

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Mary Winchester's War

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

This article first appeared in the *Addison Independent* in May 2008. Reproduced with permission.

There is a difference between the things we know in our heads and the things we know in our hearts. Our heads tell us that people suffered during the Civil War, but we are uneasily aware that their pain is not quite real to us. Yet sometimes it happens that a story in an old document grabs us and takes us in, connecting us to the people of that lost world.

This is the story of Mary Winchester's Civil War, as recounted in the transcript of her memoir, which now resides in the archives of the Sheldon Museum. Born Mary Catherine Severance, in 1821, she grew up in a Middlebury farming family whose members were known for having good brains and little money. Her struggles to get an education—the focus of an upcoming article by historian Deborah Clifford—show a bright young woman grabbing what learning she could between long stints of housework and weaving.

In 1848, Mary married a recent Middlebury College graduate, Warren Winchester, who had been one of her tutors at the Munger St. School. She later wrote of their courtship, “He loaned me books, talked, sang, and walked with me, fashioned my tastes, made clearer my reverence for nature and for God, and in a few years transformed me.”

Warren was soon ordained and began serving in Congregational churches around New England. When the Civil War broke out, he became a U.S. Army Chaplain, moving with the troops, while she remained back home in Middlebury with their four small children. After a year spent apart, he wrote excitedly to say he would be stationed at a military hospital in Washington D.C. for a few months, urging her to bring the children down so they could all be together for awhile.

Her narrative is broken by the insertion of a copy of a letter she wrote to her brother, Milton Severance, from Washington D.C., dated April 28, 1863. Her account of the trip and its devastating developments brings us back to a time when shocking news often came by mail. Forty years later, she decided to let the letter she wrote at the time tell the tale.

She told him that she and the children, three little girls and a boy, left Middlebury on the train that February, “Full of life & hope & joyous at the prospect of being again united with the dear Husband & Father.” The parents were full of plans for showing the children all the wonderful sights of the capitol.

Two weeks into their happy reunion, they took them to Sabbath services at the army hospital. The four were wonderful little singers, and their Father had given them hymn books and taught them some tunes so they could cheer the sick soldiers. The proud mother wrote that, “Their little voices all blended with the rest...and many a brave Soldier had to wipe his eyes—as he was so forcibly reminded of his own little ones at home, from whom this cruel war had separated him.”

That evening, the youngest daughter, four-year-old Nellie, mentioned an earache and sore throat; but as she didn’t complain, her mother did not realize how sick she was. She grew more listless, and on Thursday a physician was called, who told the frightened parents that she had diphtheria. This dreaded bacterial infection killed its many victims by causing a thick membrane to develop in their throats that could lead to suffocation. In an age before germ theory, the well-meaning parents had not realized that singing for the sick soldiers had exposed the children to a huge risk.

The disease progressed rapidly. Imagine the powerless uncle reading his sister’s letter, as she recounted Nellie’s last hours. The little girl grew very agitated, as she found it harder to breathe. Mary wrote that, “She gave a most imploring look to me, & then to her Father...and her Father said to her, “Nellie, we cannot help you.”” About five in the morning, she took her last breath.

There was worse to come. The grieving mother told her brother, “The children took Nellie’s death very hard.” The oldest sister, named Mary, like her mother, “would go about from room to room, crying and repeating [Nellie’s] little acts.” The family told stories of her sweet ways. Her mother remembered how, “She amused my father [Ebenezer Severance] very much with her little prattle. One morning at the breakfast table she looked with a sweet smile to her grandpa and asked him, “Which looks the brightest, me or the Sun?” He replied, “Oh, I guess the Sun.” Then she shook her head and said, “No, I do.””

Young Mary was the next to show symptoms. Her throat, too, began to swell, and, “Soon after, she wished to give away all her little valuables.” She doled them out to her loved ones: a toy bureau for Mother, the treasures Nellie had given her for Papa, her tea set to their middle sister, Minnie, and a little bag of marbles to her brother, Willie. The account of her last night is related in such harrowing detail that I will spare you, gentle readers. Her parents took comfort in their belief that she had died with full faith in her Lord, and would be reunited with her little sister.

No battlefield sufferers struggled more, or felt more pain, than the collateral damage wreaked on the Army chaplain’s family. Minnie, aged 7, was the last to be lost. As she began to show the familiar symptoms, she mourned that she had no one to give her toys to anymore, since her brother would not care for her girlish things. Instead, she told her mother, “I want you to have my dollies,”—her dearest treasures.” She, too, suffered, but her faith seemed to calm her as she asked her father, “Papa, will you tell me when you think I am dying?” Her loving parents watched helplessly, as she, too, slipped away.

Now there was just their six-year-old son, Willie. He seemed the sickest of all, and yet he was the only one to survive this horrible battle. As he slowly recovered, he cried for his lost siblings and asked his mother, “Do the sisters know the reason, now, why everything is done?”

The letter to Milton Severance closes with Mary’s account of the emptiness of that Washington spring, where, “The grass is tall & green...But there is a strange sadness about it all to me. The Band plays gaily in the shady grove just below our dwelling...but it fills my heart with sorrow rather than joy.” She went from room to room expecting to find her children again, and “to gaze into their speaking eyes.” Most of her time was spent alone, as her husband was busy at the hospital, ministering to the many incoming wounded from the Union defeat at Chancellorsville. Through this test of her faith, she prayed that. “these afflictions may be a blessing & bring me into close communion with Him who makes no mistakes.”

Looking back on this terrible time from the perspective of old age, Mary Winchester remembered again how, “At times our affliction seemed almost more than we could bear—to have three, bright, happy, lovely, little girls taken in three weeks was a terrible blow.” But as the Civil War raged all around, the couple retained the perspective that, “We were not the only sufferers.” Many wives came to the hospital looking for their husbands, and Chaplain Winchester had to give them the news they dreaded. Mary recalled how, “Sometimes thoughtless young men walking on the street would burst out in loud laughter, and it seemed to me like mockery. I could not see how anyone could laugh when there was so much suffering and sorrow in the country.”

The war ended, and Mary and Warren Winchester longed to come home to heal in the Green Mountains. In 1867, he was called to be pastor of the Bridport Congregational Church, where they stayed for fourteen years. Her brother, Milton, had been ordained, and was made the minister of the neighboring church in Orwell. There were some happier times. She enjoyed the active life of a minister’s wife, helping the parishioners, teaching Sunday School and serving as the president of the Bridport Women’s Christian Temperance Union.

Mary Winchester’s struggles were not at an end. She bore twelve children altogether, and only one, their son, Benjamin, lived to adulthood. After the death of her beloved husband and soul mate in 1889, she spent the rest of her long life with Ben and his family, dying in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1913, at age 91. Her family brought her back to Vermont, and buried her in the Munger St. cemetery, beneath the Green Mountains she loved.