

An 1864 Christmas at Fort Steilacoom

**Saturday, December 13, 2014
4:00 to 7:30 PM**



You are invited to Join the Soldiers of Company K, 1st Washington Volunteers, their Ladies, children and Guests in a 1864 style Christmas Celebration! A guided candlelight tour will depict the joys of the holiday season as it was celebrated at Fort Steilacoom in 1864. Enjoy period decorations, crafts, music and other activities in the original buildings of Historic Fort Steilacoom. Tickets for Sale at the Door: Adults \$5. Children \$3. and Families \$10.

We are located at 9601 Steilacoom Blvd. S. W. Lakewood, WA
(on the grounds of Western State Hospital)
Information: 253-582-5838 or www.historicfortsteilacoom.org

Fort Steilacoom

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The Pacific Northwest and the United States Sanitary Commission: A Matter of Relevance

by Kristen McPherson

The weather had not been normal as of late. Instead of the persistent rains and occasional frosts typical in late November, pervasive fog haunted the Washington Territory. Only the occasional sun and starlight breaks permeated this fog.¹ Yet, it was on this dark and dense night of November 29, 1864, that the residents of Steilacoom City and nearby Olympia were willing to brave the elements. Donning their best millinery and fashionable suits and dresses, the citizens of the Pacific Northwest turned out for one of the biggest and most successful of the war-time dances.

While the proper supper and performances of the skilled musician were enjoyed by all, these dancers were well aware that there was much more at stake than a gay evening. Raising money for the United States Sanitary Fund was not just an opportunity to support the war effort, it would prove the Territory's loyalty to the Union and potentially secure the blessings that would flow from a Union victory.

As the American Civil War claimed thousands of lives and tore an already divided nation further apart, the Washington Territory was determined to show its support for the Union. Clearly aware of skepticism that there may be Southern leaning, the Washington Territory wanted



Seal of the United States Sanitary Commission.

President Abraham Lincoln to know where they stood.

While not yet a state of the Union, nor a significant contributor of soldiers to the cause, the people of the territory sought whatever influence they could muster. The strongest support that they could offer toward subduing the rebellion was to contribute financially to the efforts of the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC).

Despite the tangible and cultural divide created by its remote location, the patriotic people of the Pacific Northwest were determined to prove to their government that they were loyal and supportive Americans. Its citizens did not want to be forgotten in the aftermath of a Union victory. They sought to overcome the stigma of a region whose loyalty to the Union was suspect. As a result, the Pacific

Northwest mobilized its efforts in impressive amounts, proving its worth and undying loyalty. The most convincing way that they could prove their devotion to a skeptical nation was through their unequivocal support of the United States Sanitary Commission.

The challenges of this modern war were evident as the Civil War began. Contributing greatly to the already deadly cost of war were the "horrors" that resulted from being ill prepared. Having learned from the British lessons of the Crimean War that poor diet, health and sanitation contributed greatly to casualty rates, Americans sought to counter those affects.

The supporters of the USSC believed in "structured charity" to contribute directly goods such as clothing, blankets, camp goods, and food. USSC materials were to be distributed when it was determined that the government had failed to provide them. Then, supplies would be distributed on a basis of apparent need with an explanation given as to how the need came about, and it would have to be shown why the commission was called, unless it was directly a result of the surgeon's request.²

(Continued on page 3)

² Charles Janeway Stille, *History of the US Sanitary Commission, The General Report of Its Work During the War of the Rebellion*, (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1868), 246 Google Books.

¹ "Fogs," *Puget Sound Herald*, November 26, 1862

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Alan Archambault signs one of his new books for a grandson of Loran Bures.

President's Message



HFSA celebrated the 165th anniversary of the establishment of Fort Steilacoom at the annual Founders' Day picnic during August.

It has been a productive year. Thanks to the persistence of Joe Lewis and Ken Morgan, a 15 year lease of the four Fort Steilacoom buildings has been signed with the State of Washington. This has allowed progress to be made toward using the funds appropriated through the efforts of the late Senator Michael Carrell to paint and begin much needed repairs to the buildings.

A big "thank you" to Lawrence Bateman for his service as president of Historic Fort Steilacoom Association from October 2009 to October 2014. Carol Stout, who previously served two terms as president, again accepted that responsibility at the Annual Meeting election in October. Loran Bures was elected 2nd VP and Michael McGuire was reconfirmed as Treasurer. Board members elected to a new two-year term are Bill Arends, Bernard Bateman and Orville Stout. Orville had previously served as a director and secretary for 17 years

and has continued as newsletter editor for 27 years. Continuing incumbents are listed in the directory above this column.

Loran Bures has made arrangements with The Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War to transfer a large collection of Civil War books to the Fort Steilacoom library so that they can be made available to researchers by appointment. Jackie Dock presented a special edition of *Gone with the Wind* to the fort, and two boxes of books were donated by Mike Quayle for sale in the gift shop.

Other donations received this year have included three dresses and two period woven coverlet blankets from Charlotte Medlock, and an 1830s child bed, laundry dasher, and an Overshot Lindsay Wooley coverlet from Sharon Klein. Beth Julian entrusted the fort with the cradle that John and Ellen Flett's daughter Annie (born in 1864) slept in and the blanket that covered her. We also thank others who gave treasured gifts to the fort.

A new display featuring a military guardhouse and tools used by a blacksmith was installed in the upstairs of Quarters 4 by John Roten with help from Lawrence and Bernie Bateman. Nancy Keller-Scholz

made lovely period drapes for the living room and curtains for the dining room in Quarters 1. Tom Melberg repainted the Fort Steilacoom sign and maintains the large banner that advertises fort events. And Bernie spends many hours doing needed maintenance and leading groups on tours of the fort buildings. This has included visiting groups from Joint Base Lewis McChord and schools. Reenactors from the fort have also gone out into the community to educate the public.

Attendance at the many fort events has been very good this year. We hope you have been able to attend these programs, which have included the Valentine Tea, the story of the pioneer Flett family by Beth Julian, the impact of the Civil War on Washington Territory by John McPherson, *American Lake Vignettes*, by Nancy Covert, and Alan Archambault's presentation of his books depicting Civil War infantry. Two living history days with reenactors in period dress were also featured. And we hope to see you at our 1864 *Christmas at Fort Steilacoom* candle-light event between 4 and 7:30 p.m. on December 13.

Carol E. Stout

nature of the newspaper coverage of the day. Not only were the Steilacoom and Olympia residents in attendance at this lavish event proud of their work for hosting such a civilized and refined event in the midst of the remote territory, but the attention devoted to the event by Prosch shows the significance of their actions. These were not people geographically and, as some had speculated, politically divided from the rest of the warring nation, but were very much citizens of the Republic in all that those duties and responsibilities entailed.

While the efforts of the Washington Territory in raising funds for the Sanitary Commission were impressive, the state of Oregon was not to be outdone. A rivalry ensued between the various locales of the Pacific Northwest, as noted by the newspapers of the region. The *Washington Statesman* reported in January of 1863 that, "We want our friends in the East to know that there is such a place as Washington Territory and that her citizens sympathize as strongly as Oregon, or any other portion of the Union, with our sick and wounded soldiers. We do not believe our Territory will be very far behind Oregon in her contributions."¹⁸

The efforts of the people of Walla Walla, in the eastern part of the Territory on the Idaho border, were also organizing a ball in 1864.¹⁹ The paper reported that the ladies of the event were considering a "starvation party" to further promote their profits.²⁰ As was true with Washington's fundraising reports, the various totals for regions were displayed in the paper.

The Sanitary Fund contributions on election day given by the Shoshone, Idaho, and Nez Perces Counties were \$105, \$100, and \$47.50, respectively.²¹ The Idaho Territory had newly sepa-

¹⁸ "Our Sanitary Fund," *Washington Standard*, November 29, 1862.

¹⁹ "Sanitary Ball," *Wash. Statesman*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ "Sanitary Fund," *Washington Statesman*, November 14, 1863.



Reenactment at Fort Steilacoom Park, 1994

Civil War battlefield hospital aided by Sanitary Commission women.

rated from Washington in 1863 and was noted for its higher number of "semi-secessionists."²² These secessionists were dubbed Sterling Price's "Left Wing." Despite this, the papers still touted the successes of the people of the region to support the efforts of the Union in securing a victory in the Civil War.

It was not just the local press that noted the successful fundraising efforts of the Pacific Northwest. In 1863, Dr. Bellows acknowledged the yeoman efforts of the region. His speech highlighted a recent letter to the editor in a local paper: "You will see that our little territory [Washington Territory] figures proudly for her size and wealth; and her contribution was received with warm applause."

It is interesting to note that the loyalty of the region does not seem to be in dispute by the rest of the nation. Perhaps only political interests were at play in those conclusions. Despite their geographic distance, their generosity, though, was not unrecognized at the national level. Stille noted that "No such splendid beneficence of a state to distant

²² *Ibid.*

objects, for general purposes under unknown almoners over whom the State had no control, and where no visible monument was to remain, was ever yet recorded."²³ Clearly, the residents of Oregon and Washington Territory, despite their conflict with one another, shared a common interest. They were determined to prove to a war-torn nation their dedication to securing a Union victory.

The Territory's generous contributions to the Sanitary Commission were a logical and effective expression of its solidarity with the Union cause. The territory's remote locale did not mean that this citizenry was not to be taken seriously. In April of 1864, Charles Prosch again reported on the weather. He noted that it had "rained almost uninterruptedly" but that the "season for rains has now passed," anticipating "a long period of bright and sunny weather."²⁴ The end of the Civil War worked in concert with Mother Nature to secure that bright future for the Pacific Northwest.

²³ Stille, 242.

²⁴ "Weather," *Puget Sound Herald*, April 2, 1864.

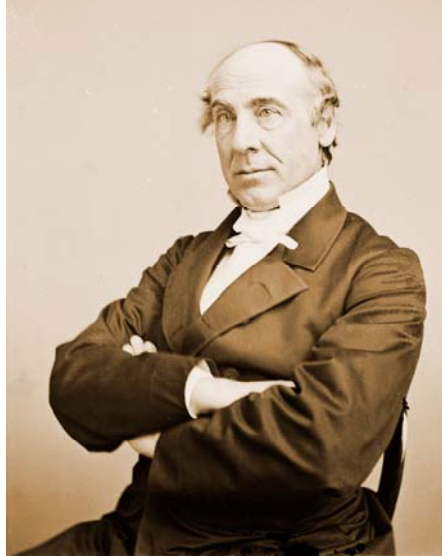
Sanitary Commission (from p. 1)

The best way to understand the needs that the Sanitary Commission sought to fill is through the writings of the women who did this work. Mrs. Eliza C. Porter, the wife of Reverend Jeremiah Porter of Chicago, kept a diary that was published without her knowledge in a Sanitary Commission bulletin. In 1864 Mrs. Porter described poor hospital conditions and the work that they did to improve those conditions:

I have just visited a tent filled with "amputated cases." They are noble young men, the pride and hope of living families at the North, but most of them are so low that they will never again return to them. Each had a special request for "something that he could relish." I made my way quickly down from the heights, where the hospital tents are pitched, and sought for the food they craved. I found it among the goods of the Sanitary Commission - and now the dried currants, cherries, and other fruit are stewing; we have unsoldered cans containing condensed milk and preserved fruit—and the poor fellows will not be disappointed in their expectations.³

According to the women's diaries of the time, soldiers were frequently in want of sustenance. Scurvy was the constant plague of the soldier, and the USSC sought to rectify this. As Mrs. Stephen Barker, the wife of a reverend from Massachusetts wrote in 1864:

The Commissary Department issued vegetables in such small quantities that they did not affect the condition of the troops in any appreciable degree. Surgeons immediately sought the Sanitary Commission. The demand soon became greater than the supply. At first they wanted nothing but vegetables, for having these, they said, all other discomforts would become as nothing.⁴



Henry Bellows

Dorothea Dix, appointed by Lincoln as Superintendent of Nurses during the Civil War, inspired Henry Bellows to create a commission to support the federal medical effort. The Sanitary Commission worked to reform the Medical Bureau.⁵ The Commission's prevention goal included putting an end to "incompetency, inefficiency, and contracted ideas" common in the Bureau.⁶

The Commission addressed the needs of wounded soldiers that had been overlooked previously through standard, established military organizations.

None of this aid or reform happened without substantial financial backing. The work of the USSC was nearly entirely dependent on the donations of private parties. Elaborate fundraising opportunities were common, including activities such as balls and dances sold to civilians as a way to show patriotism and support the war effort.

Beyond its extraordinary fundraising efforts, the effects of the USSC could be measured in the amount of lives that it saved. Indeed, the Sanitary Commission proved its worth in helping reduce the mortality rate.

And the Sanitary Commission as a whole contributed greatly to the health and well-being of the soldiers risking their lives in combat and in the unsanitary conditions that life beyond the battle field presented.

The Sanitary Commission was funded by donations from all regions of the Union. The commission, with "exclusive direction" in the relief of armies in areas west of the Mississippi River, fell under the jurisdiction of the Western Sanitary Commission,⁷ an independent entity headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri.

The duties of the Western chapter were numerous. Among them were to provide medical supplies to Mississippi gun boats and hospital steamers, of which they had a near monopoly. They were to maintain agents and hospital stores at all important western fronts. Additionally, they set up soldiers' homes that were capable of caring for 600 soldiers a day. They built and supplied hospitals, selected and assigned nurses in the Western Department, and provided badly-needed support for Union refugees.⁸

The result of this work was that they made their work as civilians and this particular agency of aid invaluable not just to the war effort, but for sustaining the lives and well-being of the Federal soldiers well after the conclusion of hostilities. In comparison to national efforts, "...the Western Sanitary Commission did not play second fiddle; its distribution and expenditures amounted from one fifth to one fourth of the amount done by the older group and all its branches."⁹

The people of the West, and the Washington Territory in particular, were committed to this work, as they understood that its value went even beyond that of saving lives, promoting general welfare, and bringing about a Union victory. This was an act of patriotism, and a way that a geographically distant body could

³ LP Brocket and Mary Vaughan, *Women at War*, (Stamford, CT: Longmeadow, 1993), reprint of 1867, 169.

⁴ Brocket and Vaughan, 207-208.

⁵ Maxwell, 297.

⁶ *Ibid*, 296.

⁷ Maxwell, 98.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*.

prove that while mountains may divide them, their loyalty would not waver. As the region vied to be recognized as a vital part of the war effort, this worked to help seal that.

The people of the Pacific Northwest had hoped for just such a conclusion. As a whole, the people of the Pacific Northwest had only the desire to support the Union in its wartime commitment. They had everything to gain by winning this conflict. In fact, the noted Seattle historian, founder, and member of the Washington Territorial Legislature, Arthur Denny, boasted of Washington's loyalty. Measuring this by the Territory's contributions to the United States Sanitary Commission, he gloated of "more contributions per capital for the Sanitary Commission than any other state or territory." This statement may be an exaggeration, but does prove a successful effort, if nothing else.

In the Washington Territory, the first Sanitary Commission chapter was organized at Vancouver with territorial headquarters established at the Territorial capitol of Olympia, near Tumwater Prairie at the southern tip of Puget Sound. Additionally, there were locations at Port Madison, Port Gamble, Monticello, Boisfort Prairie, Port Angeles, Claquato, Yelm, Whidbey Island, Chehalis, Grand Prairie, and Clallam.¹⁰ This is an impressive amount of organizing for an outlying territory. It shows an intentional effort on the part of these citizens to demonstrate a unified and loyal backing of the Union.

The territorial newspaper *Washington Statesman* makes the claim in April of 1864 that the contribution of their territory of the Commission totaled \$14,976.99.¹¹ Without perspective this number may not seem impressive. The publication further asserts, though, that this represents more than \$1 to every man, woman and child in the Territory. If this

assertion is true, this reveals a disproportionate rate of donation to the USSC, further proving the dedication of the region to the cause.¹²

At the south end of the Puget Sound, serving as the military hub of the Washington Territory, sat Steilacoom City. While the city served as a port and hub for trade, the federal government looked to expand its defenses in this Territory. Created in 1849 on lands leased from Hudson Bay's Puget Sound Agricultural Company, Fort Steilacoom became an important part of the defense of the Department of the Pacific.

Perhaps driven by their allegiance to the federal fort near their town, the people of Steilacoom went to great lengths to fundraise for the cause of the USSC. The papers of the day reveal numerous descriptions of the ball, certainly the talk of the town, but also of sustained fundraising efforts throughout the years of the war.

The *Puget Sound Herald* reported in 1862 that a ball was to be held in the Masonic Hall at Steilacoom. "No pains will be spared to make this a most attractive affair, in every way worthy the occasion and the object for which it is gotten up. Let all hold themselves in readiness to contribute their mite toward this much-needed fund."¹³ The extent to which this ball was planned, the careful details that the citizens of Steilacoom City tended to, and the pride evident from the newspaper coverage of the event certainly reveals nothing less than a loyal and devoted citizenry.

The hype surrounding this ball was evident through the publications of the Territory. The *Puget Sound Herald* covered this extensively, anticipating the event that was held on November 29, 1864. The ball appealed to residents beyond just that of Steilacoom City, indeed, drawing attendees from the Territorial

Capital of Olympia as well. The ball was hailed as "One of the largest and most successful of war-time dances."¹⁴

The description of Charles Prosch, editor, while often boastful and lavish in his praise of the south Sound, revealed the desire that Steilacoom, and indeed the region, had in demonstrating its devotion to the Union. While it was common practice at the time to not include a supper with the ball as a tactic to save money and increase profits, the citizens of Steilacoom decided to forgo the "starvation party" and indulge in an elaborate fundraiser.¹⁵ Indeed, no corners were cut in this region's efforts to prove their worth as contributors to the cause of the Civil War.

In his account, Prosch boasted that the Sanitary Fair Ball was "the most signal success, in the matter of balls in Steilacoom, if not in the entire territory." He attributed the success to the "admirable" talents of the organizers where everything "worked to a charm." From the supper that was "recherché and abundant," to the music that was "the best we ever heard," right down to the company dubbed "numerous and unexceptionable," the ball could not be topped.¹⁶

Further setting this ball apart from other perhaps less gallant efforts, was the decision to include a most skilled musician. The fiddler, Henry Hertz, "proved himself not only a master of the violin but also a master of the order of dancing; for his calling was better pronounced, in point of time, than any we had before been favored with."¹⁷

Perhaps just as telling as the success of the event itself was the

¹⁰ McArthur, 188.

¹¹ "Contributions to the Sanitary Fund," *Washington Statesman*, April 9, 1864.

¹² "Bonney Lake History," City of Bonney Lake.

¹³ "Sanitary Ball," *Puget Sound Herald*, November 6, 1862.

¹⁴ Hunt, Hoover, and Floyd Kaylor, "Washington West of the Cascades: Historical and Descriptive," (Chicago: SJ Clarke Publishing Company, 1917), 192.

¹⁵ "Sanitary Ball," *Washington Statesman*, March 12, 1864.

¹⁶ Hunt, 192-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 193.