establishment."

The arrangements in Columbus were somewhat primitive and supplies were meager; for example, one broom for the entire hospital, eleven plates for sixty-three patients, five gallons of milk daily for all. It was not possible for the Sisters to attend weekday Mass in town, but the local priest offered to change the 6:30 Mass to suit the Sisters, if they wished. The Sisters of Mercy in town also prepared breakfast for the camp Sisters whenever the latter assisted at Mass, especially on Sundays and First Fridays. At best, assisting at Mass was a "hit and miss" situation. For the first time since the first Sunday in September, the Sisters were present for Vespers and Benediction on December 11.

In the midst of their heavy work, two Sisters went to the December woods to collect holly, myrtle, Jerusalem cherries, lemon shrub, hanging moss, ferns to be sent to Saint Mary's for Christmas decorations.

When General William Ludlow was appointed military governor at Havana, he was succeeded at Camp Conrad by General J. P. Sanger, who seemed pleased with his appointment, being genial and concerned rather than blustering and stormy as in Lexington.

In mid-December the Sisters received permission from the general commander to proceed to Cuba. Yellow fever had

broken out near Matanzasⁿ and only six of the hospital corps were immune. A group of lay nurses and Sisters of St. Joseph left Charlestown, S.C., on the steamer Manitoba bound for Cuba with the 12th New York Regiment. The 160th Indiana and the 3d Kentucky Regiments left a few days later.

Early in January the hospital train took all patients to Atlanta, except two who were too sick to be moved and eighteen to be discharged or to return to their regiments.

of the Holy Cross
The Sisters^A left for Savannah by train on January 13, 1899, after Mass and confession, arriving on the 14th and boarding the steamer Panama next morning in pouring rain.

Life on board was luxurious: staterooms for three, dinner with officers on Spanish silver plate; upholstery, bedding, and other articles were marked with the Spanish coat-of-arms. The Panama had been one of the prize vessels captured from the Spanish on April 25, 1898. "For three days," Sister wrote, "we lived in Spanish splendor."

Arriving at Matanzas, they saw soldiers on shore, probably from New York, for they yelled, "Go back, you Kentucky hayseeds!" Nurses who had arrived earlier gave the newcomers an account of their stay so far. A large house acquired by government officials had been converted into a hospital and dormitory for all the nurses.

Dr. Williams, who was in charge of the group, went ashore to report and brought back news that all

on board were to return to the United States in the same transport. It was explained that General Sternberg had visited the army hospitals in Cuba, had found only ten patients -- none very ill, had left orders for all lay nurses to return home. Since the eleven Sisters of St. Joseph were sufficient to care for the needs of the few sick, other nurses were not needed.

Some of the Sisters went ashore to visit hospitals under the care of Cuban Sisters of Charity, who were living with one hundred seven patients in poverty and ^{with} insufficient food and help. After American troops had arrived, the Cuban Sisters fared better and were able to give better care.

"Oh! the vicissitudes of this mortal life! From camp life at Columbus to the sumptuous surroundings, silver plate, etc., on board the Panama, with its excellent menus, back to mush, bread, rice, bacon, and coffee, from tin cups to tin plates."

While in Matanzas the Sisters visited the cathedral, dirty and unkept, met two old, gentle, kind-faced priests, visited the fort in possession of the American soldiers and showing evidence of cruel treatment of prisoners, saw on the beach a portion of a torpedo similar to the one that blew up the Maine.

On January 20 the Panama began its voyage back to the States; many soldiers who had known the Sisters in Lexington and Columbus were at the wharf to say good-bye, some in tears. The trip home was marked by seasickness, but in four days the steamer arrived at New York. Custom officers

inquired about purchases; Sister Lydia's altarcloth was declared church property and tax free.

On arrival the Sisters reported, as ordered, at the Army Building, were not expected, were not paid. At dinner time in a restaurant Sister Lydia had to advance money to several lay nurses who had nothing. The Sisters went overnight to the Leo House (run by the German Sisters of St. Agnes to accommodate traveling priests and religious). The next day they wasted much time waiting for detained officers, for the reckoning and approval of pay rolls before being paid each \$25 with a balance of \$10 each, \$20 to Sister Lydia.

In Washington they separated and stayed at St. Joseph's Asylum, Holy Cross Academy, and St. Cecilia's Academy. The next day they visited the War Department and were complimented by Dr. Anita McGee as "the only religious order down in the report as observing Military Discipline." Sister Lydia replied to questions, "In such cases the Rule of Charity predominates. Even in what is of obligation for ordinary Christians -- to hear Mass on Sunday -- we would set aside if by so doing we could keep from the sick any unnecessary suffering."

They visited Miss Dorsey and shared with her their experiences; she considered some matters sufficiently serious to try to lay the matter before the Senate. Subsequently, Miss Dorsey and Sister Lydia talked with Senators William N. Roach and Thomas Carter, suggesting that Sisters from the States be sent to Cuba to train the Cuban Sisters in hospital

care. Next, through the effort of Senator ^{Marcus A.} Hanna, the two women met with President McKinley, who received them cordially and gladly received their willingness to serve the country whenever occasion demanded.

Sister Lydia sent a letter to the War Department (signed by nine Sisters) expressing their thanks for the opportunity to serve the country and the soldiers sick and wounded and their willingness to serve the Government in any capacity. They thanked also, through the War Department, the commanding officers under whom they served in Lexington, Columbus, and Matanzas.

In the following March Sister Lydia received a letter asking the Sisters of the Holy Cross to take charge of a military hospital either in Savannah or in San Francisco. In May Sister received a letter asking the Sisters to return to Cuba.

In all, those who served during the last months were twelve Sisters of the Holy Cross, twenty-five Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg, eleven Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Louis, ten Sisters of Mercy of Knoxville, and fifty-five lay nurses. The total disbursements of the Sisters of the Holy Cross were \$1733.13; their receipts were \$1740.63; they came home, cash in hand, with \$7.50. \$366.40 were due them from the War Department.

Many years later memorial stones were placed on the graves of these brave women and can be seen in the cemetery at Saint Mary's.

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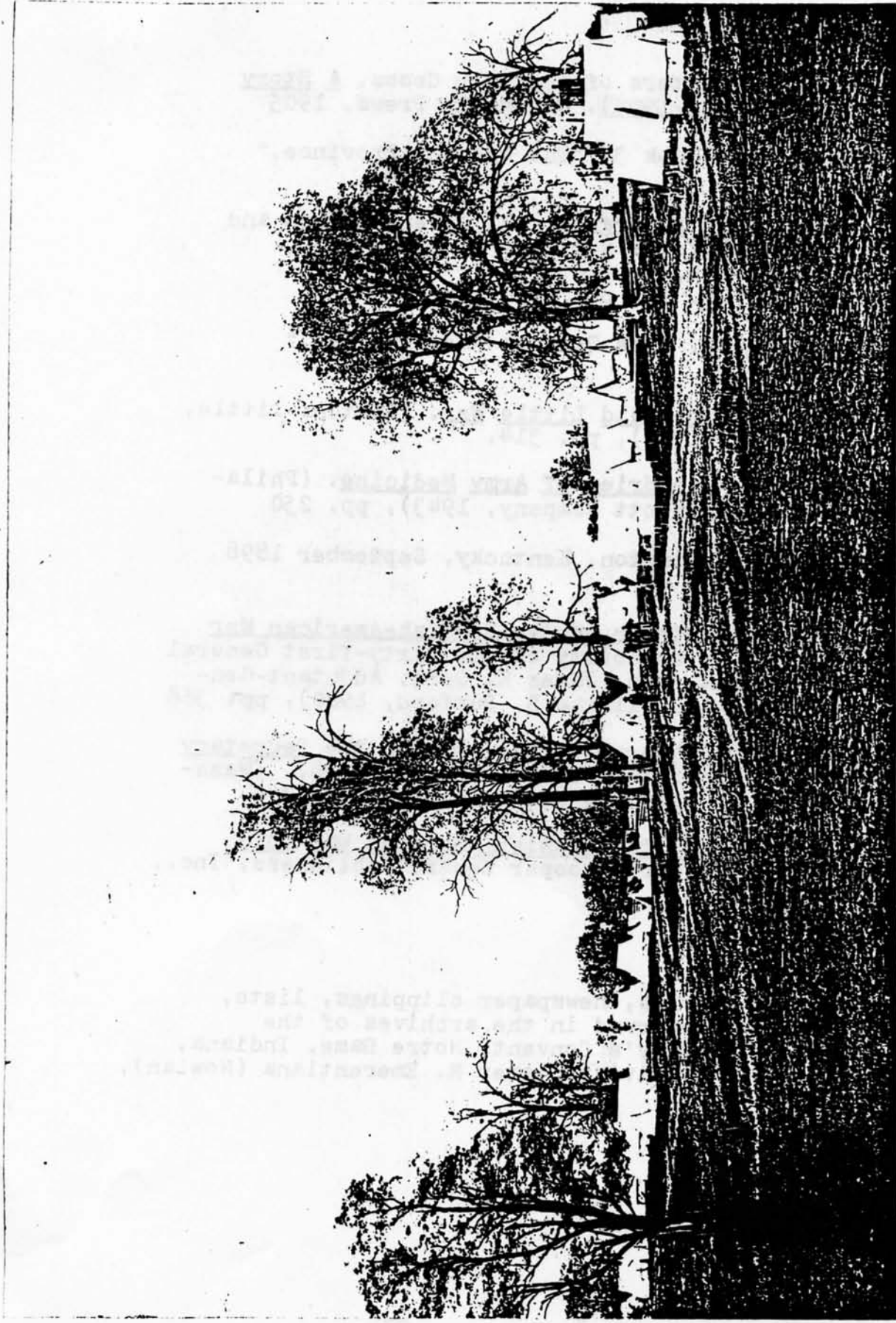
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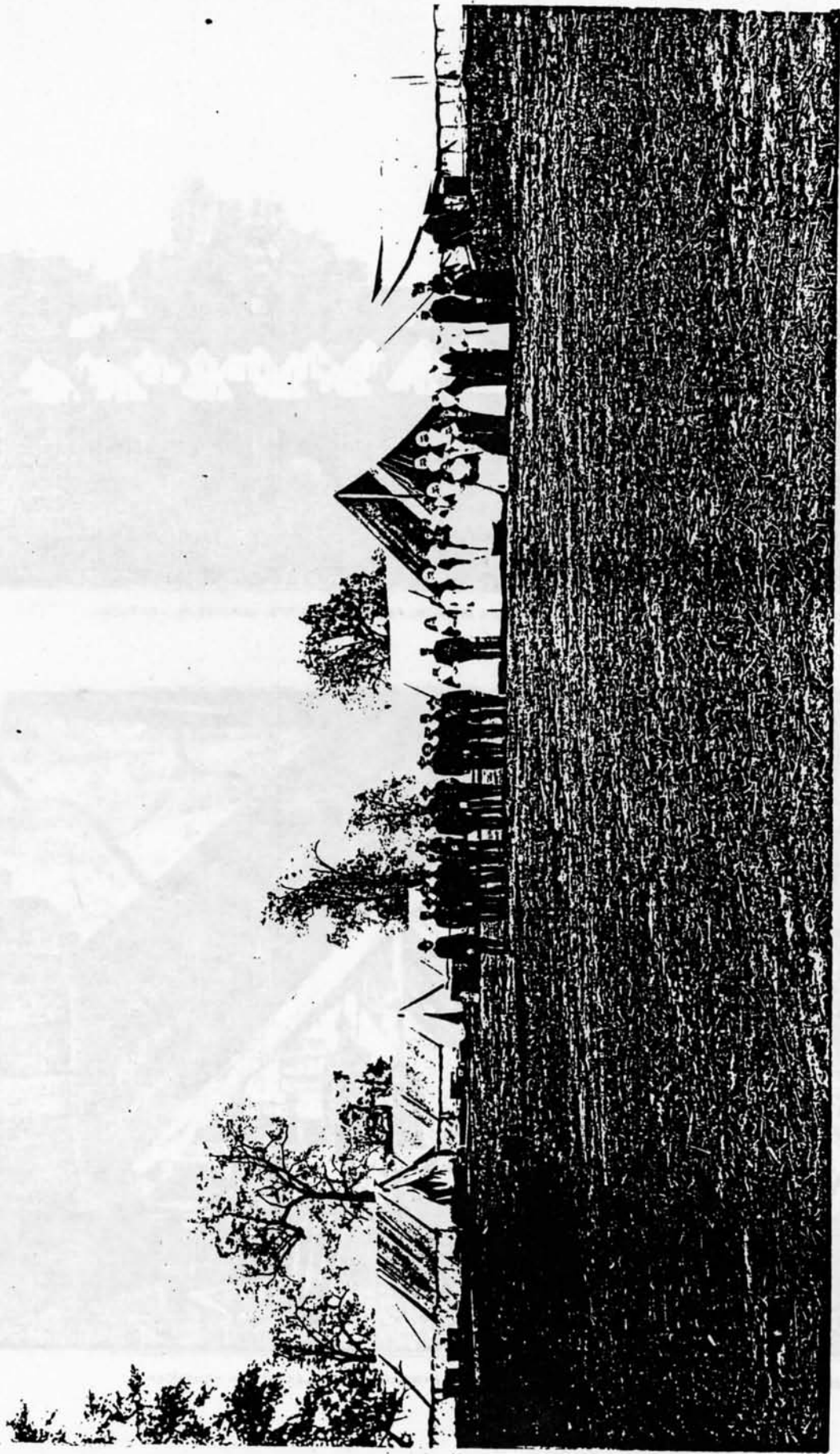
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Principal source:

Letters, journals, diaries, newspaper clippings, lists, and other materials preserved in the archives of the Congregation at Saint Mary's Convent, Notre Dame, Indiana, the work of the then archivist Sister M. Emerentiana (Nowlan), C.S.C. (1898-99).

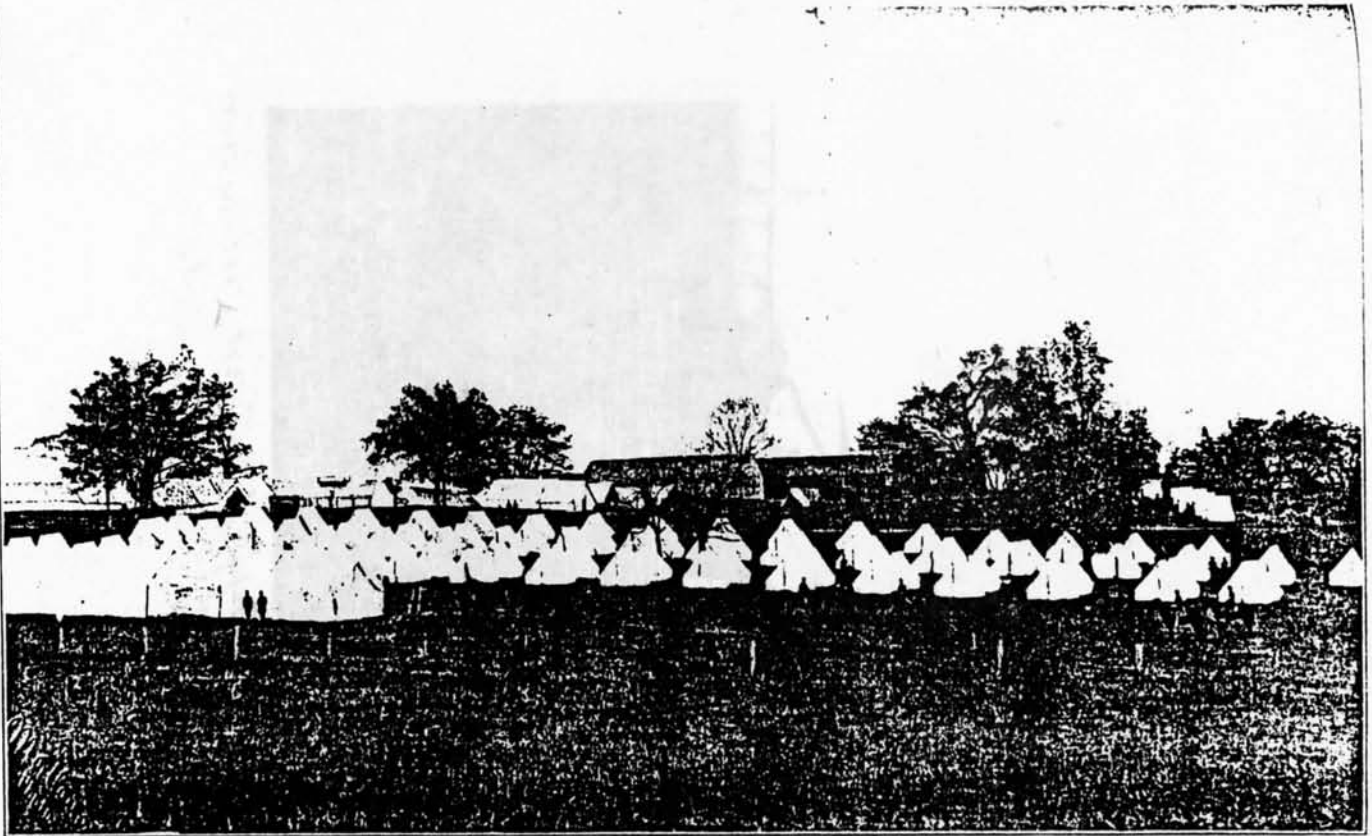


The tents on the night
Tents occupied by the Rebels
Camp Hamilton, Lexington, Kentucky, 1898

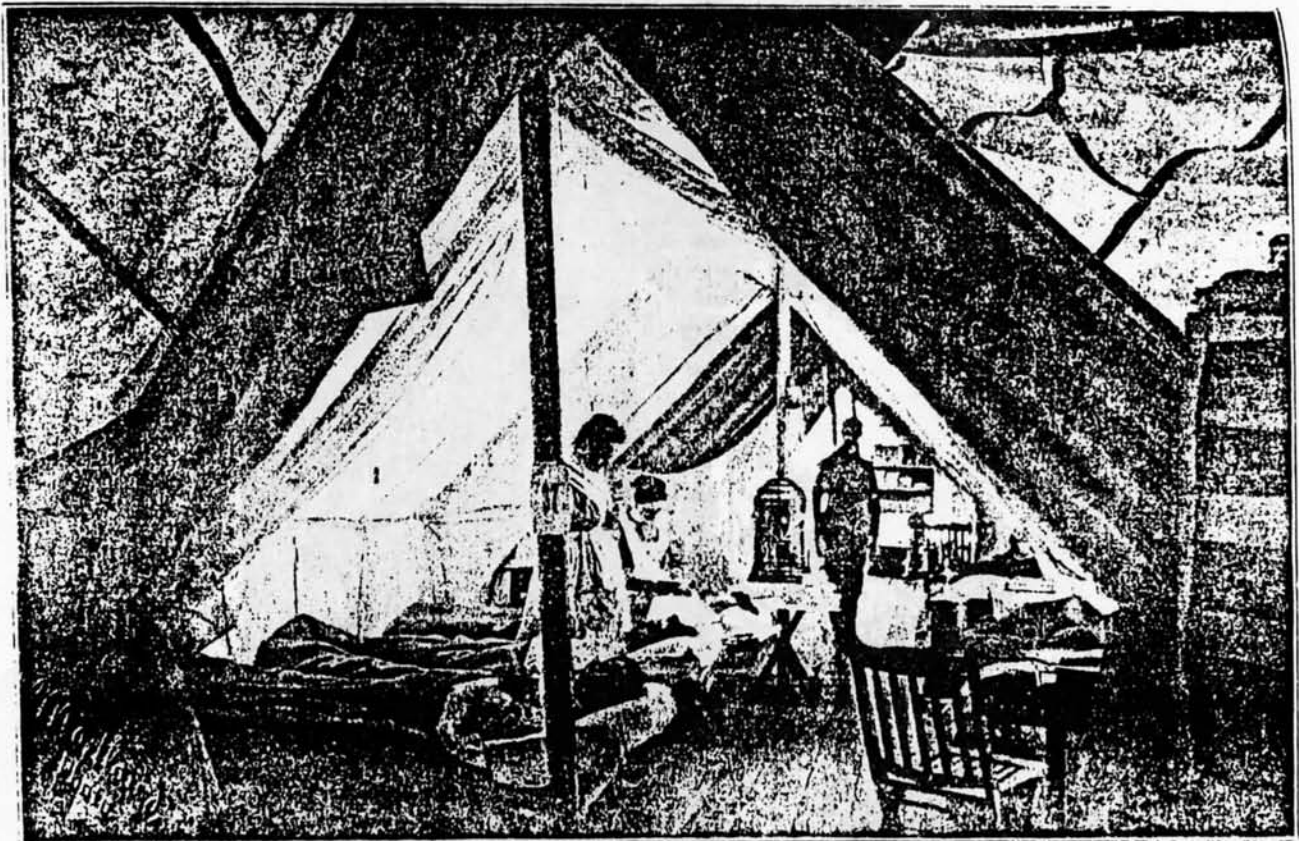


Camp Hamilton, Lexington, Kentucky, 1898

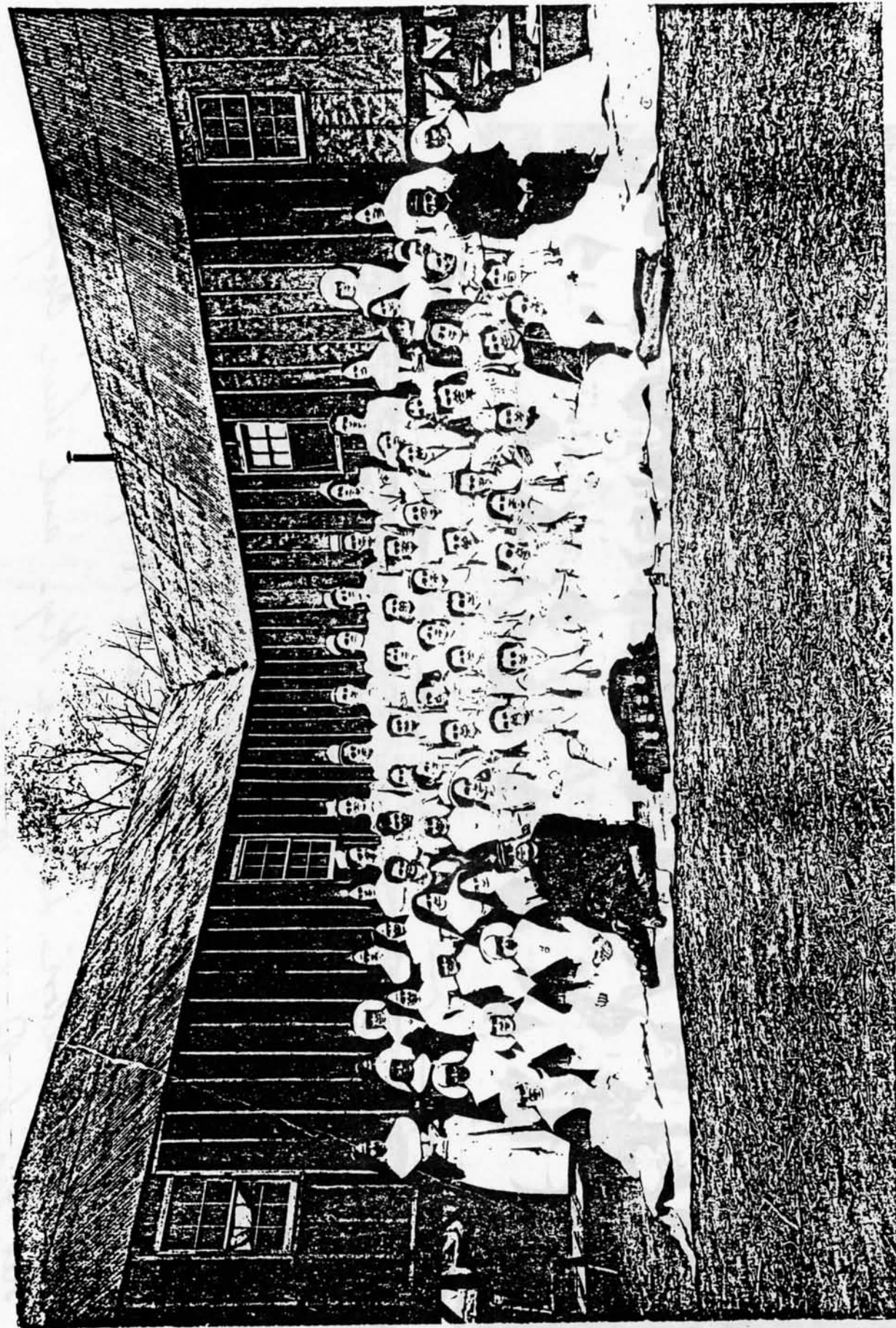
*Typical of the modern
war camp*



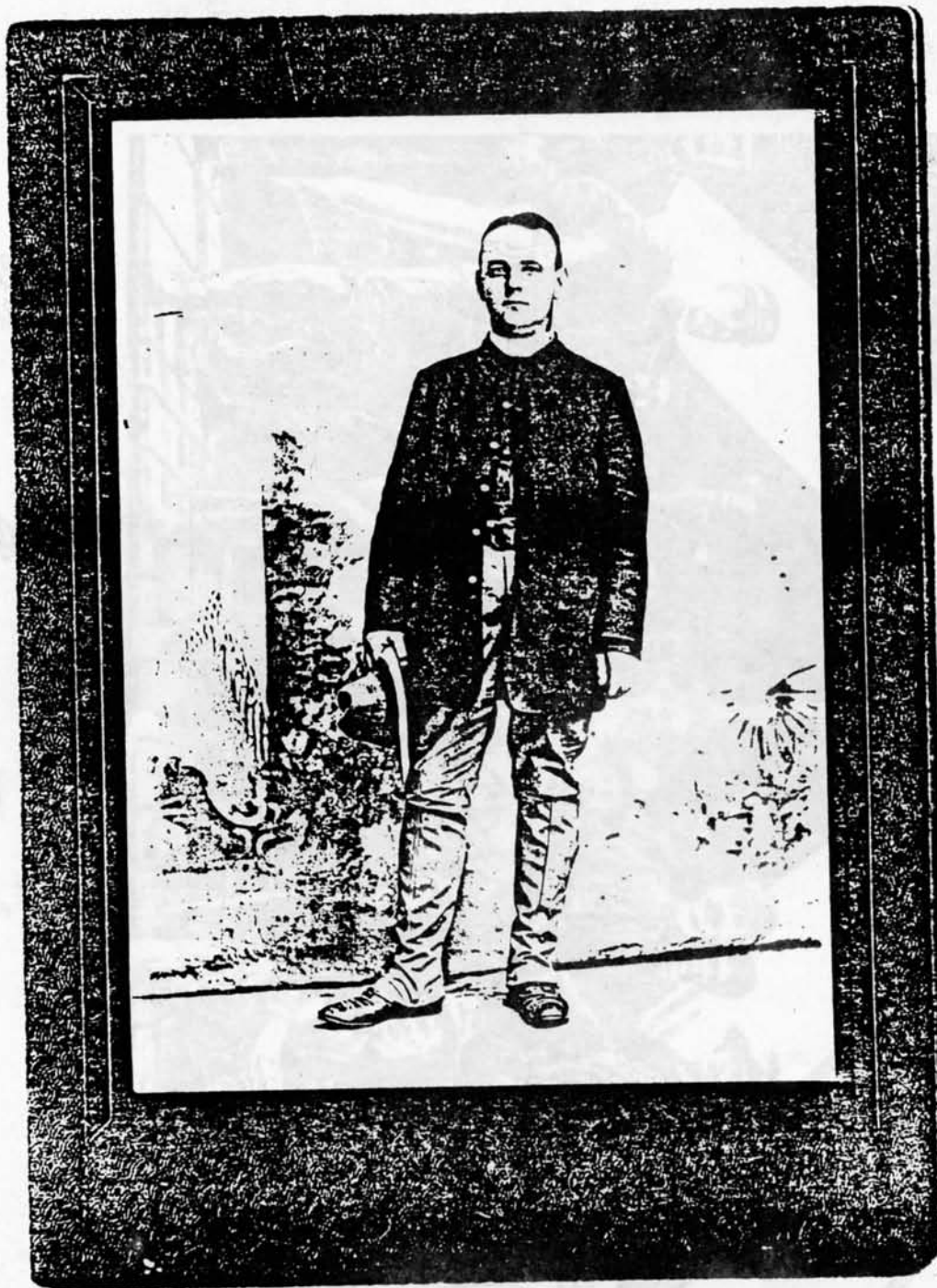
CAMP OF HOSPITAL CORPS—HOSPITAL IN BACKGROUND—THIRD DIVISION, FIRST ARMY CORPS, LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY.



HOSPITAL INTERIOR, THIRD DIVISION, FIRST ARMY CORPS, CAMP HAMILTON, LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY.



Sisters of the Holy Cross, Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Louis, Sisters of Charity
of Emmitsburg, Md., with lay nurses and Father Bader 1898
Camp Hamilton, Lexington, Kentucky



Rev. Frank Bader



Dr. Reynolds
Dr. Iselchrist

Maj. Glennon

Miss Norton

Maj. Mearns

Dr. Foxworthy

The 7th Division staff



Army Medical Library

SURG. GEN.
GEORGE MILLER STERNBERG
(1838-1915)



From *The Condor*, July 1903

LT. COL. EDGAR ALEXANDER MEARNS
(1856-1916)



General
William Ludlow, sketched by Remington