



BOTH PHOTOS: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Cards, dominoes, and other games filled spare hours. So did letter writing, reading, playing music, singing, and general horseplay.

Camp Life

by Ginalie Swaim

Life in a Civil War camp was "monotonous, stupid," according to a Union soldier, and made "one long to go somewhere, even at the risk of being shot." Neither camaraderie nor adventure could make up for inclement weather, inadequate equipment, and, always, boring rations. As Franc Wilkie, a newspaper correspondent from Iowa, wrote, "Oh ye gods, how I do loathe the cursed pork. Its scrofulous, greasy, foul-looking slices cover every platter—it reposes in superlative nastiness in every barrel!"

Fortunately, tons of fresh and preserved fruits and vegetables from Northern relief groups supplemented rations, and camp sutlers sold canned goods, like meat, Borden's condensed milk, and Van Camp beans. Under orders or on their own, soldiers routinely foraged for fresh meat, milk, fruits, vegetables, and anything else they could find in the increasingly devastated South. They took great joy and pride in their efforts. "I must close [this letter] in a hurry," Iowa soldier W. H. Platt scribbled, "for I see a wagin lode of peaches cumming and I want to capture one."

Killing long hours in camp was another challenge; carving, whittling, playing games and music could only while away so many hours. Letters and diaries reveal that in the absence of women's better influences, many soldiers veered towards liquor and tobacco, swearing and gambling, and other activities considered social vices. Prostitutes were seldom far from army camps.

Josiah Conzett, a soldier from Dubuque, wrote of a "so called Hotel" near the Kentucky border where soldiers could "get most anything they had" for a bag of coffee, including the attentions of a "quite good looking Young girl" who worked there. A Davenport newspaper reported that "several women of easy virtue, who were trifling with the soldiers about Camp McClellan Hospital, were treated to a cold bath in the Mississippi by order of the officer in charge." Historian Geoffrey Ward writes that "one in ten Union soldiers was treated for venereal disease during the war, and thousands more cases were never reported." Back home in Iowa, families warned their young soldiers to avoid temptation. Many soldiers worried about it, too, decrying immoral behavior around them in camp. Iowa soldier Charles B. Senior wrote to his father, "I have got with a good mess of boys, 8 of us, they are not a swearing, black guarding set . . . they are quite the reverse, more inclined to study and improve their mental faculties. We have had several debating schools in our shanty since we came here and we study grammar some and arithmetic. One of our mess sent to Fowler and Wells and got a couple of phrenologic books, and we are just beginning to see a dawn of sense in that branch. Altogether we have received the name of the literary squad, which sounds better to me than [the] card-playing, blackguarding shanty just below us which is known by the name of Gambling Saloon."

Some well-intentioned soldiers signed temperance pledges, formed temperance or religious groups, attended Sunday services, and read Bibles and religious tracts distributed by missionary organizations.

Camps sometimes had a portable library (essentially a wooden box) with books on history, science, philosophy, poetry, and religion. Dime novels were popular, as were novels by Charles Dickens and James Fenimore Cooper, and, especially, newspapers.

Writing and reading letters was a major distraction from the tedium of camp life. One historian estimates that 180,000 letters to and from soldiers went through St. Louis and Washington, D.C., every day. "If you went into any camp at any time, you would see dozens and sometimes hundreds of soldiers writing letters," wrote soldiers' relief worker Mary Livermore. "Some would be stretched at full length on the ground, with a book or a knapsack for a table—some sitting upright against the trunks of trees, with the paper resting on their drawn-up knees—others would stand and write."

In a long, detailed letter to his parents, Iowan George Bradway scribbled, "Will tell you about our equipments . . . we received a cap [and a] pair of first rate sewed shoes. 2 pair of wolen stockings to pair of

Because repairing uniforms was part of a soldier's life, women fashioned small sewing kits called housewives (below) for them. "Never came anything so handy, Iowan Cyrus Boyd wrote in his diary. "It contains needles, pins, buttons, thread and just what every soldier needs. In it the needles do not rust and are always in good shape." Another soldier wrote, "The admirable little housewives sent by our Dubuque ladies elicited three hearty cheers for their senders, and one containing a lock of golden hair is a bone of contention. . . . Whose sheeny tress is it? The lady who put it there had better write to the one she wishes to have it, or else a dozen duels may result."

drawers 2 shirts 1 blous one pair pants. they are all first rate clothes except the shirts they are rough and corse . . . I brough both of my shirts along I have 4 now I wished I had sent them home fore I have so much to carry. . . . we have 1 knapsack any amount of straps and buckles on it which we carry our woolen blanket a oill cloth blanket . . . we have a haver sack which will hold about half a peck the haver sack and knapsack are made of oil cloth and all the rest is stout heavy Leather the cartridge box has a steut belt which goes over the left shoulder then we have a belt around our waist which holds our cap box bayon stabbard and holds the cartridge box to its place and there is too straps that hooks into it from the knap sack. we have a heavy brass plate on our belt with U.S. on it and another on the strap that holds the cartridge box with an eagle on it . . . our guns are the enfield rifle they are small and easy to handle they weigh 10 lbs they are strong and well made . . . they allso have a strap on them to swing them over our backs. so you see we are pretty well riged and I think we will have to use them, they say there is hard fighting down the river."

Letters between soldiers and home folk sustained relationships, conveyed news and affection, and attempted to assuage loneliness and fear. John Ensign Mitchell wrote to Lizzie Arrowsmith, "My dear friend Lizzie: Your real-good-old-fashioned letter arrived in safety yesterday. I have read and reread it and every time it does me more good. . . . While all is clamor in camp preparing for some battle or move, a letter just received from Lizzie so kind and good brings me a contented mind. The rose came unimpaired in your letter. I will never stop thanking you for it. Just from Iowa and away out here in the wilderness. It seems so

SEWING KIT: SHSI (DES MOINES). PHOTOGRAPH: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

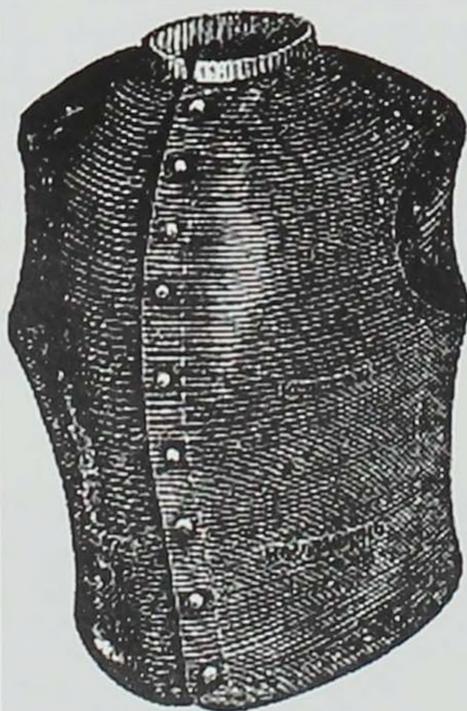


WANTED TO EXCHANGE.—The Seventh have some 900 mosquito bars they wish to exchange for Government blankets. None of the U. S. contractors need apply, as we wish to deal with honorable men.

WANTED IMMEDIATELY. — One hundred and fifty fly wall tents, nine hundred uniforms, wood daily, and straw sufficient to sleep the whole bloody 7th. Contractors will send in their bids before another rain. For further particulars inquire at this office.

Ads above imply dissatisfaction with equipment and supplies.

The Soldiers' Bullet Proof Vest



Has been repeatedly and thoroughly tested with Pistol Bullets at 10 paces, Rifle Bullets at 40 rods, by many Army Officers, and is approved and worn by them.

It is simple, light, and is a true economy of life — it will save thousands. It will also double the value and power of the soldier; and every man in an army is entitled to its protection. Nos. 1, 2, and 3 express the sizes of men, and No. 2 fits nearly all.

Price for Privates' Vest, \$5. Officers' Vest, \$7. They will be sent to any address, wholesale or retail.

Sold by MESSRS. ELLIOTT, No. 231 Broadway, New York, and by all Military Stores. Agents wanted.

An ad for a bullet-proof vest. Iowa soldier Cyrus Boyd wrote in his diary: "Man selling 'bullet proof' vests [was] in camp to-day. The boys say our Capt purchased one. They submitted some for trial about one half of them were bored through by musket balls. They sold for \$8.00 to \$16.00. If the bullet did not go through it would knock a man into the middle of next week so that he might as well be killed first as last."

strange that the letters could come so direct without being disturbed by the enemy."

Like Lizzie's rose, locks of hair and pressed flowers were sometimes tucked inside letters. Alonzo Abernethy, intrigued by Southern plants, sent samples of cotton and cotton seeds back home. Another sent the scab from his smallpox inoculation in camp, hoping that it could be used again to inoculate his family. Soldiers often asked for photographs from home or enclosed photographs of themselves in military attire. Iowan James Adams Shedd explained to his sister the pose he had taken: "I wanted to have my knapsack and blankets on but they make one look round shouldered, and as though he has a hump on his back, so I took them off, and took the position we usually take when on 'Dress Parade.' The posture is called 'Parade rest' and is the one taken when listening to the details on orders which are read by the Adjutant. The overcoat is much darker than the picture shows. . . . The beard is darker. . . . On the whole it is a very good likeness."

Not all Civil War correspondence was between soldiers and people back home. Historian Patricia Richard uncovered a variety of correspondence advertisements placed in newspapers by Union soldiers eagerly seeking women with whom they could exchange letters. Iowa soldiers Charles Clayton and William Cozen stated in their ad that they had "lately had the misfortune to lose their sweethearts and to supply their places wish to open correspondence."

Although some of these exchanges veered toward marriage, soldiers like Clayton and Cozen were skirting 19th-century courtship customs; their ad implied neither commitment nor obligation. Instead, Richard states, such men "hoped to relive some of the playful moments they enjoyed with women before they enlisted." And surely this kind of correspondence was yet another way for soldiers to kill time in "monotonous, stupid" army camps. ❖

NOTE ON SOURCES

Quoted materials related to Alonzo Abernethy, Cyrus Boyd, John Ensign Mitchell, W. H. Platt, Charles B. Senior, and James Adams Shedd are in Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa. Secondary sources include Marilyn Mayer Culpepper, *Trials and Triumphs: Women of the American Civil War*; Russell L. Johnson, "'Volunteer While You May': Manpower Mobilization in Dubuque, Iowa," *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front*, ed. Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller; Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness*; Scott Reynolds Nelson and Carol Sheriff, *A People at War: Civilians and Soldiers in America's Civil War*; Patricia L. Richard, "'Listen Ladies One and All': Union Soldiers Yearn for the Society of Their 'Fair Cousins of the North,'" *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front*, ed. Cimbala and Miller; Dorothy Volo and James Volo, *Daily Life in Civil War America*; and Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War*.