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A Matter of "Vicious Habits": Civil War Families Under the Strain of War

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A MATTER OF “VICIOUS HABITS”: CIVIL WAR FAMILIES UNDER THE STRAIN
OF WAR

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Ron and Pamela Bjornson for their continued support.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the long term consequences of spatial and temporal distance on marriages during the Civil War. The absence of male labor created by enlistment in the Union Army stretched women to their economic limits while physical and emotional separation created opportunities for infidelity for both husbands and wives. Central to this narrative is mid-nineteenth-century ideas about manhood. The war offered a confirmation of male adulthood, but also required men to abandon the duties to home that were no less fundamental to the ideal of male maturity. Recent scholarship on veterans' disabilities, including mental illness and substance abuse, show that this paradox continued to define soldiers' lives for decades after the war. Equally important to the narrative is perceptions of female behavior and morality as women navigated the economic hardships and exigencies of a protracted military conflict. The central themes of this thesis are brought forward by utilizing the pension records of George A. Casedy, a volunteer with the 17th and 97th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, as well as the 61st New York Volunteer Infantry. Casedy contracted syphilis during the war under circumstances created by his absence in the army, circumstances which Bureau of Pension examiners in the 1890s found shocking and appalling. The distance created by the Civil War strained the fabric of George Casedy's marriage and led to decisions that had long-term negative consequences.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“It is certainly a most remarkable and disgusting case,” remarked Charles Whitehead, writing from the remote Oregon wilderness in September 1896.¹ The special examiner for the United States Bureau of Pensions was referring to the case of Civil War veteran George Anderson Casedy. The resident of McConnelsville, Ohio, had filed a pension claim for rheumatism and kidney problems. His rheumatism supposedly developed from exposure to weather conditions during the Petersburg Campaign in winter 1864 – 1865; his kidney troubles arose the following spring. Unfortunately for Casedy, he had also contracted syphilis nearly two years earlier while serving in Tennessee. The Bureau of Pensions had rejected his 1889 claim under the longstanding pension laws and repeated claims under the Pension Act of June 27, 1890, under which aid was no longer contingent on a service-related disability but which continued to exclude veterans with venereal disease in their military records from the pension rolls.

What made Casedy’s case so “remarkable and disgusting” to Whitehead was not any rarity of venereal disease in a pension claim. Union Army physicians reported 73,

¹ Letter, Charles Whitehead to D.L. Murphy, September 3, 1896 in George A. Casedy, Application No. 725,163, Private, Company B, 61th New York Infantry, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain (“Civil War and Later Survivors’ Certificates”), 1861–1934, Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of The Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15, National Archives.

382 cases of syphilis and 109,397 cases of gonorrhea and orchitis during the Civil War.² Many of those soldiers filed pension claims, and some even managed to obtain their pensions.³ It was not Casedy's supposed immoral character that troubled Whitehead. Rather, it was how Casedy came to be infected that was so disturbing. His petition in 1894 for re-examination of his claim indicated that the source was not one of the many sordid dens of prostitution that lined Nashville's waterfront, called "Smokey Row," where his regiment had been stationed. Instead Casedy reported that he contracted the disease from his sixteen-year old wife, Rebecca.⁴ It was this detail that sent Whitehead to John Day, Oregon, to interview Casedy's sister Catherine A. Lester and his nephew John W. White.

While Casedy's case is somewhat unusual – another special examiner with the Bureau of Pensions called it a "singular and peculiar" situation– it is in many ways a representative story of families bending and faltering under the strains war.⁵ As hundreds of thousands of young men rushed to serve the Union cause during the country's most desperate hour, many of them left behind wives and families without adequate resources

² United States Surgeon General's Office, *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, Vol. 1, Pt. 3, ed, Charles Smart (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1888), 891.

³ James M. Roach of Company F, 23rd Kentucky Volunteer Infantry had contracted syphilis in November 1862 in Nashville. He received a pension in 1885 for an injury to his ear after a Captain Thomas struck him with a pistol during a private quarrel in December 1862. Roach had supposedly been lagging on a march. James M. Roach, Application No. 458, 279, Private, Company F, 23rd Kentucky Infantry, Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Veterans Who Served in the Army and Navy Mainly in the Civil War and the War with Spain ("Civil War and Later Survivors' Certificates"), 1861–1934, Civil War and Later Pension Files; Records of The Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15, National Archives; No. 9 General Hospital, Nashville, Tennessee, 1862-1865, Medical Department Registers, 1861-1884, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1762-1984, Record Group 94, National Archives.

⁴ Casedy pension claim.

⁵ W.D. Love, Jr., report to Bureau of Pensions commissioner, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

for continued subsistence throughout the conflict.⁶ Historian Judith Giesberg has stressed that the economic absence of men often “strained communities and stretched women to their limits.”⁷ Hiring male laborers, when available, cut into farm earnings.⁸ Only forty-percent of northern soldiers were farmers, moreover, and many working-class soldiers left behind wives and families that had no means of subsistence at all. Women unable to find remunerative work, or assistance from family or friends, had to seek aid from their state governors, or from the recruiters who had promised handsome bounties to their husbands for enlisting but had not paid out. Not every northern state offered relief money for soldiers’ wives, and those who could not obtain some form of relief from the government, or friends and family, often had to turn to private charities, the almshouse, or prostitution.⁹ As J. Matthew Gallman has recently pointed out, popular literature about enlistment decisions recognized that the potentially devastating familial consequences of military service made it reasonable for a potential volunteer to conclude that his greater duty was at home.¹⁰

The scant scholarship on conjugal separation during the war emphasizes that vice was a common feature of Union and Confederate camps. Bell Wiley observed many

⁶ Matthew Gallman has estimated that roughly one-third, or approximately 700,000 Union soldiers were married at the time of enlistment, although many of them had not yet started families. Judith Geisberg provides a similar estimate that approximately thirty percent of Union soldiers were married. J. Matthew Gallman, *Defining Duty in the Civil War: Personal Choice, Popular Culture, and the Union Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 8; Judith Geisberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 19.

⁷ Giesberg, 42.

⁸ Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 42.

⁹ Giesberg, 47.

¹⁰ Gallman, 8.

years ago that the soldiers were largely freed from the traditional moral constraints of home and “felt bound to taste the sweets of sin.”¹¹ He was referring primarily to the young, unmarried, farm boys between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three that comprised the largest demographic of enlisted men, but the average married man in the Union army was not much older at twenty-five or twenty-six and similarly faced a prospect of sudden death that encouraged him to live a little.¹² Moral policing within regiments and regular contact with their home communities counteracted these temptations, but fifty-year-old Ohio private John McLeish spoke for many observers when he wrote to his daughter from Fort Gilbert, Louisville, Kentucky in 1862 that “the immoral influences of the camp are such that I would advise a young man not to choose the military life for its own sake but if at the demand of his country he takes up arms he ought to be doubly armed with principle & religion.”¹³

The physical and emotional distance caused by men’s wartime service had similar effects among women left at home. The rumor mill that carried the immoral behaviors of soldiers back to their communities also flowed to the men in the ranks. Aspah Tyler reported to his wife that “some of the boys...are off every night” with black girls in New Bern, North Carolina, and “think that their wives don’t know it and it is alright,” but he also told her that “[w]e hear of lots of soldiers wives at home that are as bad.”¹⁴ James

¹¹ Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 261.

¹² Gallman, 8.

¹³ John McLeish, Letter to Lydia B. McLeish, January 5, 1862, from “The Civil War Letters of John McLeish,” unpublished.

¹⁴ Thomas P. Lowry, *Love and Lust: Private and Amorous Letters of the Civil War* (Thomas P. Lowry, 2009), 51.

Greenalch, 1st Michigan Engineers and Mechanics, was aware of similar rumors. He wrote his wife Fidelia to tell her that he had heard among the men that “the older the Back the stifer the horn and the women, some of them, seem to have the same disease.” Greenalch was hopeful that his wife would not “ketch” the disease herself.¹⁵ The strains that male absence placed on marriages during the Civil War opened up opportunities for infidelity for both husbands and wives.

The Casedys’ story dramatizes the fraught relationship between marriage and the Civil War. Their marriage was made by the war and nearly torn apart by the force that created it. Central to this narrative were mid-nineteenth-century ideas about manhood. The war offered a confirmation of male adulthood, but also required men to abandon the duties to home that were no less fundamental to the ideal of male maturity.¹⁶ Recent scholarship on veterans’ disabilities, including mental illness and substance abuse, show that this paradox continued to define soldiers’ lives for decades after the war.¹⁷ George Casedy’s attempt to navigate the dilemma, which continued until his death in 1897, caused him to make some difficult decisions, including the revelations that the Pension Bureau special examiner found shocking.

¹⁵ Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn’t Tell* (Mechanicsburg, PA, Stackpole, 1994), 33.

¹⁶ Michael E. DeGruccio, “Unmade: American Manhood in the Civil War Era” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2007).

¹⁷ James Marten, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Larry M. Logue, and Michael Barton, eds., *The Civil War Veteran: A Historical Reader* (New York: New York University, 2006).

CHAPTER 2

FROM WEDDING MARCH TO THE SOLDIER'S MARCH

On April 27, 1861, twenty-six-year-old George Anderson Casedy married fifteen-year-old Rebecca Richardson in their hometown of McConnelsville, Ohio. Casedy was the son of Hugh and Judith Casedy, a pair of Pennsylvanians born at the turn of the nineteenth-century. They moved to Morgan County, Ohio, sometime before George's birth in 1835. Little is known about Hugh's occupation, but he served on the McConnelsville town council as an assessor in 1844 and died in 1850. At the time of the 1860 census, George was living in the household of his mother with his sister's son John White and the wife and child of that nephew.¹⁸

Rebecca, like George, was born to parents of Pennsylvania stock. Vincent Richardson, was a miller born in 1805; his wife, Martha, was born in 1814. They had both moved to Ohio sometime before they married in Morgan County in 1837. Martha appears to have passed away between 1855, when she delivered her youngest child, and the 1860 census, on which she does not appear. Rebecca had five other siblings, including a twenty-year old brother John, who worked as a laborer, an eighteen year-old sister Hannah, and three younger brothers.¹⁹

¹⁸ Casedy pension claim; 1860 U.S. census, population schedule, McConnelsville, Morgan, Ohio, NARA microfilm publication Roll: M653_1016, Page: 298, Image: 98, Family History Library Film: 805016.

¹⁹ 1860 U.S. census, population schedule, Mcconnelsville, Morgan, Ohio, NARA microfilm publication Roll: M653_1016, Page: 286, Image: 76, Family History Library Film: 805016.

Why Rebecca married George at only fifteen is not easy to discern, but the absence of her mother may well have been a factor. George's sister intimated to a pension examiner that Rebecca had no mother, and no one to take of her outside of her husband's family. Her father was by the 1870 census remarried to a woman named Lamira Starlin, and he lived with five children for whom she was presumably the mother. None of Vincent Richardson's children that appeared on the 1860 census still resided with him in 1870, indicating that Rebecca and her siblings were likely sent off to be cared for by relatives. Her brother John enlisted in September 1861 in Company H of the 17th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, the reorganized three-year version of the regiment in which his brother-in-law George had already completed a ninety-day stint. Rebecca's older sister Hannah married a soldier named George H. Dearing on February 23, 1862. For Rebecca, marriage may have been the best option to ensure that she had a home in which to reside.

On the same day that George and Rebecca married, he responded to Abraham Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops by enlisting in Company H, 17th Ohio Volunteers Infantry along with his nephew John White.²⁰ Like many other young volunteers, Casedy must have been eager to experience the action before the war was over. He left his child-bride in the care of his mother, and Company H were assembled in front of the McConnellsville courthouse on April 28th. The ceremony featured a speech delivered by the Reverend W. H. Grimes, who had married the Casedys a day earlier. After the minister presented a flag on behalf of a committee of ladies of the county, the company traveled to Lancaster and mustered into the 17th Ohio Volunteers. From Lancaster the

²⁰ George Casedy, deposition; Rebecca Casedy, deposition; John W. White, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension Claim.

regiment moved to Bellaire, just southeast and across the Ohio River from Wheeling, Virginia. Transported by ship to Parkerville, West Virginia, the 17th spent the next three months brigaded with the 9th and 10th Ohio regiments in General William Starke Rosecrans' division in Western Virginia before returning to Ohio August 3rd and mustering out on the 15th of the month.²¹

After returning, Casedy remained in McConnelsville for approximately a year, and according to Rebecca, they "kept house" together until George re-enlisted in the army in August 1862.²² The pension records mention little about the year that the Casedys spent together before George went off to war again, but Rebecca noted in her deposition that they were happy together during that period.²³ They very well may have been, but her testimony to their contentment before her husband left her to her own devices serves to highlight the disruption of a stable home life that the war brought upon their marriage.

Casedy re-enlisted in July 1862 in response to Lincoln's call for 300,000 more men after the Peninsula disaster. Members of the military committees for the counties of Morgan, Muskingum, Coshocton, and Guernsey met in Zanesville to establish the 97th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Morgan County contributed two companies, C and D, for their share of quota. Casedy enlisted in Company C, and by early September his company had mustered into the 97th at Covington Heights outside of Cincinnati. They arrived in time to help General Lew Wallace at Fort Mitchell repel Confederate General Edmund Kirby

²¹ Charles Robertson, *The History of Morgan County, Ohio, with Portraits and Biographical Sketches of Some of its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Chicago: L.H. Watkins & Co., 1886), 171-172.

²² Rebecca E. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

²³ Rebecca E. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

Smith's raid into Ohio. Smith came within a mile of the Fort, but with only some minor skirmishes and no losses on either side, he withdrew on September 11th to aid Braxton Bragg's pursuit of Don Carlos Buell in Kentucky. Bragg failed to engage Buell and retreated from Louisville, allowing the Union army to pursue him to Perryville in October. Casedy's regiment then joined Buell's division and engaged the Confederate's at Perryville, helping to drive Bragg out of Kentucky. After Perryville, the 97th was reorganized under Rosecrans and placed under General John Crittenden in the Army of the Cumberland. As part of Crittenden's corps, Casedy traveled to Tennessee and participated in the Union victory at Murfreesboro and Stones River on New Years Eve and early January. Casedy's regiment remained in Nashville after Stones River until moving upon Chattanooga in September 1863, by which time Casedy was paying the price for his prolonged absence from his wife.²⁴

²⁴ Robertson, 199-200; Joseph S. Stern, Jr., "The Siege of Cincinnati," *Bulletin for the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, Cincinnati*, (n.d): 182-183.

CHAPTER 3

“I KNEW THE MAN’S NAME ONCE, BUT I DO NOT REMEMBER IT NOW”

Rebecca had stayed with her mother-in-law in McConnelsville during George’s ninety-day service, but upon his re-enlistment she “broke up housekeeping,” as she later testified, and moved thirty miles up the Muskingum River to Zanesville. The county seat of Muskingam County’s population was 9,229 in 1860, six times larger than McConnelsville, and most likely provided more financial prospects. There Rebecca moved in with her 24-year-old sister-in-law Sarah Longley, whose husband Wesley M. Longley was also serving in Company C of the 97th Ohio. George’s widowed sister Catherine White (Lester), who was 41 years old, also lived in Zanesville. Rebecca apparently found some work in a tailoring shop after arriving in Zanesville, though details are sparse. Shortly before Christmas 1862, she met a gentleman whom she refers to only as a “travelling man.”²⁵ He took her to the Old Stacey house, a boarding house in the center of town where the Clarendon Hotel was built in 1877.²⁶ They spent the night together there, and nine days later she broke out with syphilitic lesions.²⁷ Frightened by the horrible affliction she had contracted, and worried that her husband might find out

²⁵ Rebecca E. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim

²⁶ Sarah E. Longley, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

²⁷ Ibid.

about her infidelity, Rebecca sought the advice of her sister-in-law. Catherine informed her that she did “not understand such disease,” but took her to see a Dr. Stout, who, along with a few other doctors, treated her.²⁸ Rebecca provides no details of her treatment, but in the nineteenth-century the most common prescriptions for syphilis were heroic therapeutic methods involving chemical salves of mercury, nitrate of silver or iodide of potassium. Dietary restrictions, rest, emetics to irrigate the digestive system, steam baths with mercury vapor and cauterization of sores and lesions with hot instruments or caustic substances were also common treatments.²⁹

In her testimony, Rebecca claimed that she was never in a house of prostitution, but some of the testimonies from other witnesses raise questions regarding her activities while her husband was absent in the army. They also serve to show gender dynamics in the late 19th century, in particular, how Rebecca, her sisters, and other women were discussed in terms of their behavior. While Rebecca’s deposition frames her affair as a momentary impulse, a regrettable indiscretion that she suffered “untold misery in heart soul and body,” other witnesses’ testimonies reveal a perception of Rebecca as a woman of low morality.³⁰ Her sister-in-law Sarah, on the other hand, described Rebecca as a “mere child,” when she was married to her brother and when she came to Zanesville in 1862. In that context, Sarah intimates that Rebecca was “enticed” to go to the Stacey House on that fateful evening due to her youthful naïveté and inexperience in the world. Rebecca also provides a curious detail in her deposition that Sarah knew that she had

²⁸ Catherine A. Lester, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

²⁹ John Parascandola, *Sex, Sin & Science: The History of Syphilis in America* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2008), 32.

³⁰ Catherine A. Lester, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

gone to the Stacey boarding house to spend the night with the travelling man. The house was just around the corner, at 4th and Main street, from Sarah's house on South Third street.³¹ Whether or not Sarah knew at the time Rebecca had gone off with the stranger, or had been debriefed of the details after the fact is unclear.

But both women, along with Catherine, were apparently known as women who “did not lead strictly moral lives” during the war.³² William O. Fouts, a former postmaster for McConnelsville and town council clerk in the 1880s, states that Rebecca had even been “classed with lewd women” at the time.³³ Rebecca's reputation may have also been connected with her friendship with another soldier's wife named Charlotte Holbrook. Rebecca apparently stayed with Holbrook for a period of time and had a Dr. John Alexander attend to her at Holbrook's house. Dr. Alexander, however, testified that he was reluctant to visit the Holbrook home and kept his visitation short. The reason for his reluctance to treat Rebecca at the Holbrook house was that it “was not a house of prostitution but in public estimation at that time Mrs. Holbrook did not bear a very good reputation.”³⁴ Catherine was also aware of Holbrook's reputation. She admits that there was “some little talk about Mrs. Holbrook but I had no personal knowledge of bad conduct on her part.”³⁵

The phrase “house of prostitution” appears in three separate depositions in

³¹ Sarah E. Longley, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

³² James R. Martin, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

³³ William O. Fouts, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

³⁴ John Alexander, MD, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

³⁵ Catherine A. Lester, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

relation to Rebecca's activities. Her own deposition states that she had not been in a house of prostitution, while John Alexander chooses his words delicately, clearly not wishing to indict Mrs. Casedy. Charlotte Holbrook's home probably never functioned as a brothel during the war, and there are myriad reasons why Rebecca, her sisters-in-law, and Holbrook may have developed reputations as unchaste women, but it is worth considering the possibility that each of these women, in a period of financial uncertainty while their husbands were off fighting in the war, may have participated in clandestine sexual transactions for money. Historian Catherine Clinton has explored how poor and wage earning women frequently exchanged sex for money with men that they were acquainted with, and considered them merely "minor exchanges."³⁶ According to Clinton, many of these women did not consider themselves "public women," or prostitutes, even for participating in sexual trade. They were financially disadvantaged women during a national crisis that put mid-nineteenth century conceptions of gender norms in flux. Women were drawn out of the private sphere of the home and into the public sphere while their husbands took up arms to secure the Union. Wives of soldiers had to rely on their husband's pay, which often did not arrive when needed, or what little they could earn through employment in factories, or piecemeal sewing work, if any was available. Farmer's wives could sometimes sell livestock to get by if money was short, but urban women had fewer options if work was not available.³⁷ While many displaced women did end up in brothels to support themselves during the war, sexual exchange was

³⁶ Catherine Clinton, "Public Women' and Sexual Politics in the Civil War," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 61.

³⁷ Silber, 42, 59; Giesberg, 42.

also a method of obtaining either male labor or financial aid for women who did not reside in “houses of ill repute,” nor considered themselves prostitutes. These women may have not perceived of themselves as prostitutes, but other townspeople may have seen little moral distinction between casual sexual transactions conducted for survival and plying the trade in brothels.

There is unfortunately no way to determine the context of Rebecca’s affair. Financial destitution may have played little or no part in it all. It may have indeed been a seduction, as Sarah had suggested. Casedy may have contributed to his wife’s infidelity by his own inattentiveness, as he appears to have had little contact with his wife before her affair. Rebecca may have been lonely and thought she had been abandoned. Whatever the reasons for her indiscretion, each deposition submitted to the examiners reveals different aspects of the affair that Rebecca seems to strategically leave out. For example, Rebecca declares that she “may have known the man’s name at the time, but I do not remember it now.”³⁸ Casedy likewise claimed not to know the name of the man who infected his wife, although it is possible that he never actually knew that detail. But it seems less likely, and rather puzzling, that Rebecca would have forgotten the name of the man who had caused such a significant disruption in the quality of her and her husband’s lives. Witnesses to the affair, on the other hand, knew the name of the offending man. Fouts, who was well acquainted with the Casedys before the Civil War, stated in his deposition “it was reported here in town that George A. Casedy’s wife had syphilis and that she contracted it from a man named Tobe Palmer.”³⁹ Dr. Alexander shed more light

³⁸ Rebecca Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

³⁹ William O. Fouts, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

on the affair by naming Palmer as the man who paid for Rebecca's medical treatment while her husband was away.⁴⁰

If Palmer was indeed a stranger, perhaps he had been overcome with guilt and shame for infecting a sixteen-year-old married girl with such a loathsome disease and sought to rectify the situation as best as he could. It is also possible that Palmer may have been more than a stranger to Rebecca. Both Fouts and Alexander affix Palmer's residence in Malta, on the west side of the Muskingum river, directly across from McConnelsville, which could refute George and Rebecca's claim that Palmer was a travelling stranger. In fact, Palmer lived in Malta until around 1871 when, according to Fouts, he passed away due to complications from syphilis.⁴¹ Dr. Alexander also noted that Palmer worked as a tailor or in a mercantile business related to tailoring, the same field Rebecca was supposedly engaged in in Zanesville.⁴² Rebecca Casedy and Tobe Palmer may have met through Palmer's business and developed a romantic interest in one another.

Rebecca continued to seek treatment over the next several months, hoping that she would be cured before her husband could discover that she had been with another man. In summer 1863, Casedy left his regiment stationed in Nashville on a "French furlough," an unsanctioned absence, to visit his wife, whom he had not seen in nearly a year.⁴³ Desertion was common in both armies during the Civil War, as many men longed to reconnect with their wives and families, and gain a little respite from the grim terror of

⁴⁰ John Alexander, MD, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁴¹ William O. Fouts, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁴² John Alexander, MD, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim; Sarah claimed in her deposition that Palmer worked in the oil industry; Sarah E. Longley, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁴³ George A. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

battle and the drudgery of camp life. Although he later claimed he was unaware of Rebecca's activities while he was away, it is possible that he had heard about the reputation his wife had developed in his absence. As historian Reid Mitchell has noted in *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*, the Union method of enlisting entire communities into regiments and companies kept soldiers in fairly regular contact with their communities.⁴⁴ Rebecca's reputation among townsfolk would have been the type of fodder for gossip that was commonly exchanged between the home-front and soldiers in camp.

Casedy only spent a short time in McConnelsville though long enough to visit his mother and to spend time with Rebecca. After performing his husbandly duties, he rejoined his regiment in Pelham, Tennessee.⁴⁵ Shortly after returning to service he broke out in syphilitic lesions, alerting him to his wife's infidelity. He wrote one of his few letters home to complain that she had "diseased him." Casedy's luck took another turn for the worse, as he was given a prison sentence for desertion. He spent little time in a cell though, since the prison was not equipped with the necessary medication to treat syphilis; Casedy was then transferred to No. 9 General Hospital in Nashville, where he spent six months after he was dishonorably discharged from the service on July 31.⁴⁶ Not yet willing to return home to face his wife, Casedy went northeast to Albany, New York and

⁴⁴ Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: A Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 24.

⁴⁵ The spelling of Pelham in Casedy's deposition is Pelan. Two letters from the 97th Ohio Infantry Regiment's deputy commander, Lieutenant Colonel Milton Barnes to his wife Rhoda from Pelham, in early July 1863, indicate that Casedy rejoined his regiment in Pelham, as there was no Pelan, Tennessee. George A. Casedy, deposition; "Guide to the Milton Barnes Papers, 1853-1891," George Mason University Libraries, accessed March 24, 2016, http://sca.gmu.edu/finding_aids/barnes.html.

⁴⁶ George A. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

signed up for three years service in Company B, of the 61st New York Infantry on August 1, 1864.⁴⁷ He rose to the rank of second sergeant and remained until the close of the war in 1865.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid.; *Annual Report of the Adjutant General of the State of New York for the Year 1900. Registers of New York Regiments in the War of the Rebellion [Supplementary Volumes to the Annual Report of the Adjutant General for 1893-1905]*. Registers of the Fifty-seventh, Fifty-eighth, Fifty-ninth, Sixtieth, Sixty-first, and Sixty-second Regiments of Infantry. Serial No. 26 (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1901), 835.

⁴⁸ George A. Casedy, deposition; *Annual Report of the Adjutant General*, 835.

CHAPTER 4

“WE MADE A CONTRACT TO BOTH BE SQUARE GOODS AND I HAVE NEVER REGRETTED IT”

When George Casedy mustered out of the 61st New York Infantry in July 1865, he could have begun a new life. He had enlisted in the 61st under his middle name, “Anderson,” and he might have continued to use it as a surname, resettled, and filed for a pension under his New York service. Instead he returned home to McConnelsville to re-establish relations with Rebecca, to whom he had not written since notifying her that she had given him syphilis. They had had their row and Casedy had come to accept that it was his own failings as a man and husband that ultimately lead to Rebecca’s dalliance with immorality. He confided to the special examiner at his deposition that, although Rebecca was “leading a bad life” during his absence, he had “married her when she was just a child and . . . left her among sharks.”⁴⁹ He believed that it was his duty to take care of her and that he had failed in that duty. By returning home to Ohio and his wife, instead of staying in New York, Casedy took responsibility for his part in Rebecca’s infidelity and set himself on a path to make amends. The Casedys, according to Catherine Lester, lived in perfect harmony after Casedy’s return. Casedy never regretted his decision to return to his wife either, stating that he would have been in a bad fix if it were not for his wife. They had made a “contract to both be square goods,” and they helped alleviate each

⁴⁹ George A. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

other's suffering.⁵⁰

When Casedy finally returned to Ohio he found himself unable to fully work at his former occupation as a tobacco tier. According to an affidavit from February 1892, Casedy was “fully three fourths disabled for manual labor on average” since mustering out of the army.⁵¹ The Casedy's survival over the course of the late nineteenth century when George was unable to perform steady labor appears to be the result of the charity of their neighbors in McConnelsville. Casedy probably managed to work as much as his ailments would allow until he was no longer fit to do so, while his wife Rebecca may have earned income as a laundress or by tailoring. The 1870 census describes her occupation as “keeping house” and indicates that the Casedys were living in the same house as a woman named Sarah Walker and her three children. George is listed as a common laborer.⁵² But in 1879, Casedy and his one year-old daughter Stella suffered a serious bout of whooping cough. He lost most of his hearing and finally became completely unable to work and support his family. In 1892, J.E. Whipple, a trustee of Morgan township, told the Bureau of Pensions that the Casedys were fully dependent on public assistance.⁵³ In August of the same year, Casedy pleaded for the bureau to take action on his case due to extreme hardship and poverty. In a “Request for Special Action in Pension Claim,” he wrote that he was “unable to do any labor and living off of charity,

⁵⁰ George A. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁵¹ George A. Casedy, general affidavit, 1892, in Casedy pension claim.

⁵² 1870 U.S. census, population schedule, McConnelsville, Morgan, Ohio, NARA microfilm publication Roll: *M593_1246*, Page: 168B, Image: 340, Family History Library Film: 552745.

⁵³ J.E. Whipple, general affidavit, 1892, in Casedy pension claim.

not able to pay house rent.”⁵⁴ Casedy was concerned that he might completely lose his independence and have to consign himself to living in the county infirmary, which would separate him from Rebecca, among other unpleasant features. His plea for mercy, combined with Whipple’s affidavit, show how veterans suffering from debility struggled to maintain not only their survival, but also their dignity.

Whipple’s affidavit was also a part of a larger process of establishing both need and credibility for Casedy. He attests that Casedy “is entitled to said aid and is much in need of it or we would not give him such assistance.”⁵⁵ As a town trustee, Whipple’s prominent position and assertion that he was well acquainted with Casedy not only documented financial need but provided confirmation of moral character. Other witnesses’ depositions made similar arguments. Their statements framed Casedy as a trustworthy, virtuous man who had suffered at the hands of unfortunate circumstances and deserved a pension for his contribution to the sectional conflict. James Donahue, an acquaintance of the Casedys, declared that he had never known Casedy to “have any vicious habits at anytime.”⁵⁶ Dr. Alexander stated that he had known Casedy well for many years and that he “has always been considered an inoffensive citizen and if he was given to any vicious habits they were not known to me.”⁵⁷ William Fouts also confided that he had never known George to “run after lewd women,” and added “it is generally believed here [McConnelsville] that George A. Casedy had contracted syphilis from his

⁵⁴ George A. Casedy, Request for Special Action in Pension Claim, 1892, in Casedy pension claim.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ James Donahue, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁵⁷ John Alexander, MD, 1896, deposition in Casedy pension claim.

wife.”⁵⁸

Both of George’s sisters also testified that their brother was not prone to vicious habits. From her home in Fox, Oregon, Catherine Lester stated that her “brother was innocent of the origin of the disease for his wife gave it to him.”⁵⁹ Sarah Longley also confirmed her brother’s proclivity towards clean living. In her words, her brother “was always a person of good moral habits” and she “never knew or heard of him having anything to do with any women other than his wife.”⁶⁰ George’s nephew John W. White had perhaps the best insight into Casedy’s habits during the war, as he served with him in both the 17th and 97th Ohio infantry regiments, although he only served as a cook for a Captain Scott in the 97th until November 1862. White declares with certainty in his deposition that his uncle was “a man of good habits,” and in good physical health when they served together.⁶¹ Rebecca, for her part, appears to offer herself up as the sacrificial lamb to the jaws of the Bureau of Pensions examiners. She states explicitly more than once in her deposition that her husband was unaware of her conduct while he was away in the army, and had no knowledge that she had contracted syphilis during that time.⁶² Rebecca also believed quite adamantly that George had never had sexual intercourse with any other women than her, an assertion also made in her husband’s deposition.⁶³ Each

⁵⁸ William O. Fouts, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁵⁹ Catherine A. Lester, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁶⁰ Sarah E. Longley, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁶¹ John W. White, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁶² Rebecca E. Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁶³ George Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim; Rebecca Casedy, deposition, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

testimony of family and community members serves to foster the notion that George Casedy was an upstanding fellow, clear of any vicious habits prior to, and during, the Civil War, and that he was ultimately the victim of misfortune.

If Casedy was indeed a victim of misfortune, why did he wait until 1894 to refute the Bureau of Pension's claim that he was guilty of vicious habits during the war? There could be several factors to consider, the first of which is the sensitivity surrounding the issue of venereal disease, particularly in the late nineteenth century. Venereal disease held a stigma of personal moral corruption, and symbolized pollution and contamination in the individual.⁶⁴ Opening a discussion that would assign the blame for bringing a socially stigmatized disease into the household on Rebecca would not only bring shame to her, but also designate her as a failure in her greater domestic responsibilities of keeping the household in order.⁶⁵ Admitting that syphilis had entered his household through his wife would also put the spotlight on Casedy's own failings as a man. Although, ironically, it was his service in the Union Army that prevented Casedy from upholding the charges of his masculine responsibilities. Historian Michael Degruccio has aptly pointed out the paradox of war and manhood in his dissertation "Unmade: Manhood in the Civil War Era." The great paradox of the Civil War was that many northern men saw it as an opportunity to make "the ultimate sacrifice for community and family," while simultaneously leaving their families in pursuit of individualistic ambitions.⁶⁶ In order to pursue those ambitions northern men left their wives and families with little

⁶⁴ Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁶⁶ Degruccio, "Unmade," 8.

means of subsistence. It also left the door open for other men to step in and take their place.

Another matter may have been the credibility of the Casedys' story regarding how George became infected with syphilis. Considering that he had been stationed in Nashville, where prostitution was rampant, and that many soldiers partook in the frivolity and abundance of sexual entertainment available to them, it may have seemed unlikely to government adjudicators that his sixteen-year old wife transmitted the disease to him. Casedy may have also felt without a reasonable doubt that he had contracted rheumatism and kidney disease during the war, and believed that those debilities merited access to an invalid pension under the general pension laws. Indeed, rheumatism was one of the most common ailments claimed by Civil War veterans, usually contracted due to long periods of exposure to inclement weather like Casedy experienced outside of Petersburg. During the war 25 out of 1000 Union men were diagnosed with rheumatism, while the Confederate army had a reported 59,722 cases.⁶⁷

Casedy's claim that he developed rheumatic symptoms in the winter of 1864 - 1865 would have been around the time that the symptoms of secondary syphilis would have begun. The second stage of the disease affects the tendons and the bones producing symptoms not unlike rheumatic arthritis. In fact, more recent studies in the twentieth century have indicated direct links to syphilis in patients with rheumatic symptoms.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ George Worthington Adams, *Doctors in Blue: The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 241; H.H. Cunningham, *Doctors in Gray: The Confederate Medical Service* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 205.

⁶⁸ M. Scott Grey and T. Philp, "Diagnostic Problems with Special Reference to Congenital Syphilis," *Ann Rheum Dis*, 22 (1963): 19; JC Gerster, A. Weintraub, TL Vischer, and GH Fallet, "Secondary Syphilis Revealed by Rheumatic Complaints," *The Journal of Rheumatology*, 4 no. 2 (1977): 197.

Whether or not veterans in the late nineteenth-century were actually aware of the connection between their joint and muscle pains and syphilis is difficult to discern, but there is evidence that soldiers during the war were quite adept at feigning several maladies, including rheumatism.⁶⁹ Confederate army commanders had to institute rules regarding “malingering,” or faking sicknesses such as rheumatism to avoid duty, by only allowing cases that were physically severe enough to admit to hospital.⁷⁰ The fact that soldiers frequently faked the symptoms of rheumatism likely influenced bureau examiners’ reluctance to grant pensions to syphilitic veterans claiming rheumatism as causation of debility. In Casedy’s case, his medical examinations found limited evidence of rheumatic arthritis, and certainly not enough overturn the ruling on his supposed “vicious habits.”⁷¹

By 1892 though, Casedy’s claim had come to encompass maladies beyond rheumatism and kidney disease. His bout with whooping cough, which had left him completely debilitated, was now incorporated into his struggle for government aid. Several deponents testified that Casedy’s hearing had been significantly damaged and that he was now living at the mercy of charity because he was unable to work. A.W. Stewart, who had known Casedy since 1875, implored the bureau to elevate the claim to special status, claiming that Casedy’s pension was “justly due him,” and that it would be

⁶⁹ Cunningham, 217.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 216.

⁷¹ Medical examinations from 1891 and 1894 detail the extent of Casedy’s rheumatic symptoms and kidney troubles. His examination in 1891 found no evidence of kidney disease and limited evidence of rheumatism despite his claims of pain in his hips, arms, and shoulders. The medical report did find evidence of lumbago and rheumatism of the knees, but his ailments were still attributed to general debility caused by syphilis. The next medical report from 1894 did little to further his claims of rheumatism and kidney disease, as the examining medical officer came to the same conclusions as the 1891 report. Surgeon’s Certificate, 1891, in Casedy pension claim; Surgeon’s Certificate, 1894, in Casedy pension claim.

a “noble and generous act” to give the old soldier immediate relief.⁷² Despite Stewart’s testimony and the new provisions of the 1890 Pension Act, the bureau remained reluctant to furnish Casedy with a pension. Although by the 1890s approximately ninety percent of Union Civil War veterans were already on the pension rolls, Casedy’s designation as an immoral man of vicious habits continued to haunt him as he sought recompense for his service to his country during its greatest moment of crisis.⁷³ As Casedy’s body continued to break down from the ravages of syphilis, and he lost the ability to work, he and Rebecca may have finally found themselves in a position where public shame was no longer enough of a deterrent to prevent exposing the source of his venereal disease.

⁷² A.W. Stewart, general affidavit, 1892, in Casedy pension claim.

⁷³ Peter Blanck and Chen Song, “Civil War Pensions for Native Born and Foreign-born Union Army Veterans,” in: *A Historical Reader*, Logue and Barton eds., *The Civil War Veteran*, 221.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When the final depositions had been gathered in September 1896, the bureau's special examiners had concluded that the Casedys' story was indeed believable. The sound reputations of the Casedys' witnesses alleviated the government officials' consternation over George's moral declension. Each testimony corroborated the Casedy's claim that Rebecca was the source of George's syphilis. He was no longer a "diluted, indirect traitor" to his country and comrades through his own negligence, but was instead "innocently entrapped by his wife's perfidious conduct."⁷⁴ Examiner R.J. Powell was also impressed by Casedy's "peaceful and inoffensive" demeanor while enduring "his sore affliction and extreme poverty so uncomplainingly."⁷⁵ The genuine sympathy of Whipple and Stewart toward Casedy also contributed to the resolution of the pension claim. The willingness of Morgan County's most esteemed citizens to provide aid to the Casedys impressed upon the examiners an image of George as a man of good moral character. It also restored Casedy's masculinity within the spectrum of acceptable nineteenth-century gender constructions. Although he was no longer able to provide for his wife, and failed

⁷⁴ Reverend Thomas Starr King called soldiers sick from their own negligence (from venereal disease) a clog and hindrance to his fellow soldiers during a lecture at Camp Alert, San Francisco, in an effort to discourage new Union recruits from frequenting prostitutes. Lawrence Murphy, "The Enemy Among Us: Venereal Disease Among Soldiers in the Far West, 1861-1865," *Civil War History*. 31, No. 3 (1985):263; R.J. Powell, letter, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

⁷⁵ R.J. Powell, letter, 1896, in Casedy pension claim.

to keep his house in order during the war, Casedy's stoicism in abject poverty and suffering appealed to the Victorian ideal of genteel manhood: self-control, virtuousness, and charity towards the failings of others, namely Rebecca's infidelity, for which he assumed responsibility.

After careful consideration of the facts that had been uncovered, Whitehead concluded in his letter to commissioner of pensions, D.L. Murphy, that Casedy's pension claim was meritorious and should finally be approved. The Casedys, after years of abject poverty and suffering from the effects of their shared disease were finally in line to receive the much needed government aid George's service and sacrifice entitled him. But after petitioning the Bureau of Pensions for seven years to receive his claim, George A. Casedy did not survive to see his pension. A gap in the pension records after Whitehead's letter in early September 1896, raises questions as to whether or not the slow moving wheels of government bureaucracy had yet to pass final adjudication on Casedy's claim, or if for some reason the commissioner of pensions disagreed with his special examiner's recommendations for admittance at the time of Casedy's death on August 29, 1897. Considering that it took four years for Casedy's request for a special examination to take place, and two years from the time the source of his infection was revealed, the former seems more likely than the latter. Syphilis may have been behind the immediate cause of death, which was complications of cystitis, an inflammation of the bladder caused by a bacterial infection, though it is possible that the condition developed independently.⁷⁶

After George's death, Rebecca had to begin the pension application process over again, filing for a widow's pension. It took her another five years before her claim was

⁷⁶ George A. Casedy, death certificate, 1897, in Casedy pension claim.

approved on June 16, 1902, for eight dollars a month under the provisions of the Pension Act of June 27 1890. In 1904, she was granted a two dollar increase under several pension act revisions.⁷⁷ On March 2, 1918, Rebecca passed away from arteriosclerosis, which caused cerebral hemorrhaging and paralysis. Rebecca had been an invalid for several years before her passing, likely the result of the late stages of tertiary syphilis, surviving on only her widow's pension. Her daughter, Stella, who had married a man named Otto H. Kinney in 1898, collected what remained of her mother's pension and filed a reimbursement claim for funeral expenses, as Rebecca, like her husband George, passed with no property, and little to no income.

The Casedys long struggle with poverty and debility from syphilis was an example of the long term consequences that the strains of the Civil War placed on marriages over the four-year conflict. The federal government's need for manpower to bring the secessionist South back into the Union pulled Casedy away from his young wife, leaving her with no provisions for subsistence. With no family to turn to for support, Rebecca, moved to Zanesville to live with her husband's sisters leading to her dalliance with Tobe Palmer, the "travelling man" and the syphilis that altered her and her husband's lives in a profoundly negative way for the next sixty years. If it were not for the kindness and sympathy of the citizens of Morgan County, the Casedys may have lived much shorter lives in the county infirmary.

⁷⁷ Act of May 9, 1900, Joint Resolution of July 1, 1902, and July 29, 1903. Rebecca E. Casedy, widow's pension, 1904, in Casedy pension claim.

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