

Dr. Lee Smith (May 8, 1832 – Oct. 17, 1911)

“I’m going to war,” said Dr. George Stipp to Dr. Smith. “Yes, I’m really going. I want you to go along.” “Supply me with a job I can accept, and I will come,” Smith replied. Thus began Dr. Lee Smith’s great Civil War service to his country. Good as his word, Dr. Stipp soon sent Dr. Smith an offer of a job in Washington, D.C. with the Corps of Surgeons.

Dr. Lee Smith was born in 1832 in Hudson, Illinois. His father came to McLean County from Indiana in 1830 and was one of the earliest settlers in the area. The first of eight children, Lee was said to have been born in the early days of the Blackhawk War. He learned to hunt at an early age and killed his first deer at the age of eight. After finishing his early education at the Hudson school, Lee studied agriculture and medicine at the new Illinois Wesleyan University in 1850. At that time, medical students were required to “read medicine” in the office of a practicing physician. He studied with Dr. E.L. Hoover in Bloomington. Later, he would buy Dr. Hoover’s home and practice. He graduated from IWU in 1853 in the first graduating class. He then began studies at Rush Medical College in Chicago. He completed his course there in 1856.

That fall he moved to Bloomington where he would live the rest of his life. At first 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 were married in February, 1857 in New Lisbon, and left by train that very day for Bloomington where they would make their home on Mulberry St. They would have three children.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in April of 1861, it quickly became apparent that the military had an urgent need for more medical facilities, doctors, surgeons, and nurses. Sick and wounded began pouring in from battlefields. The government quickly began to establish hospitals. During the first years of the war, these hospitals were frequently improvised in buildings such as hotels, seminaries, jails, or even warehouses. One of the earliest, established just outside of Washington D.C., was the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, D.C. where Smith served as a surgeon in the Union Army.

When he entered service in December, 1862, Smith was made a captain in the surgeon corps of the United States Army. He served as an assistant contract surgeon at the Union Hotel Hospital with his friend, Dr. Stipp. This former hotel had been built in 1796 and had hosted many presidents and prominent figures in its time. But it was now “an unsavory old three storied building...which aggravated the already prevalent problems of disease” because of the closeness of bathrooms and kitchens and an extremely unclean environment.

During his first days there, wounded soldiers flooded the hospital from the Battle of Fredericksburg. Injured and dying soldiers lined up and down hospital hallways waiting to be treated. There was little rest or down time for doctors during the Civil War. Particularly in Washington, D.C., there was a steady stream. Doctors rushed from patient to patient with their “housewives” or surgeon’s kits, cutting, sawing, piercing or patching up soldiers as best they could. They had to treat and evacuate patients as fast as they could to be ready for the next wave from the next battle.

Not only did Smith assist in treating legless soldiers or bloody gunshot wounds, he also treated diseases. Due to the terribly unsanitary conditions and inadequate space, disease, especially typhoid, malaria and dysentery spread like wildfire. Smith was also known for his ability to treat smallpox patients. He would go to the “pest house” where all small pox cases were sent outside the city and care for their emotional and mental, as well as medical needs. He

eventually caught the disease and was very ill. However, later in life, he attributed his immunity to small pox from having contracted it during his time in service.

In June of 1863, Dr. Smith's contract with the U.S. Army ended. Although he had hoped to serve as a battlefield surgeon, the army had decided to discharge all surgeons with his classification. He returned to Bloomington and his practice there.

In the years which followed, Dr. Smith became known as a congenial and companionable doctor and friend, "a man who journeyed through heat, sleet and snow to care for his patients." It was remembered that "neither weather nor patient's inability to remunerate (pay), deterred him from performing his professional duties." He was also a physician and surgeon for St. Joseph's Hospital for many years. In 1903 he was named Chief of Staff there.

Lee and Elizabeth Smith were staunch Democrats and were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Lee was also a Mason and the 26th president of the McLean County Medical Society. He died at the age of 79 in 1911 and is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

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Discussion Question: Using the information in this story, what were medical practices like in the 1860s? How would they be different today?