

Camp Life: Food and Coping (2)

Reading

Camp life during the Civil War harbored a host of problems, but it was better than marching or combat. For many soldiers, camp was home for up to three years, and they coped as best they could.

Food

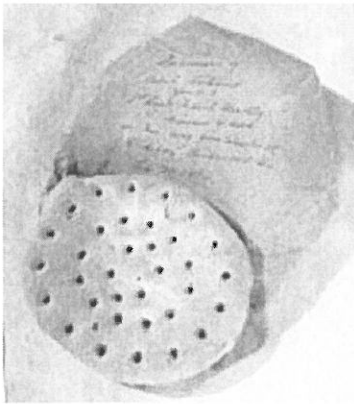
Food shortages became a serious problem for the Confederacy and even some Union forces during the later years of the war. Early on, soldiers on both sides were relatively well fed. In the field during long battles, however, mandated allotments often fell short. Quality meat and vegetables were in short supply, and soldiers were forced to live primarily on dried beans, corn bread, and hardtack, a biscuit made of flour and water that more often than not was contaminated with weevils (a type of bug) and other critters. The lack of fresh vegetables and fruit often led to outbreaks of scurvy, a disease caused by a vitamin C deficiency.

Coping

Boredom was a chronic problem in most army camps. Drilling helped take up some of the day, but the soldiers had to devise other forms of recreation to help them while away the rest of the hours. Those who were able wrote long letters home or read books, magazines, and newspapers when they could get them. Others played cards or engaged in various sports, such as baseball, boxing, and cockfighting. Some camps, desperate for activity, even staged cockroach and lice races. Of all the hardships soldiers faced in camp, homesickness was probably the most rampant and difficult to cure.

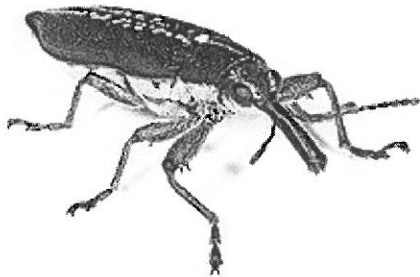
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Photographs



Hard Tack, which was food the soldiers would eat

A weevil, the type of bug that would destroy food at the camp



A letter written by a Civil War soldier to his wife back home

1862
Battlefield, near Atlanta July 25th
Dear Sandy:
You got a Mail yesterday for the first time since leaving the Chattahoochee & among the letters were two from father & one from you, telling about the Rifle & finding fault because I do not write longer letters which is I think, a little ungenerous, seeing that I improve every opportunity to send you news of me. You must remember that my time is not my own that I have duties to perform which I cannot neglect without injury to the service in which I am engaged & which duties at present take up very nearly all my available time.
There are hundreds of incidents occurring here daily that would be of great interest to you & to myself in after years if I could have the chance to record them in either diary or correspondence but after all this is only a little matter compared to the real earnest work which it is our business to perform. So don't grumble at that

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Primary Sources

"I will speak of the rations more in detail, beginning with the hard bread, or, to use the name by which it was known in the Army of the Potomac, Hardtack. What was hardtack? It was a plain flour-and-water biscuit. Two which I have in my possession as mementos measure three and one-eighth by two and seven-eighths inches, and are nearly half an inch thick. While hardtack was nutritious, yet a hungry man could eat his ten in a short time and still be hungry...."

Source: "The Blue and The Gray" by Henry Steele Commanger, Article From John Billings' "Hardtack and Coffee."

"Pestiferous vermin swarmed in every camp, and on the march--an indescribable annoyance to every well-raised man yet seemingly ineradicable. Nothing would destroy the little pests but hours of steady boiling, and of course, we had neither kettles, nor the time to boil them, if we had been provided with ample means."

Source: "The Blue and The Gray" by Henry Steele Commanger, Article From Randolph Shotwell's "Three Years in Battle."

Dear Wife, I take my pen in hand to write you a few lines. I am not very well and have not been well since I left home. I have enlisted and been sworn in. I have the promise of an office of some kind as soon as the regiment is organized. You must do the best you can and take care of the children and if any of you get sick let me know it immediately. If I do not come home before next Thursday write and let me know how you are all getting along. So nothing more at present but remaining your affectionate husband until death.

A. A. Harrison P. S. Tell Martha, Jo is well

Source: A.A. Harrison, Camp Anderson, Kentucky December, 1861