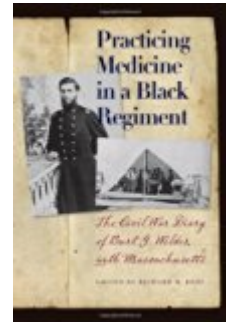


**Richard M. Reid, ed..** *Practicing Medicine in a Black Regiment: The Civil War Diary of Burt G. Wilder, 55th Massachusetts*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010. x + 282 pp. Illustrations \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-739-9.



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Truth be told, Burt G. Wilder was more into spiders than people. Yes, he served as a surgeon for the men of the 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment and yes he appears to have been, overall, kind and diligent in his care for these black men, but his writings reveal a man whose passion was for natural history, and whose assignment was to act as a physician. Wilder had studied comparative anatomy as an undergraduate at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School, where he learned under Asa Gray, Louis Agassiz, and Jeffries Wyman, leading figures of America's scientific community. He graduated summa cum laude in 1862 and entered military service as an "acting medical cadet" for the Union Army. Medical cadet was a position usually held by a medical student who was assigned to work with a particular physician and paid a monthly salary. Although Wilder had not attended medical school or spent time working as a physician apprentice, his anatomy training at Harvard was impressive at a time when anatomical knowledge was esteemed particularly highly by physicians. Once he passed an examination,

Wilder received a formal medical cadet appointment, and was assigned to Judiciary Square Hospital in Washington D.C.

In the introduction to this interesting volume, Richard M. Reid does not tell us how Wilder came to be appointed as an assistant surgeon to a black regiment assembled in Massachusetts in the spring of 1863, but just that it happened. This aspect of Wilder's situation, his commission as a surgeon while lacking formal medical training or a medical degree, is one of the more interesting components of the story, but first the document itself which forms the core of this book needs some description. Between May 3, 1863 and September 13, 1865, Wilder wrote several letters a week to the woman who would become his wife once the war was over. She saved those letters, and after a distinguished postwar career as a scientist at Cornell University, Wilder took them up with the plan of creating a memoir in 1910. He edited the letters by removing personal details (such as references to his wife), and supplemented the document with information gathered through correspondence

with various surviving comrades, as well as trips to the areas of the South where he had served. The letters themselves have now disappeared, so no one can say what other information may have been censored. Wilder never published the document, now put together to resemble a diary, and it languished in storage until donated to the Cornell archives in the 1950s. Reid suggests that Wilder failed to publish because of doubts that the account was accurate enough, because he had not been able to check all the facts thoroughly.

Reid chose to call the book “Practicing Medicine in a Black Regiment,” a title that emphasizes the document’s contributions to the history of African American Civil War regiments and to the history of medicine. The 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment is less famous than its predecessor, the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, the regiment led by Robert Gould Shaw which stormed Battery Wagner and was memorialized in the movie *Glory* (1989). Like the 54<sup>th</sup>, the 55<sup>th</sup> was composed of free Northern black men, drawn not just from local towns but from across the northern tier of states. By the summer of 1863 the Union Army had committed to the whole-scale enlistment of black troops, most of them recent or current slaves who ultimately made up a tenth of the Union Army’s strength. These men never received the same respect or treatment as their white peers. Pay was an issue from the beginning, and brought the troops to near revolt, as Reid and Wilder note. The men received inferior clothing, weapons, and supplies. And there were never enough physicians to go around. Hence the opportunity for an undergraduate with no formal medical training to ultimately be commissioned a major and full surgeon by war’s end.

The 55<sup>th</sup> was supposed to begin service in North Carolina, where its officers would find new recruits from among the local African American population to expand the ranks. Instead it moved quickly on to the coast of South Carolina, where the regiment remained except for a brief sortie to

Jacksonville when other regiments went on to fight at Olustee, Florida. Wilder, accordingly, had limited opportunities to deal with battle wounds, although the men did manage to injure themselves often enough that he performed surgery of various sorts. He pulled teeth fairly often, lanced boils, corrected joints dislocated in falls, dealt with accidental gunshot wounds, and even occasionally treated dogs and horses. More often his medical practice consisted of sick call, when the ill men of the regiment lined up at morning’s light to explain why they were too sick to do duty that day. The most common complaint was diarrhea, and Wilder could dispense with a couple of hundred cases by breakfast, although he does not describe his treatment. He was sympathetic to the black troops, who as elsewhere did much manual labor and were liable to exhaustion and its sequelae. Wilder’s pronouncement of “too sick to work” would mean a day of much-needed rest, but it also left him open to the charge of coddling malingerers, a tension he recognized. After realizing that one man had bitten the inside of his cheeks in order to “vomit blood” and otherwise faked a severe illness, Wilder concluded, “Such a man knows too many tricks, and I wish I could get rid of him. An Army doctor should have a lawyer at his elbow” (p. 184). That patient was actually a civilian who had wandered into camp, and his status and reason for feigning illness is hard to fathom, but Wilder worried in general about how to distinguish the genuine from the faker.

Wilder was likewise ambivalent about choosing medicine as a career, and cognizant of his lack of medical training. “My natural repugnance to medicine as a profession is lessening as I realize what an opportunity it offers for usefulness,” he wrote in September 1863. “[A]t present I am often and painfully conscious of my lack of regular medical training. Of practical surgery I saw so much in Washington that I feel fairly competent to deal with ordinary emergencies; but on the medical side I feel comparatively ignorant and I must study hard in order to justify my position”

(p. 82). He and his medical colleagues could requisition books along with medical supplies, and he often mentioned that he studied medical texts in order to “improve my time here” (p. 153). In typical army regiments there was a main surgeon with the rank of major who had two assistant surgeons to help him care for the usual regimental quota of a thousand men. Among white troops those surgeons would almost all have held the M.D. degree but among black troops the requirements were much looser. Wilder did not think much of the surgeon in charge of the regiment, and often mentions him with both antipathy and criticism. He began to think that he was better qualified, and talked to his regiment’s colonel about possible promotion. The colonel “said he was sure I had skill enough but had doubted whether I had sufficient acquaintance with the forms and methods of making out returns, etc.” (p. 80). Wilder admitted his ignorance in this regard, but assumed this could be overcome. By 1865 Wilder had indeed been promoted to the rank of surgeon for the regiment.

Still, it is obvious throughout the diary that Wilder’s main interest was in neither medicine nor the black men under his care. He was sympathetic to the latter, treated them with apparent kindness, and did what he could to make his patients comfortable in the hospital and so on. Far more interesting to him, however, was the natural world that surrounded him in subtropical South Carolina and north Florida. He spent days around Jacksonville, Florida trying to capture a large alligator so it could be killed, studied, and saved as a specimen. Although this quest failed, back in South Carolina the men snagged a sea turtle weighing close to three hundred pounds. This monster Wilder did dissect, harvesting the meat for food and sending the shell and skeleton north to the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. Once while on the beach he saw men bathing in the surf, when suddenly one began to flail around and call out. Wilder hoped it was a shark attack (so he could get the shark), but it was only a man

out beyond his depth who could not swim. The man’s friends brought him to safety. The soldiers knew of his interests and brought him the curious creatures that crossed their paths, such as starfish, snakes, and interesting lizards.

Wilder’s greatest love was spiders, and as the diary proceeds it becomes clear that his affection grew not just out of curiosity. He had invented an apparatus for harvesting the spider’s “silk,” the white material from which spiders construct their webs. Wilder’s goal was to find a way to grow colonies of spiders and harvest the silk as thread, much as silk worms produced fibers for clothing. He mentioned one spider held in his machine who had produced thousands of yards of such silk. Wilder experimented with breeding spiders, trying out different conditions of humidity, temperature, and food supply, as large colonies of the arachnids would be needed for industrial production. He published a paper on this research in 1865 (Reid’s work closes with a detailed bibliography of Wilder’s writings) but it never led to the hoped-for commercial applications. Still, he did file a patent for his spider-silk harvesting apparatus in 1866.

Wilder’s Civil War document is at its most illuminating in its descriptions of everyday life in the army for a mid-level officer—frequent travels and visits around the neighborhood, the challenge of building a stove that would keep the tent warm without burning it down, the antics of adopted pets, and the behavior of a beloved horse. The diary is fun and interesting as well as informative, and Richard Reid has done us all a service by making it more widely accessible through this nicely annotated publication. Reid’s introduction describes Wilder’s postwar course. He returned to vertebrate study after the war, and became something of a specialist on brain anatomy. Wilder was one of the founding faculty at Cornell and taught there until his retirement in 1920. He never returned to the practice of medicine.

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