

IOWA HISTORY



Photo courtesy Library of Congress
Civil War nurse writing a letter for a wounded soldier in a hospital bed.

“Aunt Becky” Young Disregards Authority for Her Boys

“I never had a rude word from a soldier in my life. I’ve met rebuffs from steamboat captains and paymasters and that kind of fish, but never from one of the boys!” Aunt Becky Young told a reporter with the *Chicago Tribune* in 1888.

“The boys” were the soldiers of the Civil War, and Young had won their admiration when she served in field hospitals administering to the needs of the wounded. Her name wasn’t Becky, and she was no one’s aunt. She was born Sarah Graham in New York in 1830 and married Abel O. Palmer. He died leaving her with two children. When war broke out she joined the army as a nurse.

At first wounded soldiers referred to her as “mother.” But she objected to that because she was much younger than many of the men. She and the soldiers compromised with the title “Aunt Becky,” and it stuck.

“Undersized, lean and bent of body,” Aunt Becky cheered and fed the wounded in the field. Working in hospital tents she “helped to make history in an obscure and toilsome way.” Often she was the only woman in camp for months at a time.

The *National Tribune* newspaper explained how Aunt Becky came to wear her unusual clothing. Shortly after her arrival at the front, her wardrobe was stolen. It didn’t take her long to discover the value of the sturdy fabric that covered the mattresses. From that point on she used bed ticking to make dresses that could withstand the blood and filth of the field hospital.

Soldiers had plenty of stories about their “Aunt Becky.” They often centered around her “disregard of authority” when she “felt her own good sense was the better law.”

There was the time the chief cook at camp took a dislike to Aunt Becky. He was tired of her constantly asking for extra food for her patients. He ordered his subordinates to refrain from giving her special rations. But Becky found a way around the cook. Often when she left the mess tent the folds of her cloak concealed “chunks of dried beef, basins of custards and balls of butter.”

Once when some of the more mobile recovering soldiers made raids into the nearby woods and captured some pigs, Aunt Becky roasted the delicacies to “perfection.” Just before they were about to eat, one of her patients warned her, “O, Aunt Becky, hide the pig. Col. Tracy’s coming.”

“Hide the pig? Oh, no,” she said, “Col. Tracy shall stay to dinner; the pig is nicely done.” And it was reported that the colonel did stay to enjoy the meal.

And there was the time Aunt Becky promised a dying patient that he would be properly buried in a wood box. She had one constructed for the soldier, ready for his body when the time came. But when the day of his burial arrived, the box could not be found. Aunt Becky stormed to the burial site and stopped the chaplain in mid-prayer. “What is prayer to a promise?” she demanded. Despite the chaplain’s protests, she ordered the body removed from the dirt grave. The soldier was reburied in a wood box, just as Aunt Becky had promised.

Aunt Becky herself liked to tell the story of her battle to get beds for her patients who had to lie on the dirt floors of the hospital tents. She knew there was a

large supply of wood near the camp; and although she wanted it for constructing beds, one of the officers was “carefully guarding it from destruction” because he was “sweet” on the owner’s daughter.

When the officer visited her hospital, he couldn’t help but overhear Aunt Becky’s loud comments to others, “If it wasn’t for the provost marshal, we should have cots for the men.” Pointing to a soldier lying on the ground with a severe lung wound she continued, “I wish *he* would lay in place of that soldier, and I had the privilege of seeing him try the soft floor till I was satisfied.” She added that the officer “colored and withdrew” from the tent.

After the war, Aunt Becky married a veteran named David Young, and they moved to Des Moines, Iowa. She became an honorary member of the Joe Hooker Post of the Grand Army of the Republic and regularly attended national Civil War veterans’ conventions, where many of the old soldiers continued to call her their “Aunt Becky.” And she always called them “the boys.”

At the 1888 convention, a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* pointed out that “your boys are rather bald-headed and gray for that title;” and she replied, “They were boys *there!* They *are* boys!”

To read Sarah Palmer’s autobiography search online for “The Story of Aunt Becky’s Army-Life” published in 1867.

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Sources

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