

## Feeding the Troops

Getting enough to eat was often a problem for Civil War soldiers. Throughout the war rations became scarce. At times soldiers would go for days without food, and when shipments of food finally did arrive, the starving men often consumed several days rations at one time, never certain when supplies would arrive again.

Northern troops were better fed and supplied than were Confederate soldiers. The fare of the Union soldier consisted of salt pork, bread, beans and coffee which they supplemented with cakes and pies bought from sutlers who followed the armies from camp to camp. Families of Union soldiers as well as aid societies sent the men thousands of boxes containing food such as smoked meats, dried fruits and jams, and pies. Sadly, much of the food was spoiled by the time it arrived.

It is no surprise, then, that soldiers from both sides acquired food by any means possible including foraging, hunting, and picking fruits from orchards. Raiding homes

and farms for food was a common occurrence. Thievery was rampant with soldiers stealing whatever livestock or crops they could get their hands on.

Hardtack—biscuits made from flour and water—was a principle staple and was often referred to as teeth dullers or worm castles. The biscuits were baked to last, and by the time they reached the troops, the bread was as hard as cement.

Referring to hardtack as “sheet-iron crackers,” one soldier stated that army regulations requiring a good set of teeth referred more to eating hardtack than to the necessity of biting the end of the paper cartridge when loading shot into a rifle. Soldiers had no choice but to eat the hardtack which was generally stale, moldy, and worm-filled. Some joked that the weevils were the army’s way of providing protein. One soldier exclaimed, “All the fresh meat we had came in the hard bread.” In order to eat the bread, it had to be soaked in coffee or soup until it was soft enough to chew.

Meat, when it was supplied, was almost always spoiled. In addition, most meats were fried in grease, causing numerous stomach ailments. Coffee was highly prized, but hard to obtain. The Union soldiers had more access to it, and when available, some men drank four or five quarts a day.

In the South, coffee beans were scarce for both the military and civilians. Chicory or other spices were often added to make the coffee stretch further. Sometimes rye, corn meal, peanuts, acorns, beets, or sweet potatoes were substituted for coffee. Cream was a luxury, so soldiers often mixed in egg white or butter to make their coffee creamy.

Scarcity of provisions was unexpected by most Southerners. By 1863, even the wealthy were subsisting on rice, milk, and cornbread. Southerners faced famine by the closing of the year, and people settled for whatever food they could find. Even rats and mule meat were eaten.

The Confederate Congress made attempts to alleviate the situation by requiring farmers to grow food crops

instead of cotton and tobacco. This helped, but problems continued because of poor transportation. The North had about 22,000 miles of railroad track, while the South had only 9,000. Railroads were always a main target as supply lines could be severed when tracks were destroyed. If the trains couldn't move, food rotted at railway stations.

Shortages of food became so severe that many soldiers took drastic measures. Southern soldiers often deserted in order to return home to help their families and to get enough to eat.

## **Creative Cooking**

***Salt Horse*** - a slang term for salted beef that was so salty it could take two years to decay. It was soaked for hours in order to lessen the amount of salt, but the water also leached out the flavor and nutrients.

***Cush*** - stew made with bacon, cornbread, and water, cooked slowly until all the water evaporated.

***Essence of Coffee*** - the first instant coffee which looked like axle grease and was difficult to dissolve.

***Artificial Oysters*** - grated green corn mixed with egg and butter, rolled and fried.

***Desiccated Potatoes*** - dried slabs that were heavily coated with pepper and described as looking like "a dirty brook with dead leaves floating around" when made into soup.

***Bully Soup*** - hot cereal consisting of hardtack, cornmeal, wine, and ginger.

***Skillegalee*** - hardtack soaked in water and fried in pork fat.

***Lobscouse*** - pork-flavored soup, thickened with hardtack.