

Dr. Lee Smith (1832- 1911)

Dr. Lee Smith was born on May 8, 1832 near Havens Grove, Illinois. He was the first child born to John and Anna (Havens) Smith. Smith's father was a native of Randolph County, North Carolina and his mother was from Newark, Ohio. His father came to McLean County from Indiana in 1830 and was one of the earliest settlers in the area around Hudson. While in Indiana, John engaged in farming but decided that there were more opportunities to be had in other occupations. He then took up the occupation of "freighting." In this work, John would transport people and their belongings from Indiana to Illinois using heavy teams of oxen and strong wagons.¹ Later in his life, Lee Smith recalled that his father passed through McLean County in about 1828 – 1829 and by the next year, "returned to this part of the state... with a colony which settled" in an area known as Havens Grove, in today's Hudson Township.² It was here that he met and married Anna Havens, who was a member of another early pioneering family to the area. John and Anna would go on to have eight children.

According to local lore, it was said that on the day of Lee's birth, just two hours after he was born "a horseback rider brought tidings of (Chief) Black Hawk's approach." The Chief had crossed the Illinois River and was heading east. "All of the settlers were ordered to the blockhouse on Money Creek" for protection. Lee and his mother were loaded into their neighbor, Benjamin Wheeler's, wagon and taken to the blockhouse. It was feared the trip would kill his mother, him, or both of them, but they survived.³ In another version of this story, Lee was eight days old. Regardless, he came into this world under unique circumstances.

While being raised in a strong and sustainable farm family, Lee learned to hunt at a young age and killed his first deer when he was eight years old. Apparently the rifle was too heavy for him so he had to balance it across their backyard fence. He kept that gun for years until it was stolen.⁴ As a child, Lee was educated in the district schools. Later in life he recalled "my first school days were passed in a little log cabin in Haven's Grove. My first teacher was Jonathan Dow whom all the old settlers remember as one of the peculiarly eccentric characters of the pioneer days of this county."⁵

After finishing his early education, Lee was accepted to the newly founded Illinois Wesleyan University in 1850 and studied agriculture and medicine.⁶ In an interview for the *Daily Bulletin* later in his life, Smith recalled that when he began studying medicine, he studied under the tutelage of Dr. E. L. Hoover in his "little old wooden office." He stated that "at the time all medical students went into practicing physicians offices to read the medical course. Three years were required for reading and we profited by practical experience as well."⁷ At the end of those three years, Smith graduated from IWU in 1853 as a member of the first graduating class. "Armed with a certificate of qualifications" he was eligible to study at any medical school or course lectures.

He then began studying medicine at Rush Medical College in Chicago, Illinois.⁸ As part of medical course work at Rush "it was a rule for the young doctor to go into some frontier town and practice" medicine to gain more practical experience. Some doctors would remain for a short time and finish their coursework with lectures while others would remain in a place for up to

¹ Newton Bateman, Paul Selby, Ezra Prince, and John H. Burnham. *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of McLean County, Volume II*. (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Co., 1908) p. 1297

² "Three Score and Ten" *Daily Pantagraph*, May 8, 1902

³ Ruth Bitting Hamm. *The Hudson Colony* (Hudson; Bicentennial Commission, 1976), p. 2-3

⁴ "Three Score and Ten"

⁵ "The Old Time Doctor: Lee Smith Tells Annette of the Early Days," *Daily Bulletin*, May 9, 1899

⁶ "Wesleyan University," *The Intelligencer*, March 3, 1852

⁷ "The Old Time Doctor"

⁸ "Dr. Lee Smith is Dead," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 17, 1911

three years.⁹ That year, Smith decided to travel to the village of Rockville, Iowa located 28 miles west of Dubuque, to begin practicing medicine and hone his skills as a doctor. However, his practice there was cut short due to an outbreak of malaria. Smith was not immune to this disease and suffered from a severe attack of malarial fever. This caused him to decide to return to Hudson after the summer was over and he had recovered. Upon his return to Hudson, he opened an office on a lot he had purchased in 1855 and continued practicing medicine. At the end of that year, he returned to Rush in Chicago to finish his medical course work. In the spring of 1856, he graduated from Rush and was now a full-fledged doctor.

In the fall of 1856 Smith moved to Bloomington where he established a medical practice and lived for the remainder of his life.¹⁰ After he first arrived in Bloomington, he boarded with Dr. Thomas P. Rogers. While staying with Dr. Rogers, he met his future wife, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Rogers, Dr. Roger’s niece, who was visiting from New Lisbon, Ohio. They soon fell in love and were married on February 2, 1857 at the home of Elizabeth’s parents in New Lisbon. That very same day, they returned to Bloomington by train and started their new life together.¹¹ They went on to have three children: George, Antoinette, and Clara, all of whom lived to adulthood. A short time later, Smith purchased the medical practice and home of his former teacher, Dr. E. L. Hoover. The home was located at 43 W. Mulberry Street (later 511 W. Mulberry Street), and would remain their home for the rest of their lives.

After the Civil War broke out on April 12, 1861, deadly violence swept the nation and there became an urgent need for more medical facilities, doctors, surgeons, and nurses. Before 1861, the United States Army was limited in terms of medical services. They had no general hospitals (which was a hospital that accepted men from any military unit or post¹²), only post hospitals that were “habitually small in size.” The largest of these post hospitals was located in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and had forty beds.¹³ In order to accommodate the massive numbers of sick and wounded that began pouring in from battlefields, the government quickly began to establish general hospitals, particularly in cities near battlefields. During the first year of the war, these hospitals were often improvisations in which hotels, seminaries, government buildings such as jails, or even warehouses were utilized.¹⁴ However, these structures were hardly adequate to give the sick and wounded soldiers proper care, “but were the best the government could provide on such short notice.”¹⁵ One of the earliest general hospitals established just outside of Washington D.C., the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, D.C., was where Smith first served as a surgeon in the Union Army.

Later in his life, Smith recalled how it was that he came to be in the service of the Union Army during the Civil War. Smith stated that in November of 1862, he was walking through the McLean County Courthouse when he was called into a room by Dr. George W. Stipp, another prominent physician in Bloomington. “Come in here. I’m going to war.” Stipp said. “Are you?” replied Smith. “Yes, I’m not joking, but really going. I want you to go along,” Stipp said. Smith told Stipp that as long as he could supply him with a job he would accept.¹⁶ Dr. Stipp soon departed for Washington D.C. and after securing a job with the United States Army Corps of

⁹ “The Old Time Doctor”

¹⁰ Bateman, p. 1297

¹¹ “Silver Wedding Chimes,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 3, 1882.

¹² George Worthington Adams. *Doctors in Blue: The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, Second Edition 1980) p.149

¹³ John R. Brumgardt. *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press,) p.37-38

¹⁴ Adams, p. 149

¹⁵ Brumgardt, p.38

¹⁶ “Experience of Army Surgeon: Dr. Lee Smith talks of the Suffering he Witnessed in the Civil War ---Old Union Hotel Hospita” *The Daily Pantagraph*, December 9, 1905

Surgeons, Stipp pulled through with a job offer for Smith and sent for him immediately. Smith had to delay his departure for a time because his wife, Lizzie, was pregnant with their first daughter, Antoinette. The next month, after Antoinette was born, Smith departed for service. On his way, he made a short stop in New Lisbon, OH where he left his son, George, in the care of Lizzie's mother. When Lizzie was strong enough to travel, she and their newborn daughter also went to New Lisbon to stay with her family until Lee returned home to Bloomington in the summer of 1863.

Upon entering the service, Smith was made a captain in the surgeon corps of the United States Army on December 2, 1862. He served as an assistant contract surgeon at Union Hotel Hospital. This was the same hospital where Stipp had been put in charge on November 10, 1862. During Smith's eight months there, his skills as both a doctor and a surgeon were tested as he saw much suffering from the wounded and dying soldiers pulled from the field of battle.

Union Hotel Hospital was located on the northeast corner of Bridge and Washington Streets in Georgetown, D.C. This former hotel was built in 1796 and hosted many past presidents and prominent figures in its heyday. The U.S. Government took control of the hotel on May 6, 1861 and the hotel began receiving patients on May 25 that same year.¹⁷ The building was "an unsavory old three-storied building, with an unfortunate interior juxtaposition of latrines and kitchen which aggravated the already prevalent problems of disease," making the hotel very unsuitable to being a hospital.¹⁸ In fact, the Union Hotel Hospital was once known as the "Hurly Burly House" because of its extremely unclean environment but government officials were desperate for hospitals, so these conditions were ignored.¹⁹

Dr. Smith was first tested just ten days after he began his service in the Union Army on December 12, 1862. Wounded soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg poured into Union Hospital to receive treatment from both Dr. Smith and Dr. Stipp.²⁰ Injured and dying soldiers lined up and down the hospital hallways waiting to be treated.

There was little rest or down time for doctors during the Civil War. The makeshift hospitals were constantly inundated with the wounded and dying soldiers from the battlefield or the soldiers who had taken ill. The hospitals in Washington D.C., in particular were typically inundated with sick and wounded soldiers because of their close proximity to the front lines of battle. The hospitals in Washington always had to be ready for a steady stream of wounded and had to treat them and evacuate those patients as fast as they could to be ready for the next wave.²¹ Doctors rushed from patient to patient with their "housewives," or surgeon's kits, cutting, sawing, piercing or patching up soldiers as best they could. Doctors usually visited patients twice a day, in the afternoon and the evening. The nurses were responsible not only for washing, feeding, giving medicine, and preparing the wounded for surgery, but also reading aloud, writing letters, and entertaining day and night.²² Often there was no time for sleep. "All was hurry and confusion" recalled Louisa May Alcott, who served as a nurse at the Union Hospital for six weeks during the winter of 1862-1863, at the same time as Dr. Smith.²³

Three days after the Second Battle of Bull Run, Smith recalled sitting down to eat his dinner when an orderly burst into the room in a panic with news that over 90 wounded soldiers were at the door of the hospital. Without a moment's hesitation, Dr. Smith dropped his dinner

¹⁷ http://americancivilwar.com/sanitary_commission.html

¹⁸ John R., Brumgardt. *Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press) pg. 39

¹⁹ Brumgardt, p.39

²⁰ "Experiences of Army Surgeon"

²¹ Adams, p.153-154

²² Louisa May Alcott. *Civil War Hospital Sketches*. (Moneola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006) p 29

²³ Alcott, p. 21

and rushed to let them in. “That was a terrible sight.” Smith recalled years later.²⁴ He and several nurses worked tirelessly until midnight going from patient to patient without stopping. Nurses washed each of the wounded in preparation for Dr. Smith and another group of nurses dressed the wounds after they were treated.

Not only did Smith assist in treating legless soldiers or bloody gunshot wounds, he also treated diseases. Due to terribly unsanitary conditions and inadequate space, disease, specifically typhoid, malaria, and dysentery, spread like wild fire. Conditions were so poor in some hospitals that sewage was known to leak from the floorboards, stench from the deceased polluted the air, and dirty laundry from injured soldiers lingered for weeks under patients.²⁵ In an investigation report of hospitals in the area around Washington, D.C. published in July of 1861, it was reported that at the Union Hotel Hospital: “*There are no provisions for bathing. The water closets and sinks are insufficient and defective and there is no dead house. The wards are many of them overcrowded and destitute of arrangements for artificial ventilation. The cellars and area is damp and undrained, and much of the woodwork is actively decaying.*”²⁶ Conditions had improved little by the time Louisa May Alcott began serving as a nurse and Smith began working at the hospital. Alcott described conditions in the hospital as a “perfect pestilence box....cold, damp dirty, full of vile odors from wounds, kitchens, wash-rooms, and stables.”²⁷

During his time working at the Union Hotel Hospital, Smith also remembered working with the matron of the hospital, Mrs. Hannah Ropes. She served as matron of the hospital from July 1862 to January 1863. Her responsibilities were not only general nursing duties, but also included supervising all of the other hospital nurses. She was a kind person and skilled nurse. She taught the other nurses under her charge that “bedpans were to be changed whenever used, that the patients’ hands and faces must be washed with strong brown soap, and that the men’s underclothes must be changed at least once a week.”²⁸ Louisa May Alcott recalled that Ropes’s “motherly face brought more comfort to many a poor soul, than the cordial draughts she administered, or the cheery words that welcomed all, making of the hospital a home.”²⁹ Smith recalled how Ropes was genuinely concerned for the soldiers she cared for. He said her face looked “so distraught from all the dying and wounded men.” He remembered her bringing a mug of hot brandy to the injured and receiving cries of “Bully for you, ma’m,” and ‘God Bless you,’ as they were handed the drink. This would either provide them with the strength they needed to continue hanging on or was the last liquid they would ever drink. However, Mrs. Ropes soon contracted typhoid pneumonia and grew very ill.³⁰ “I would go to her bed and ask how she was feeling today,” Dr. Smith recalled. She then said to him smiling “Surgeon Smith, the little devils are at work again, chiseling and picking at me, and I must die.”³¹ She died on January 20, 1863.

Smith was also known for his strength in treating patients with smallpox. Not only did he treat each smallpox patient medically, but also catered to their emotional and mental needs as well. He would go to the “pest house” where all the small pox cases were sent some three miles outside the city and read the newspaper and journals to the sick. This was very unique for a doctor in these hospitals as nurses were typically known for performing these duties. Although Smith thought he would never contract the disease himself, he did eventually catch it. Smith

²⁴ “Experience of Army Surgeon”

²⁵ Robin Oliveria. *My Name is Mary Sutter*. (New York: Viking, The Penguin Group, 2011) p. 129

²⁶ Brumgardt, p. 40

²⁷ Brumgardt, p. 40

²⁸ Brumgardt, p. 4

²⁹ Brumgardt, p.5

³⁰ “Experience of Army Surgeon”

³¹ “Experience of Army Surgeon”

suffered a terrible headache and become very ill for three days. He survived and later said that he was glad for the experience because afterwards he considered himself to be immune.³²

Dr. Lee Smith's service as a contract surgeon during the war ended in early June of 1863 and he returned home to his family in Bloomington. He had hoped to be able to serve as a surgeon on the field of battle before returning home but orders were issued by the United States government that discharged all assistant surgeons from duty, so he made his way back to Bloomington.³³ Lee's dedication and passion for the medical field carried him for many years to come. In 1868, while working in his wheat field in Bloomington, William H. Moore, a Civil War Veteran, was struck by lightning. Dr. Smith hurried to the scene and although Moore's horses died, Lee was able to save the man's life.³⁴ Smith also worked as a physician and surgeon for St. Josephs Hospital for many years. He was named Chief of Staff at St. Joseph's hospital in 1903.³⁵

Lee and Elizabeth Smith were staunch Democrats and were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Lee was also a member of the Royal Arch Masons and was voted High Priest in 1871.³⁶ He was the 26th president of the McLean County Medical Society and held his membership longer than any other living member.

After suffering a collapse which forced him to bed rest for four days, Dr. Lee Smith died at the age of 79 on October 17, 1911. People from Bloomington said that just a week earlier he was seen as energetic and youthful as his usual self.³⁷ Smith was known throughout Bloomington as not only a congenial and companionable doctor and person, but also as a friend, "a man who journeyed through heat, sleet and snow to care for his patients. He never adopted the changing modern ways of the doctor." He was an "active and energetic practitioner. Neither weather nor patient's inability to remunerate deterred him from performing his professional duties." His funeral brought many people from the community together as they remembered their honest and courteous friend. The eulogy read "Over the broad prairies he might be seen riding through the storm to relieve the sufferings of those early settlers who cleared the way for us."³⁸ He was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

By: Rachael Kramp, 2011

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2011

³² "Experience of Army Surgeon"

³³ "The Old time Doctor"

³⁴ Bateman, p. 804

³⁵ "Hospital Edition: Big One for St. Joseph's," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 30, 1903

³⁶ "Royal Arch Masons to Celebrate," *The Daily Pantagraph*, September 14, 1906

³⁷ "Dr. Lee Smith Is Dead"

³⁸ "He Was More than a Doctor, He Was a Friend"