

Civil War Nostalgia



In October 1861 Alfred Lewis Castleman, a surgeon in the Fifth Regiment of the Wisconsin Volunteers, described the first death in his regiment. It was not from battle. “The poor fellow died of Nostalgia (home-sickness), raving to the last breath about wife and children,” he wrote. “Deaths from this cause are very frequent in the army.”

While today “nostalgia” is used to describe the longing for a lost time, the word originally signified acute homesickness, a condition widely regarded as a dangerous and often deadly illness. Doctors maintained that it could kill, either by worsening existing maladies or by causing its own physical symptoms, which included heart palpitations, lesions, damage to internal organs, “hectic fever,” bowel problems and incontinence.

A Civil War veteran described nostalgia’s effects in 1866, noting how it “fastens upon the breast of its prey, and sucks, vampyre-like, the breath of his nostrils. Many a heroic spirit after braving death at the cannon’s mouth . . . has at length succumbed unresistingly to this vampyre, Nostalgia.” During the Civil War, with close to three million men away from home and therefore potential victim to its ravages, Americans both on the battlefield and on the home front worried about nostalgia.

Homesickness was widespread in both the Confederate and Union armies, as thousands of surviving journals and letters testify. Many men came from rural areas and were away from farm and family for the first time. Added to this sense of displacement was the fear that they might be killed in battle and never see their loved ones again.

An 1861 letter from Richard Simpson, a soldier in the Third South Carolina Volunteers, to his aunt was typical. “We are now in the land of danger, far, far from home,” he wrote. Simpson had been away from home before, but, he confided: “I never wished to be back as bad in my life. How memory recalls every little spot, and how vividly every little scene flashes before my mind. Oh! If there is one place dear to me it is home sweet home. How many joys cluster there. To join once more the family circle (I mean you all) and talk of times gone by would be more to me than all else besides.”

While Simpson’s homesickness was intense, it was not debilitating. For thousands of other men, the emotion sapped their strength and left them ill. When it became this serious, doctors deemed it nostalgia. Union records offer a good picture of its consequences: over the course of the war’s

first year, the Surgeon General reported, there were 572 cases of nostalgia among troops. Those numbers rose in subsequent years, peaking in the year ending in June 1863, after the draft had begun. That year more than 2,000 men were listed as suffering from nostalgia; 12 succumbed to it. The year with the most fatalities was 1865, when 24 men died of the disease. In all, between 1861 and 1866, 5,537 Union soldiers suffered homesickness acutely enough to come to a doctor's attention, and 74 died of it.

Given the deadly risks believed to accompany the condition, soldiers of all ranks monitored their own mental health as well as that of their comrades. Union Gen. Joseph Shields wrote in 1862 that soldiers, "if not allowed to go home and see their families ... droop and die. ... I have watched this." In August 1864, Gen. Benjamin Butler worried that this might happen to him, writing his wife, "You make me so homesick. I shall have *nostalgia* like a Swiss soldier." Men lower in the ranks harbored the same fears. Cyrus Boyd of the 15th Iowa Infantry wrote in 1863, somewhat hyperbolically, "More men *die* of homesickness than all other diseases — and when a man gives up and lies down he is a *goner*. Keep the mind occupied with something new and keep *going all the time* except when asleep."

In light of such fears, soldiers and physicians looked for possible causes of and cures for nostalgia. What sparked the emotion? And how could it be assuaged? Some pointed to the letters that soldiers received from home. If they didn't receive enough letters, they might grow lonely and sad and begin a descent into nostalgia. On the other hand, if they received too many letters, they also might dwell overmuch on the family scenes they were missing.



Thomas Nast's depiction of a homesick soldier on Christmas Eve.

Doctors also theorized that music might carry a soldier's mind back to his family. As a result, some units took steps to prohibit particularly moving melodies. S. Millett Thompson, of the 13th New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry, reported that "the bands are forbidden to play pathetic or plaintive tunes, such as Home, Sweet Home... Auld Lang Syne, etc., lest they serve to dispirit, and unnerve our suffering men." Such a rule was not frivolous, as Numa Barned, a Union soldier

forced to listen to new “homesick recruits” playing “Home, Sweet Home,” confided. “I don’t like to hear it for it makes me feel queer,” he wrote.

If music could spark homesickness, so could holidays. Thanksgiving and Christmas were always difficult days for men far from home. The Sabbath likewise was a day for remembering other routines and identities that war had forced soldiers to abandon.

Doctors also contended that within the Army, homesickness was more visible among some populations than others, although they reached no consensus about which populations those actually were. Some pointed to young recruits, venturing far from home for the first time. Others claimed that middle-aged men, long accustomed to the comforts of domestic life, missed them most acutely. Some believed farm boys were more likely to be homesick than city dwellers, while others maintained that New Englanders were particularly tender-hearted and therefore vulnerable.

Doctors sometimes went beyond these demographic profiles and attributed homesickness to character flaws. J. Theodore Calhoun, the assistant surgeon of the Union Army, believed nostalgics needed to be rendered “more manly,” while Dr. John Taylor of the Third Missouri Cavalry contended that they were indolent hypochondriacs who were probably prone to other vices as well. Taylor told nostalgic soldiers that their “disease was a moral turpitude,” and “was looked upon with contempt – that gonorrhoea and syphilis were not more detestable.” The association of nostalgia with venereal disease was not accidental. Some doctors, like Roberts Bartholow, believed that a strong libido and the tendency to masturbate predisposed soldiers to homesickness, pointing the finger at “those given to solitary vice or the victims of spermatorrhea.” Supposedly, soldiers who lived in a dream world and who fantasized about home or sex, or both, became disconnected from their actual surroundings, and wished for different circumstances. Other vices associated with nostalgia were drinking, gambling and tobacco use.

If the precise causes of nostalgia were open to debate, so too were its cures. Some suggested that vigorous physical exercise might cure men of their yearnings for the family hearth; others put faith in the idea that once they faced battle, men would feel more committed to the cause and less tied to home.

Many, however, worried about the risks of nostalgia and took extreme measures to treat it. Physicians sometimes suggested hospitalization, but if cases turned critical, they often sent men home to cure them. A medical manual suggested that in nostalgia’s early stages, “a furlough ... will often suffice to restore the moral vigor of the young soldier. But when it has long resisted treatment, and gone so far as to produce sensible external lesions ... or structural changes in large organs, a discharge must unquestionably, be granted.”

To modern Americans who are accustomed to leaving home and who harbor few fears of dying of nostalgia, such diagnoses and cures seem strange, even laughable. But they reveal much about 19th-century values. The widely shared conviction that homesickness could kill reflected the deep moral and emotional significance that these Americans attached to home. Even more, their concerns about homesickness and nostalgia remind us that while today we celebrate restless

mobility and see it as a central part of our national identity, earlier generations did not, and instead found mobility to be profoundly painful and unnatural.

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