

The Sentinel

A Civil War Surgeon Comes to Town

As with so many things such as armaments, tactics, etc., the Civil War was a watershed in the advancement of medical technology. Before the war, medicine had not changed much in 200 years. But between 1861 and 1865, the carnage that was produced by 620,000 deaths and countless more life-changing injuries forced a constant examination of the methods and technologies of the medical art.

Visiting the Roundtable “stage” this month was Fred Schaefer, a senior surgical assistant with Ortho Indy, a small, private hospital specializing in the care of many of the same types of injuries and procedures that faced the physicians of the Civil War almost a century and a half ago. Beside medicine being his vocation, re-enacting the life of a Civil War surgeon is also Fred’s avocation which he practices regularly both in the Indianapolis area and around the Midwest and even the country. He is affiliated with the Lilly Museum of the Civil War on Monument Circle and most recently participated as a “performer” at the Tall Stacks event in Cincinnati.

The evening’s program began with a very thorough audio/video presentation on the many aspects of medicine during the war, including the use of drugs, the surgical instruments in a typical physician’s kit, the advancements of hospitals, the rise of the nurse corps along with some of the women who gained prominence during the war such as Clara Barton, Elizabeth Thorn, Mary Bickerdyke, Eliza George of Fort Wayne and others. Also covered were the advances in ambulances, the use of anesthetics, the techniques of an amputation (one of the most common medical procedures of the war) and much, much more.

Some fascinating specifics from the talk included the “myth-buster” that anesthetics were not used. They were, in fact, used extensively. Chloroform and ether were the most common. Another myth is that deaths directly from battle wounds accounted for most of the total 620,000 deaths on both sides, although many in attendance assumed that the largest segment was from post wound infections. While these were legion, there actually were effective, if crude, antiseptics and antibiotics to deal with them after infection set in. The



Fred Schaefer “amputates” a member’s leg

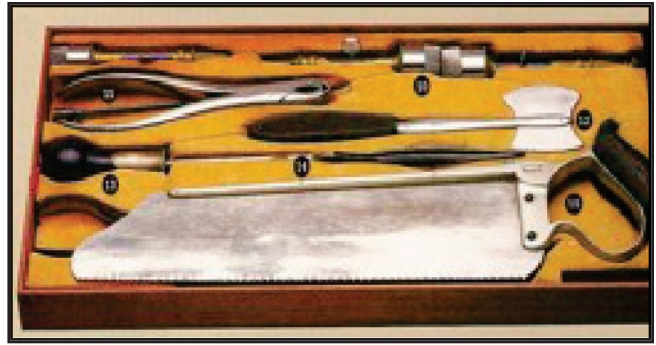


Staged photo of a supposed amputation with a Union ambulance in the background

number one cause of death was very simply the cholera and dysentery that men got from drinking tainted water. Experts had no idea about the bacteria in the water, then had no effective drugs to combat such diseases when they took hold. The final “act” in Mr. Schaefer’s evening of enlightenment was, however, the best and most dramatic. With the assistance of three eager volunteers from the audience, an “actual” amputation of the lower right leg of one of our members was performed with equipment that our “surgeon” brought with him. These were all genuine field articles typical of what any Civil War doctor would have used including a tourniquet, Satterlee saw, bullet probe, bone chipper and suture set, complete

with silk sutures. The omnipresent whiskey was there as well, but we learned that it was actually more to boost the doctor's spirits than to deaden the victim's! While our "wounded" volunteer did, in the end, leave with all limbs intact, the effect was stunning in giving a very accurate and true sense of the technique, difficulty, pain, and amazing speed with which battlefield amputations were performed.

Needless to say, Mr. Schaefer enthralled the audience for a full ninety minutes and it was clear that most would have stayed longer if the need had been there. Kudos to you, Fred!



Typical surgeon's kit used during the war

Update on Libby Prison Timbers

Rather than a review, the estate of local Monroe County native Rod Wampler was auctioned on October 7th. Some unique Civil War-related items that were auctioned were some 123 floor joists from Libby Prison, the infamous Confederate prison in Richmond, VA.

Fort Wayne resident and history buff Bob Willey, in Bloomington on other business, surprised the MCCWR membership with a drop-in visit at the November meeting and was persuaded (well, as he admits, it doesn't take much persuading to get him up in front of an audience!) to give an account of the auction and of his intended use of the timbers.

As it turned out, he encountered at least two people before the sale that every intention of using these revered historical artifacts for all the wrong purposes. One was going to have them milled in to some lumber for a home building project, while the other was actually going to cut them into small squares and sell them on E-Bay! That last one set Bob determinedly on a mission and soon the timbers were safely in his possession. He simply decided he *would not* be outbid.

He has already been in contact with the National Museum of the Civil War in Harrisburg, PA, the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, VA, the Civil War Preservation Trust, the National Park Service and others, all of whom are interested in purchasing these valuable connections to the past. Bob would very much like to see at least a small section of the famous prison reconstructed using these items as a base to build from. We hope he makes it!

Come and Join Us in Holiday Fellowship!

Rather than a program in December, the MCCWR will be having our first annual holiday dinner during the normal meeting time on the 12th of the month.

While some details are still being worked out, the plan is to have a pitch-in type meal at the Monroe County History Center, with the MCCWR providing the main course, table service and drinks while our members bring a side dish to share with others. Souses and children are encouraged to attend, as well as friends.

These types of evenings are great for sharing personal experiences in studying the war, discussing Civil War travel in the past or yet to come, hashing over the latest book you've read or whatever. In the end, the intent is to simply to be able to relax and take the time to enjoy each other's company in a much less formal atmosphere than the usual meeting format. Please plan on attending. One of our officers will be contacting everyone for RSVP's in the near future.

Be a Charter Member!

Michael Maben, a local Civil War descendant, visited the November meeting briefly to fill the membership in on a new organization in the state, the Society of Indiana Families in the Civil War. This group is intent on finding and, hopefully, getting anyone in the state with a verifiable, traceable genealogical connection to the Civil War in Indian to join. While verification is not easy, it is important that such direct connections to our state's history be recognized and preserved. If you believe you qualify for membership and are interested in joining, please contact our secretary, David Wiley, for specifics and an application form.

Contact Information

Steve Rolfe, President • 336-0757

David Wiley, Secretary • 337-0649

Kevin Shiflet, Treasurer • 876-2415

Deborah Cronin, Hospitality • 323-9615

Call any of the above people for questions, suggestions or comments regarding the Roundtable.