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TO DECEMBER. VOL. VI**

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SOUTHERN

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Secretary Southern Historical Society,
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SOUTHERN HISTORICAL SOCIETY PAPERS.

Vol. VI

Richmond, Va., July, 1878.

No. 1.

Detailed Minutes of Soldier Life.

By Private CARLTON MCCARTHY.

PAPER No. 4—*Cooking and Eating.*

[Many of our readers will be glad to see another of those vivid sketches of soldier life from the pen of Private McCarthy, whose previous sketches were so widely read and commended.]

Rations in the Army of Northern Virginia were alternately superabundant and altogether wanting. The quality, quantity and frequency of them depended upon the amount of stores in the hands of the commissaries, the relative positions of the troops and the wagon trains, and the many accidents and mishaps of the campaign. During the latter years and months of the war, so uncertain was the issue as to time, quantity and composition, the men became in large measure independent of this seeming absolute necessity, and by some mysterious means, known only to purely patriotic soldiers, learned to fight without pay and find a subsistence in the field, the stream or the forest, and, on the bleak mountain side, a shelter.

Sometimes there was an abundant issue of bread and no meat; then meat in any quantity and no flour or meal. Sugar in abundance and no coffee to be had for "love or money," and then coffee plenteously without a grain of sugar. For months nothing but flour for bread and then nothing but meal, till all hands longed for a biscuit, or fresh meat until it was nauseating; and then salt-pork without intermission.

To be *one* day without anything to eat was common. *Two* days fasting, marching and fighting was not *uncommon*, and there were times when no rations were issued for three or four days. On one march, from Petersburg to Appomattox, no rations were issued to Cutshaw's battalion of artillery for one entire week, and the men subsisted on the corn intended for the battery horses, raw bacon

captured from the enemy, and the water of springs, creeks and rivers. No doubt there were other commands suffering the same privations.

A soldier in the Army of Northern Virginia was fortunate when he had his flour, meat, sugar and coffee all at the same time and in proper quantity. Having these, the most skillful axeman of the mess hewed down a fine hickory or oak, and cut it into "lengths." All hands helped to "tote it" to the fire. When the wood was convenient, the fire was large and the red coals abundant.

The man most gifted in the use of the skillet was the one most highly appreciated about the fire, and as tyrannical as a Turk; but when he raised the lid of the oven and exposed the brown, crusted tops of the biscuit, animosity subsided. The frying pan, full of "grease," then became the centre of attraction. As the hollow-cheeked boy "sopped" his biscuit, his poor, pinched countenance wrinkled into a smile and his sunken eyes glistened with delight.

The strong men squatted around, chuckling over their good luck and "cooing"—like a child with a big piece of cake. Ah! this was a sight which but few of those who live and die are ever permitted to see.

And the coffee, too—how delicious the aroma of it, and how readily each man disposes of a quart.

And now the last biscuit is gone, the last drop of coffee, and the frying pan is "wiped" clean. The tobacco bag is pulled wide open, pipes are scraped, knocked out and filled, the red coal is applied, and the blue smoke rises in wreaths and curls from the mouths of the no longer hungry, but happy and contented soldiers.

Songs rise on the still night air, the merry laugh resounds, the woods are bright with the rising flame of the fire, story after story is told, song after song is sung, and at midnight the soldiers steal away one by one to their blankets on the ground and sleep till reveille. Such was a meal when the mess was fortunate. How different when the wagons had not been heard from for forty-eight hours, and the remnants of stock on hand had to do. Now, the question is, how to do the largest amount of good to the largest number with the smallest amount of material? The most experienced men discuss the situation and decide that "somebody" must go foraging. Though the stock on hand is small, no one seems anxious to leave the small certainty and go in search of the large uncertainty of supper from some farmer's well filled table. But at

last several comrades start out, and as they disappear the preparations for immediate consumption commence. The meat is too little to cook alone, and the flour will scarcely make six biscuit. The result is that "slosh" or "coosh" must do. So the bacon is fried out till the pan is half full of boiling grease. The flour is mixed with water until it flows like milk, poured into the grease and rapidly stirred till the whole is a dirty brown mixture. It is now ready to be served. Perhaps some dainty fellow prefers the more imposing "slap jack." If so, the flour is mixed with less water, the grease reduced, and the paste poured in till it covers the bottom of the pan, and, when brown on the underside, is by a nimble twist of the pan turned and browned again. If there is any sugar in camp it makes a delicious addition.

About the time the last scrap of "slap jack" and the last spoonful of "slosh" are disposed of, the unhappy foragers return. They take in the situation at a glance—realize with painful distinctness that they have sacrificed the homely slosh for the vain expectancy of applebutter, shortcake and milk, and, with woeful countenance and mournful voice, narrate their adventure and disappointment thus: "Well, boys, we have done the best we could. We have walked about nine miles over the mountain, and haven't found a *mouthful to eat*. Sorry, but it's a fact." "Billy Brown fell down the mountain and mashed his nose; Patso nearly scratched his eyes out with the briars, and we are all hungry as dogs—give us our biscuit." Of course there are none, and, as it is not contrary to army etiquette to do so, the whole mess professes to be very sorry, and is greatly delighted.

Sometimes, however, the foragers returned well laden with good things, and, as good comrades should, shared the fruits of their toilsome hunt with the whole mess. Foragers thought it not indelicate to linger about the house of the unsuspecting farmer till the lamp revealed the family at supper, and then modestly approach and knock at the door. An invitation to enter was almost certain to follow and was certainly accepted. The good hearted man knew that his guests were "posted" about the meal which was in progress in the next room, the invitation to supper was given, and, shall I say it, accepted with an unbecoming lack of reluctance.

The following illustrates the ingenuity of the average forager: There was great scarcity of meat, and no prospect of a supply from the wagons. Two experienced foragers were sent out, and as

a farmer about ten miles from the camp was killing hogs, guided by soldier instinct, they went directly to his house, and found the meat nicely cut up, the various pieces of each hog making a separate pile on the floor of an outhouse. The proposition to buy met with a surprisingly ready response on the part of the farmer. He offered one entire pile of meat, being one whole hog, for such a small sum that the foragers instantly closed the bargain, and as promptly opened their eyes to the danger which menaced them. They give the old gentleman a ten dollar bill and request the change. He is pleased with their honest method and hastens away to his house for the desired change.

The two honest foragers hastily examine the particular pile of pork which the simple hearted farmer has designated theirs, find it very rank and totally unfit for food, transfer half of it to another pile, from which they take half and add to theirs, and await the return of the farmer. He returns, gives them their change and assures them they have a bargain. They agree that they have, toss the good and bad together into a bag, say good-bye, and depart as rapidly as artillerymen on foot can. The result of this trip was a "pot-pie" of large dimensions, and some six or eight men gorged with fat pork, declaring that they had never carcd and would never again wish to eat pork—especially pork-pies.

A large proportion of the catering of the army was done in the houses and at the tables of the people—not by the use of force, but by the wish and invitation of the people. It was at times necessary that whole towns should help to sustain the army of defence, and when this was the case, it was done voluntarily and cheerfully. The soldiers—all who conducted themselves properly—were received as honored guests and given the best in the house. There was a wonderful absence of stealing or plundering, and even when the people suffered from depredation they attributed the cause to terrible necessity rather than to wanton disregard of the rights of property. And when armed guards were placed over the smokehouses and barns, it was not so much because the Commanding General doubted the honesty as that he knew the necessities of his troops. But even pinching hunger was not held to be an excuse for marauding expeditions.

The inability of the government to furnish supplies forced the men to depend largely upon their own energy and ingenuity to obtain them. The officers knowing this, relaxed discipline to an extent which would seem, to an European officer for instance, ruinous.