

A Taste of Food in the Civil War

What's the way to keep a soldier alive? Strategy? Weaponry? Medicine? Or is it something as basic as food? While many of us take our meals for granted, the Civil War was impacted by the distribution and intake of food. Contrary to popular belief, most Union soldiers had plenty of food. The restrictions experienced by both the Union and Confederate soldiers were the types of food available during the civil war. The army with the soldiers well nourished gained an advantage. Societal norms regarding who prepared the food was also a factor and differed between slave states and free states. Without kitchens with experienced chefs or slaves, soldiers had to cope with the unvaried and insufficient rations they received.

As the war began, Union soldiers started to realize the bleak reality of the food they were given. The United States Sanitary Commission, also known as Sanitary, supported and supervised all food allocation in the North. Captain James Sanderson was a notable volunteer who worked for the Sanitary. He noticed the importance of food in a man's body and how advantageous an able-bodied man can be. After authoring the first cookbook distributed to soldiers, Sanderson helped raise awareness about meals on the battlefield. In Sanderson's cookbook it was evident he was passionate about soldiers' nutrition on the battlefield.

“Remember that beans, badly boiled, kill more than bullets; and fat is more fatal than powder. In cooking, more than in anything else in this world, always make haste slowly. A big fire scorches your soup, burns your face, and crisps your temper.”

-Union Cookbook by Captain James Sanderson¹

¹ Sanderson, James M., Captain. *Camp Fires and Camp Cooking, Culinary Hints for a Soldier*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1862. *Google Books*. 21 Jan. 2016. Page 5

However, Sanderson did not write a cookbook about crab cakes or prime rib, but informed people about hardtack, salted meat and desiccated vegetables. Hardtack was a hard bread that was overcooked to be preserved. For perspective, soldiers called hardtack “tooth dullers” and “sheet iron crackers.” Hardtack was the Spam of the era, it was not made to taste good, just to last a long time. Hardtack offered a source of protein as many sheets had worms in them, often by mistake. Soldiers’ other sources of protein were pork and beef. Fresh vegetables did not preserve easily so they were rarely transported to war camps. Camps ended up with desiccated vegetables instead, which was soon named “desecrated” vegetables. Vegetables were packed into cakes, dried, and boiled by soldiers when ready to eat. Fresh vegetables last for a week while desiccated vegetables last for more than a year and can compress 16,000 servings into one cubic yard.

Coffee was also a large component of the North’s diet. Many soldiers relied on coffee to give them an extra pep in their step. Water was distasteful because the troops did not filter it. When coffee was mixed with this water the taste improved dramatically. Soldiers were then able to bear the taste and retain liquids in their body because of the coffee bean.

Another factor in the Union’s food supply was their 20,000 miles of train track. This was nearly double in comparison to the South’s 9,000 miles. By having so much track, food could be quickly transferred to almost any soldier to make sure they could be fed.

Union food was fair and always in the soldier’s best interests. To reward the soldiers, patriotic and generous Northerners sent quality food to troops on Thanksgiving in 1864. Poetry was sparked by this warm-hearted donation. One contributor wrote on a note:

“Please find enclosed, My little mite
To give the soldiers, An extra bite
Be it turkey, goose or hen,

I don't care which, if it suits them."²

A soldier replied:

"Turkeys hot and turkeys cold, ditto young and ditto old,
Ditto tender and ditto tough, And thank the Lord, we had enough"³

In contrast to the Union, the Confederate diet during the Civil War was not as formalized. Before the war, wealthy and middle class men ate three large meals a day. On the battlefield, most soldiers ate rations of bacon, Jonny cakes, imitation coffee, and molasses. Bacon was plentiful and boiled for almost every meal and alongside it was Jonny cakes. Jonny cakes are the confederate version of hardtack made of cornmeal and milk. Additionally, the South did not have good supply of coffee beans so they they made imitation coffee. They crushed, fermented and brewed acorns, peanuts, chicory, rye, peas, dried apples and anything that was cheap in order to make the water taste better. Union blockades prevented goods from other countries like flour and coffee, from reaching the Confederate troops. Therefore giving the Union a tactical advantage because they controlled the price of coffee and had no competition. Tobacco from the South was traded to the Union in return of coffee.

Another concern of the Confederate troops was how the price of food was increasing inside and outside the war. Only in the South, women started bread riots. Bread riots were when groups of people petitioned the price of food in violent ways. For example, Mary Jackson and a

² Smith, Andrew F. "Giving Thanks and No Thanks." *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War*. New York: St. Martin's, 2011. 155. Print. and quoted in: Goodrich, Frank B. "Chapter XVI." *The Tribute Book : A Record of the Munificence, Self-sacrifice and Patriotism of the American People during the War for the Union*. New York: Derby & Miller, 1865. 433. Ebook.

³ Smith, Andrew F. "Giving Thanks and No Thanks." *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War*. New York: St. Martin's, 2011. 155-166. Print.

few hundred women in the working class, met at a church in Richmond. They were armed with stones, clubs, knives, hatchets and guns while they demanded food price decrease from the Virginia governor. Food was costly and they could not grow their own as there was no men to do the labor. One clerk said jokingly, "The price of looking at foods in Richmond is five dollars." ⁴

During the war, salt increased from sixty five cents to sixty dollars for two hundred pounds. This hindered the Confederacy greatly because the price became higher and higher to preserve meat. On the battlefield Confederate men sometimes ate nearly rotten meat because their commissary did not pay for salt to preserve the meats. However an alternate cheap method was discovered.

"We need salt as a relish to our food, but it is not essential in the preservation of our meats. The Indians used little or no salt, yet they preserved meat and even fish in abundance by drying. This can be accomplished by fire, by smoke or by sunshine, but the most rapid and reliable mode is by all these agents combined."

-Confederate Receipt Book compiled by G. W. Gary⁵

Many speeches, proclamations, and harangues encouraged farmers in the South to plant more food, but not cotton and tobacco, as these did not directly address the upcoming problem of famine. General Braxton Bragg came up with a three part plan to prevent widespread

⁴ Smith, Andrew F. "Bread Riots" *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War*. New York: St. Martin's, 2011. 53. Print.

And Quoted in:

Jones, John B. "A Rebel War Clerk's Diary at the Confederate State's Capital." (1866):. Web.

⁵ Gary, G. W., comp. *Confederate Receipt Book*. Richmond: West and Johnson, 1863.

Documenting the American South. Web. Page: 16. 21 Jan. 2016.

starvation. First, the president of the Confederate States of America would prohibit all growing of cotton and tobacco or clearing of new lands. Then, all planters would have to seed an amount of grain proportional to the amount of slaves and cleared land they owned. Lastly, any owners who did not intend to seed with edible items would have the government take possession of their land. Many historians believe this plan could have resulted in a Confederate victory. However this plan was ignored. No southerner would accept a plan to prevent famine that was to reliant on a central government because they were fighting a Civil War partly about stronger state rights.

If the plan would have been accepted the Confederacy potentially could have gained assistance from European countries. There was word going around that the South was approaching famine. England and France caught wind of this which made them more unsure of helping the Confederacy. The war's tide could have shifted if the plan was adopted. The southerners stuck true to their beliefs and refused to let their central government gain more control.

This food the soldiers ate possibly affected who won the war. Yet, it also compares to our food today. Preservation was a great hinderance to the Commissaires in the North and the South. One preservation method of the 1860s was covering the goods in salt and then soaking them in a brine. Furthermore, goods could also be preserved by air and heat drying. This method was copied from the Native Americans and is still used today. We don't eat dessicated vegetables nor hardtack because we have sophisticated preservation methods. In the present, we preserve meats and goods by refrigeration and chemicals. These amenities were not available to

soldiers or people at home in the 1800s. Food preservation was a necessary aspect of food in the Civil War and it has changed over time

Differences in access, quantity, preparation, and quality of food between the South and the North gave the Union an advantage. Union soldiers could operate at a higher level than the Confederate soldiers because of their food supply. Food may seem like a simple unimportant subject. However, it was very influential and necessary in the Civil War.

When the Union set up a blockade to stop all foreign trading with the South, the Confederacy had to rely on themselves to produce food. The North continued to trade with other countries. An effect of the blockade, was the South's poor access to food. In addition, the Union had built a more vast train system, as mentioned earlier. This train system helped the Union's Commissary system. James Sanderson was able to continue to distribute food while the Confederate Commissary could not. Another example of greater access to food was the United States government money and funding for the Union's food. The Confederate States had an unstable economy. In the antebellum, the southern states relied on the central government and state governments. When they didn't have this reinforcement during the Civil War, there was large price increase in southern food. The Sanitary, trains, funding, and blockades gave soldiers more access to food in the Union. With more food, the North could be dominant compared to the hungry South.

An example of the importance of an abundance of food was when the South defeated the Union at the first battle of Bull Run. At this battle, the Confederate army won despite the depletion of supplies. Some historians suggested that if the Confederacy had a larger supply of food, the army could have marched their way to Washington - which at the time was defenseless.

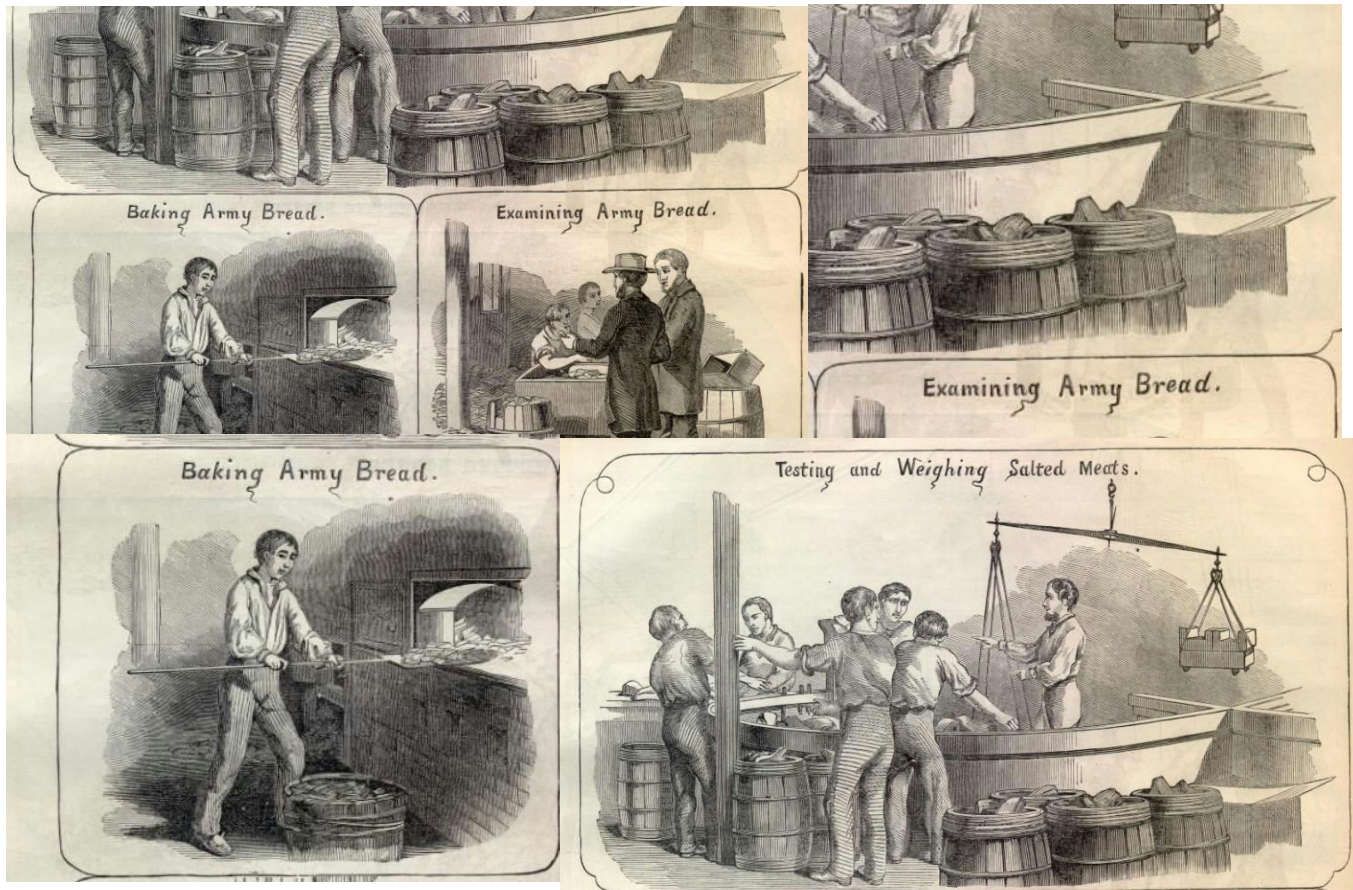
In July 1861, the war could have ended with the Confederacy's independence. Yet, the Civil War continued because food was not on the Confederate general's priority list. In contrast, the Union was aware of its quantities of food so the soldiers could be prepared nearly all the time.

One primary struggle for both the soldiers of the North and the South was their inexperience in cooking. Soldiers on both sides were accustomed to women or slaves cooking. However, on the battlefield, there were very few slaves or women to cook. In Confederate camps, it was even more of a problem because men viewed the job of cooking as a slave's work. He who fought in battle for his country could not stoop to the level of a slave. In the North, women usually did the cooking, so the Federal soldiers did not view cooking as unacceptable as the South did. In fact, many Union men volunteered to cook, distribute or harvest food. Captain Sanderson even wrote a cookbook to inform inexperienced men how to cook. Something as basic as a willingness to prepare food, gave the Union an edge over the Confederacy and their refusal to cook. Societal norms about who prepared food varied between the North and the South and ties back to how different beliefs about slavery started the Civil War.

Comparing calories and quality of food shows yet another benefit that the Union had. Calories were not discovered till the 1900s however we can still estimate to compare. An average Union soldier received a little more than one thousand calories per day. A Confederate soldier received slightly less than one thousand calories. Today, we are recommended to have over two thousand calories. Quantity of food also correlates to the weight of soldiers. Before and after the war, the average weight of a man was considerably higher than a soldier's weight of one hundred forty pounds. Today, an average male's weight is two hundred pounds. The soldiers lost weight but never starved-that doesn't mean they weren't hungry.

The overall concept of food is interpreted differently all around the world and in different time periods, but always essential in health of humans. The Union starved the South to gain their victory in the brother versus brother war. Blockades, railroads, cookbooks, preservation methods, and inexperience in the culinary field all played a part in the Civil War. However we still question, what does really keep a soldier alive? Weaponry? Strategy? Medecine? Or food? One thing we know is that food is essential in our life and that no one wants to face the foes of food in the Civil War while fighting for their lives.

Appendix A:



From Harper's Weekly and Son of the South Website⁶

This newspaper was published in the Harper's Weekly on November 2, 1861. It depicts the process of the Union producing their food. On the other hand, the Confederacy, used less efficient methods to distribute and manufacture their food items. Above was published to educate those outside of the war, with the methods that the Union used.

⁶ "Provisions for the Army." *Harper's Weekly* [New York City] 2 Nov. 1861: 695+. *Son of the South*. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

Appendix B:



From Library of Congress⁷

This drawing was published in 1867 by the artist, Edwin Forbes while he watched a sergeant weigh meats for the Commissary cook. The rations were carefully weighed because of the limited resources and the large amount of soldiers that needed to be fed. Normally, the Commissary cook would not have a small shelter to prepare food in. This allowed a fair and equal ration for every soldier of the same rank. This drawing gives us an idea today what happened when rations were measured.

⁷ Forbes, Edwin. *The Commissary's Quarters in Winter Camp*. 1876. *Library Of Congress*. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

Appendix C:

The following are recipes for Jonny Cakes and Beef Stew. They are adapted from cookbooks authored in the the 1860s.

Beef Stew:

“Take the pieces of beef reserved for frying or broiling, and cut them into pieces about two inches square and one inch thick; sprinkle them with pepper and salt, and put them into frying pans, with a little fat; place them over the fire until half cooked; then turn them into camp kettles, adding a handful of flour and six onions cut in quarters to each kettle, with just enough cold water to cover the meat; add also to each kettle two dozen potatoes pared and cut in quarters. Stew slowly over a moderate fire, skimming every now and then, for three hours and a half; then stir in each two table spoonsful of vinegar, and serve smoking hot. All kinds of vegetables—such as leeks, carrots, parsnips, and turnips—can be added to this stew with advantage.”⁸

Journey or Jonny Cakes:

“To three spoonfuls of soft boiled rice add a small tea cup of water or milk, then add six spoonfuls of the rice flour, which will make a large Jonny cake or six waffles.”⁹

⁸ Sanderson, James M., Captain. *Camp Fires and Camp Cooking, Culinary Hints for a Soldier*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1862. *Google Books*. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

⁹ Gary, G. W., comp. *Confederate Receipt Book*. Richmond: West and Johnson, 1863. *Documenting the American South*. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

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