

A Case for Messes
By Sean Smith

All Civil War infantrymen were part of a unit, their company, regiment, brigade, and so on. Within your company you have smaller detachments; the platoon, squad, and mess. Two of these last three entities are in the drill manuals; the other is not. The mess was a non-prescribed army unit, made ad hock by the soldiers themselves. The mess guys in your mess where the men you had the most intimate relationships with.

At the beginning of the war, most companies had some time of food service for the men. There would be a company cook and maybe an assistant or two. Many times the cooks and assistants were slaves brought by their masters, but in most cases it was some of the men from the company. If a company cook was had then you would line up outside the cookhouse when *Dinner Call* was sounded by the bugler and wait in line to be slopped your victuals. With this system you had no choice in rations. Meat was most likely boiled, not fried or broiled- which were the preferred ways to prepare meat. Bread could be day old or stale. Many times you got a soup of some type, it would be all your rations in one. It would contain the beef or pork boiled, mixed with vegetables, rice, beans, or peas if they were had, maybe some cornmeal or flour for consistency and a slice of bread on the side. Most soldiers hated this meal as there were many inadequacies to it, like being bland, not getting enough of one thing or the other, and so one and so forth. Eventually company cooks became impractical also. When you are not in a static camp, then there is little time to set-up a cookhouse and cook for 70 to 100 men! So this system was abolished and a new system formed.

The mess ordinarily was composed of four to eight men. Messes sometimes consisted of men with lineage or affinity. The mess system worked very well during campaigns, each man would secure a different assignment in exchange for the services fulfilled by his comrades.

Duties in the messes mainly revolved around food preparation. Pardes would rotate positions in gathering the food, preparing the food, borrowing utensils from others, collecting firewood and kindling, foraging or purchasing from the sutler, and other duties that deal with wartime cuisine. Not only would these guys cook and eat together, but they would also sleep together. Spooning was common during the war; it helped a soldier keep warm! Sharing body heat is very effective. So as you can surmise, you were very close to your messmates.

Mess ware varied from mess to mess, some were endowed well, and others weren't as prosperous. Cooking equipment tended to be scarce in the Confederate armies, but most messes owned their own frying pan, which each member of the mess would take turns hauling during marches. An alternative to a frying pan is a canteen half, which can be used as a plate as well as a skillet, it also works great for digging the fire pit or entrenching. Other items might include a tin can boiler with a wire bail for stewing items. During static camps messes might obtain small ovens and pots.

Food preparation differed group-to-group depending on the tastes of the members. Typical rations consisted of cornmeal, meat (generally fresh beef or salt pork or bacon), occasionally sugar and salt, rarely were Confederates issue *real* coffee. They used substitutes, like acorns, potatoes, peas, and chickory. To make coffee from potatoes you thinly slice the tuber and place it on a skillet, you then cook it thorough, so that is can be

ground. When they are done “roasting” your root you grind it in a method of your choosing and then cook it as you would regular coffee (note: Sweet potatoes are generally the best for this work).

Cornmeal and meat were the main staples and soldiers were very creative in their preparation. A common dish concocted by Confederates, but rarely consumed by re-enactors is “mush.” You fry your meat in a skillet to collect the grease, and then you take some cooked meat (in small pieces) and put it in the grease and pour in water and stew it. Then put in cornmeal or flour, or crumble in cornbread or biscuits, then stew it again until there is no water left. And you have what some soldiers would call the “luxury” of mush. When you received bread ration it usually came in raw form, not in baked form. Cornbread was usually stale by the time it was rationed to the soldiers anyway. Soldiers would make bread out of meal by using the leftover grease from the bacon they had prepared and made dough out of cornmeal, grease, and water. They would do this on an oilcloth, a flat piece of wood, in a tin cup or any other available surface. To bake it they would sometime wrap it around their ramrod or simply find a flat piece of wood and bake it next to the fire.

When other rations came in, like rice, beans, and other vegetables they were either made separately or cooked all together in a soup or as a type of all-in-one meal. Items like sugar were usually issued in raw form, not refined. Salt was another items occasionally issued. This would be used in food preparation, not for salting the meat, remember it is salt pork, there is more than enough salt there already! Fruits came in by forage seasonally and would also be used in all-in-one types of dishes or eaten raw.

Fires were not the bon-fires most units have today. Soldiers did not have the luxury of pre-cut logs. They used small pieces of wood, fences, or branches. The fire would not be kept going 24-hours a day either, there wouldn't be enough fuel for the entire army.

Messes were a fundamental part of the Confederate soldiers lifestyle. Rarely are they portrayed in today's re-enactments. This is a small idea that can greatly improve a unit's authenticity. Try an event with messes, you'll like it and you'll do it at every event. This way each soldier will not have to cook and clean for himself. Issuing rations through the company or battalion greatly helps this process and members should advocate it to their superiors.