

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Hospital in Philippine Islands during Spanish-American War

A Hero in Skirts

When the students of Mrs. Jennie Huegle's classroom in Des Moines contributed the money they collected at their spring program to the Della Weeks Fund in June 1898, they were part of a city-wide effort to make sure she joined the soldiers of the 51st Regiment.

Della, a trained nurse, wanted nothing more than to serve the Iowa soldiers who were about to ship out to Camp Merritt in San Francisco. Their ultimate destination was the Philippine Islands, where American troops were joining forces with Filipino rebels in fighting Spain in the Spanish-American War.

When the Army refused Della a place with the 51st, she appealed to her friends in the Des Moines area. Newspapers, women's groups and school children pulled together to secure money to pay for her travel to Camp Merritt. By mid-June \$100 had been collected and Della was on her way.

Arriving at the Army camp, Della sent word back to Iowa that the boys were “well and happy.” However, that soon changed. Typhoid fever, measles and other serious maladies began to take their toll on the soldiers.

Della, described as “a wee morsel of a woman” with “a coil of jet black hair topped off with an officer’s cap,” hit the ground running at the hospital where the soldiers of the 51st were sent. In addition to providing medical services, Della cooked meals and used her small savings to buy coal for the cook stoves. A Des Moines soldier wrote home telling his parents she was “worth twice her weight in gold.” As the summer wore on, it was reported that “every man in the regiment” would “lay down his life” for Della.

Della’s co-workers at the hospital held her in the highest esteem also. “If we could all get women like Miss Weeks to assist us, we could accomplish 10 times as much,” a surgeon said.

As valuable as Della was to the Army, she still was working as a volunteer. The citizens of Des Moines continued to raise money for her, and she managed to live on those funds. Even the soldiers of the 51st Regiment pooled their money and donated it to Della. They also gave her a pair of “soft, tan kid boots, cap and collar with the regiment’s insignias.”

As the regiment prepared to leave for the Philippines in late summer and early fall, Della was denied her request to travel with the soldiers. And again businesses and private individuals began to raise money for her travel and salary. Banks, lumber companies, hardware stores, churches, Younkers department store and Drake University contributed to the cause.

Finally in November the Army agreed to hire Della at a salary of \$30 per month and she found herself on the steamer, *St. Paul*, headed to Manila, Philippines. She was stationed at the Corregidor Convalescent hospital located about 30 miles from Manila.

There she cared for the Iowa men as well as soldiers from other states. In summer 1899 she wrote back to a friend in Iowa, “It seems the good Lord has been watching over our brave boys, for so few have been wounded, so far, or killed in battle.” However, many were afflicted with various diseases.

“If the boys are not sent home soon there will not be many to come home. So many are sick,” Della wrote. “In this tropical climate when anyone gets sick it takes months to fully regain strength. We are in hopes that our stay here will be short so we are anxious to send all home.”

By November 1899 the boys of the 51st and Della were safely back home in Des Moines. The soldiers returned to their homes across Iowa, but Della continued nursing wherever she was needed. When a hurricane hit Galveston, Texas, in 1900 she rushed to aid the victims working “night and day” in an emergency hospital. Returning to Des Moines she continued to work as a nurse until 1911, when she surprised all her friends by moving to Yakima, Washington, to marry a man named B.F. Moore.

Della died in 1934. Her nurses’ uniform was donated to the Iowa historical museum.
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