

CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION (1860 – 1877)

The Vivandieres

Although they are not widely known, the vivandieres and cantinieres who traveled with regiments during the Civil War were women who, despite the constrictions of Victorian society, chose to serve alongside men during wartime in a role that American women thus far had not played. A part of their regiment, these women served several functions, all unheard of for American women of the time.

The history of the vivandiere, or cantiniere, is rooted in the Napoleonic War. During this war, it was not uncommon for bands of women, often the wives or daughters of members of the regiment, to “follow the drum” just behind a regiment. The French army, wishing to reduce the number of women who followed these regiments, restricted this activity, but as a compromise, allowed a few women to serve in some capacity in the regiment. These women became known as either vivandieres or cantinieres. The duties of each were prescribed; vivandieres acted as a concessionaire of sorts, selling food and drink to the troops remaining in camp, while cantinieres followed the regiments on campaigns, also distributed food and drink, and nursed ill or wounded soldiers.

Prior to and during the civil war era, the French army was respected as the finest and most technologically advanced. Many of those who served in the U.S. Army prior to the Civil War went to Europe and Africa to observe the French army and then taught their skills to troops in the U.S.

In America, the vivandiere was most often known as “the daughter of the regiment,” a title that was sometimes literal, as the vivandiere was usually the daughter, wife, or some other relation to an officer in the regiment. The role of these daughters of the regiment was to follow the regiment, assist in setting up and maintaining camp, not to mention their duties as nurses, carrying a canteen of water or whisky into battle and performing triage to the wounded on the front.

Vivandieres were most popular at the beginning of the war, when regiments were forming, and their duties were often confined to drills. When the war progressed, and the campaigns grew longer and the fighting more common, the vivandieres were less common. This may also be due to the fact of the eventual “normalization” of the troops; as the volunteer units who formed at the outset of the war became encompassed into larger regiments and armies, they became more regulated, their customs more in line with that of the regular army.

Despite the fact that the number of vivandieres dwindled after the beginning of the war, several remained with their regiments throughout most of the war, bravely accepting the brutal conditions of military life during the civil war era, following their regiments to the front lines of battle. They gave rise to the acceptance of women as wartime nurses, as valued members of a

military camp, and may even have presaged the acceptance of women as soldiers in the 20th century.

In Summerville, the vivandieres mostly attended to the sick and wounded at the two hospitals. The "regiment" formed at Summerville consisted of 60 individuals. The first to sign up was Sue Gelzer.