

# Feeding the Soldier . . .



"The cooking is everything. If not well done it is positively injurious; if well done it is wholesome."  
General Silas Casey, USA - 1862



For generations, military men had banded about the maxim that an army "marched on its stomach," but few thought beyond the expression. Governments and commanders largely assumed that their culinary responsibility ended with the obtaining of "basic" supplies and distributing them in the field. After that, how these men supplemented their rations, and even the basic nutritional requirements of a soldier, were very much up to the individual, or to the officers and non-commissioned officers immediately above him.

(left) Preparing the meat for the next meal.

Consequently, neither Union nor Confederate forces went into the field with standard manuals of cookery, nor with anything like an idea of proper food sanitation and handling. The whole science of nutrition had not yet been born. Manuals for quartermasters and commissaries were adopted by the respective war departments, but again, these extended only so far as to the proper ration to be issued to the man in uniform, and that ration had not changed materially since the days of the Revolution.

Fruit, fresh vegetables, dairy products (especially milk) were entirely absent. It did not mean that the commissaries didn't believe that the soldiers did not need such essentials, only that the governments could not undertake to provide them on a regular basis. It was up to the men themselves, or their officers, to find such things in their locality. One of the first issues (other than preparing for battle) when any army arrived at its destination, was to search for food in the local area. In the beginning of the War in the southern states, for example, Confederate troops were often resupplied with food by local farmers willingly, due to the abundance available. When these same troops ventured to northern states, however, food was less likely to be found.

The diet of the average Southerner, however, quickly went from a pre-war variety of adequate foods to a near-starvation sustenance. Those at home suffered as well, and the enlisted men perhaps even more so. Parched corn, wormy hardtack, "blue" beef and "sowbelly" jerky, goober peas, and perhaps beans and corn bread were typical soldier fare. At Port Hudson and Vicksburg the beleaguered troops ate the meat of rats, dogs, mules, horses, and cane roots, and even grass. It took months for the North to hobble the food supply system of the largely self-sufficient agricultural South, and years to weaken and ensnare the Southern army.

~ Food at Home in 1860 ~

The military authorities' attitude toward what the men ate and how they prepared it was largely a reflection of the time in which they lived. Soldiers dined on much the same raw materials as they had when at home on their farms. Meat was the staple of almost every diet, and they ate it either freshly killed, or preserved by a variety of means from pickling in brine, to smoked, dried, sugar-cured, and even canned in tins. Vegetables (carrots, onions and potatoes) and fruit (apples, pears, plums, cherries, peaches) were the other mainstays, eaten fresh when available, or else dried.



(above) Non-commissioned officers Company D, 93rd New York Infantry.

Flour (bread) and rice provided the grain in the diet, with bread being always available on every table. Milk, butter, eggs, and cheeses rounded out the basic foodstuffs in the larders of virtually every American family of the time. Cooking techniques of the period were basic, and had changed little (if at all) from the age-old methods brought to the New World from the Old. Meat was fried, roasted, or most often boiled, frequently in stews with the vegetables. Vegetables themselves, if cooked, were almost invariably laced with with pork or bacon fat for flavor, while seasoning on all dishes usually extended little farther than salt and pepper and a few fresh herbs like bay leaf.

Fruit pies, especially apple and cherry (peach and pumpkin in the south), were universally popular.

Beyond this, regional differences and variations were already making their mark on American tables. The distinctive Creole cooking of southern Louisiana was well established. The stews and barbecues of the backwoods of Tennessee and Kentucky excited the palates of native sons, while Virginia ham, Boston beans, New England chowders, and Indiana fresh corn, all stood out in the fare of their localities.

### ~ Technology Arrives ~

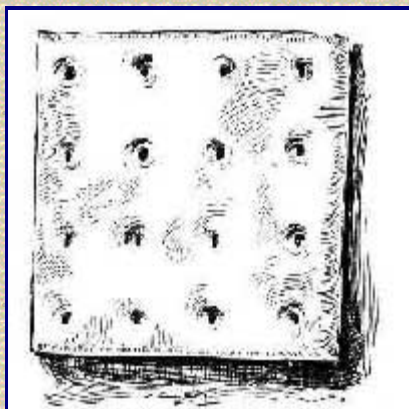
Recent technological developments made it possible by 1860 for some of these regional specialties to be enjoyed elsewhere. Smoking, pickling, and drying were preservation techniques older than human memory. But within this century men had discovered the art of vacuum packing meats and vegetables in tin cans (Hormel - tinned meats), glass jars (Ball Mason jars - canning vegetables), and [Gail Borden](#) had recently developed a process for "condensing" milk, putting it into tins that could keep it for months ( a product available to us to this day).



(right) Well-equipped regiments had a number of camp stoves for the use of the soldiers, but these were often little more than an iron box with a stove pipe.

So, when war erupted in April of 1861 and thousands of men flocked to the colors, means were at least available to get food to them, while their own experience at home had taught them a few rudimentary cookery skills to convert the raw rations into something edible, although not always either nourishing or healthful. There was still a lot to learn, however, for in a regiment of 1,000 men, each might have his own idea of what to eat and how to make it.. Thus a uniformity quickly spread throughout the camp kitchens, imposed in part by the limitations and availability of what was provided, and how the officers passed on their instructions. "Army food" was army food, then as later, and the officials did not go to any great lengths to explain or prescribe exactly how to make it.

~ Food in the Field ~



**Hardtack** was a simple flour biscuit issued to Union soldiers throughout the war. Hardtack crackers made up a large portion of a soldier's daily ration. It was square or sometimes rectangular in shape with small holes baked into it, and similar to a large soda cracker and baked in northern factories.

If the hardtack was received soon after leaving the factory, they were quite tasty and satisfying. Usually, the hardtack did not get to the soldiers until months after it had been made. By that time, they were very hard, so hard that soldiers called them "tooth dullers" and "sheet iron crackers". Sometimes they were infested with small bugs the soldiers called weevils, so they referred to the hardtack as "worm castles" because of the many holes bored through the crackers by these pests. Packed into large wooden crates, the boxes were stacked outside of tents and warehouses until it was time to issue them. Soldiers were usually allowed six to eight crackers for a three-day ration. There were a number of ways to eat them- plain or prepared with other ration items. Soldiers would crumble them into coffee or soften them in water and fry the hardtack with some bacon grease. One favorite soldier dish was salted pork fried with hardtack crumbled into the mixture. Soldiers called this "skillygallee", and it was a common and easily prepared meal.

Coffee was the most important part of a soldier's ration. Whenever Union armies halted on the march, even if only for an hour or so, rail fences in the area soon became firewood for brewing a large, Stout cup of coffee. Excess coffee was also used as a trade item on those rare occasions when Confederate and Federal soldiers met between the picket lines. Southern tobacco, not on the Union ration, was traded for Northern coffee, an increasing rarity in the Rebel ranks as the war continued. The beverage was in such demand that the Army developed something commissaries called "essence of coffee."

Camp cooks prepare another meal in the endless struggle to feed the men (right).



It came packed in tin cans and looked like axle grease. Apparently, it tasted like the same. Before

long it was removed from the ration and replaced by the genuine article.



Before secession, a typical Southern family's grocery bill was \$6.65 per month. By 1864, it was \$400 per month. In fact, Confederate dollars were so devalued that many families could not afford to buy food staples. As produce became more and more scarce or expensive, people had to find substitutes for common foods. Many residents were quite creative, and although most of the substitutes did not survive until modern times, satisfied southern appetites to some degree.

(left) Officers are waited on as they prepare to dine out at camp.

### Here are some examples:

**Meat** (at least \$20 for one meal): Domestic animals, crows, frogs, locusts, snails, snakes and worms

**Coffee:** Okra seeds that were browned, dried sweet potatoes or carrots, roasted acorns, wheat berries

**Tea:** Herbs, sumac berries, sassafras roots, raspberry, blackberry, huckleberry and holly leaves

**Champagne:** Water and corn and molasses, fermented in an old barrel

**Milk or cream:** Beat an egg white to a froth and add a small lump of butter, mix well

**Sugar:** Molasses, sorghum, dried, ground figs, honey, watermelon syrup

**Vinegar** (apple): molasses, honey, beets, figs, persimmon, may-apples and sorghum

**Flour:** Rice, rice flour, cornmeal, and rye flour

**Salt:** Boiled sea water, or taking dirt from the smokehouse, adding water and boiling it. Skim off the scum on the top and drop in cold water, and the salt sinks to the bottom. The impurities could be boiled off. Wood ashes or gunpowder could substitute for salt as a seasoning.

In the end, the fighting men ate what they could get, and cooked it in whatever means was most convenient, or most tasty. The ingredients suggested by the respective commissaries and others may have predominated, but when men were left so much to their own devices, innovations and improvisation, especially in the confederacy, it became a way of life. A group of Confederates in South Carolina made a meal of rats, finding that "rat tasted like young squirrel." Another recounted how "I overcame prejudice against the bull frog and found him very nice." Dogs, cats, even mules, went into stew pots. At Vicksburg, Mississippi, for years after the war, it was said that the city was rat free. The starving Confederate garrison during the 1863 siege had caught and eaten them all.

Those hardships were often shared by soldier and civilian alike in a war that frequently blurred the distinctions of people in and out of uniform. Their experiences were no culinary lark, and were not so intended. Men ate to live, and lived to fight, and if their fare was not extravagant, still the heavy diet gave them protein, starch, and animal fats, to provide the energy needed for days of endless marching and the feverish heat of battle.

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(See Bibliography below)

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Photos: (2) O'Sullivan, Timothy H., 1840-1882, photographer, Bealeton, Va.; *Noncommissioned Officers' Mess of Co. D, 93d New York Infantry*

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