



Chilled Union troops line up for a warm cup of Joe in Winslow Homer's print *The Coffee Call*. "I can drink two and three quarts of coffee a day easily and want more," bragged William Hamilton of the 2nd Pennsylvania Cavalry.



'Strong Enough to Float an Iron Wedge'

Few things were as welcome to soldiers in camp and on the march as a **fresh, hot cup of coffee**

By KIM A. O'CONNELL

Somewhere amid the horror and bloodshed of Antietam, a small act of kindness was rendered that would be remembered decades later. The battle had begun before daylight, leaving harried soldiers no time for breakfast. By that afternoon, a 19-year-old commissary sergeant with Company E, 23rd Ohio Infantry, decided to see what he could do to ease the suffering. Exposing himself to fire, he organized a mobile field kitchen, along with several volunteers, to serve warm food and coffee to the men. That enterprising young man was William McKinley, who became the 25th president of the United States. Today a monument at Antietam commemorates McKinley's battlefield service and includes a panel depicting him handing a cup of coffee to another soldier. As much as it is a memorial to the late president, it can also be seen as a monument to coffee, which was held in tremendous esteem during the war. Coffee was, after all, one of the few items in a soldier's food ration that was both reliable and highly coveted.

Between half-rotten meat and iron-tough bread, the Union food ration was often a disappointment. (The Southern apportionment was usually worse.) "Sore feet an' damned short rations, that's all," a soldier laments in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*—a common complaint. Coffee, by contrast, tended to hold up well in a soldier's pack and was appreciated whenever it could be consumed.

"Coffee was one of the most cherished items in the ration," wrote Bell Irvin Wiley in his classic, *The Life of Billy Yank*, published in 1952. "The effect on morale must have been considerable. And if it cannot be said that coffee helped Billy Yank win the war, it at least made his participation in the conflict more tolerable."

Coffee's power had been known around the world for centuries. It was prepared and drunk with reverence in the Middle East and Africa from the 15th century on. (The prophet Mohammed reportedly stated that, under the influence of coffee, he could “unhorse forty men and possess forty women.”) By the 17th century, the caffeinated beverage had spread throughout the western world, with the first coffeehouse in America opening in Boston in 1689.

After the Boston Tea Party, John Adams declared that “tea must be universally renounced.” In its wake, coffee flourished. So addictive was this elixir that the Sioux called it *kazuta sapa*—“black medicine.” The early 19th century also brought technological innovations such as a two-tier drip pot invented in France, according to Mark Pendergrast, author of *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How it Transformed the World*. In 1850 young entrepreneur Jim Folger opened a coffee-roasting business in San Francisco, planting the seeds of a coffee empire. Coffee had become—according to Lieutenant William H.C. Whiting, a 19th-century Army engineer—“the great essential in a prairie bill of fare.”

Before the war, New Orleans was the primary port for the coffee trade in the United States, with the most popular suppliers coming from Java, Ceylon, Brazil and

Costa Rica—the great irony being that the coffee industry in many places, such as Brazil, relied on slave labor or horrific working conditions. The Southern port was quickly superseded by New York after the blockade was put in place. Coffee prices steadily increased as the war went on; the price of Brazilian coffee jumped from 14 cents a pound in 1861 to a high of 42 cents a pound by war's end, according to Pendergrast. (That was nothing compared to the \$5 per pound price found in the South, which sometimes went much higher.)

In 1832 President Andrew Jackson added coffee to the official military food ration, where it remains today (although the coffee is instant in today's MREs). At the outbreak of the Civil War, the Union food ration included 12 ounces of pork or bacon, one pound and 4 ounces of salt or fresh beef, flour or bread, corn, beans or peas, and coffee. Coffee beans were usually distributed whole and roasted, although green beans were often dispensed as well. (An attempt to distribute canned instant coffee known as “essence of coffee”—a coffee extract mixed with milk and sugar—was short-lived.) The U.S. government was purchasing 40 million pounds of coffee beans by 1864.

Preparation was time-consuming but straightforward. First soldiers roasted the beans if they were green, then ground the roasted beans with a rock or their rifle butts when it came time to brew. (By the end of the war, some Sharps Carbines had been modified to include a hand-cranked grinder for coffee or grain, though extant examples of these are extremely rare.) The grounds and water were put together in a pot and brought to a boil over a fire. Before drinking, soldiers either strained the grounds through a piece of cloth or let the grounds settle to the bottom of their tin cups, skimming them off when needed. The drink was usually prepared black and strong, and soldiers learned to drink it straight (without milk), although sugar was often added whenever it was available. One common technique among veterans was to mix the sugar evenly throughout their coffee beans before brewing, so as to never be caught without a sweetened cup. Some had been told to use such items as eggshells or fish to “clarify” the drink, but it's doubtful that the resulting taste or extra steps involved warranted widespread use in the field.



Federal soldiers pose with their prized coffee pot and pieces of hardtack.

It wasn't long before coffee began to show up in the literature and art of the period. In 1863 Winslow Homer published six lithographs in a volume called *Campaign Sketches*, which his publisher sold as a set of “spirited Camp scenes” for just \$1.50. Homer's sketches ranged from the sentimental (“The Letter for Home”) to the comical (“Foraging,” starring a runaway cow), but one image above all captured the daily grind of war, literally: “The Coffee Call.” In Homer's sketch, several soldiers with tin cups in hand, and including one wearing a long greatcoat (indicating cold weather), eagerly await the coffee brewing in two pots over an open flame.

Sometime during the war, artist Alfred Waud, best known for his battle drawings for *Harper's Weekly*, drew a hasty sketch of a bearded soldier with a scribbled title, “The Veteran Coffee Boiler.” He also added a first-person caption in the margin (original spelling and punctuation retained): “Now they are going to have another fight I ain't spoiling for a fight But I don't see any help for it, I've boiled coffee till I have got no more, my rations are about played out and I never see sich a mean country a chip bird might starve if he did not move out quick. Weel I'll

go and fire off these cartridges.” The business of coffee was captured in photographs too. Timothy H. O'Sullivan, who had taken a famous photo of Waud at Devil's Den at Gettysburg during 1863, made a stereograph in 1864 of African-American soldiers brewing coffee in front of a bombproof at Petersburg, capturing troops enjoying a rare and refreshing break from some of the conflict's most brutal fighting.

“Whatever words of condemnation or criticism may have been bestowed on other government rations,” wrote Union veteran John D. Billings in his classic 1888 work on the subject, *Hard Tack and Coffee*, “there was but one opinion of the coffee that was served out, and that was of unqualified acceptance.” A veteran of the 10th Massachusetts Artillery, Billings acknowledged that coffee had been given second billing in his title, noting, “Some old veterans may be disposed to question the judgment which gives it this rank, and claim that coffee should take first place.” He argued that, while bread or hard tack provided actual sustenance, coffee was merely a stimulant.

Its stimulating effects were nonetheless treasured. “What a Godsend it seemed to us at times!” Billings wrote. “How often after



An Essence of Coffee tin: This early form of instant coffee seemed like a good idea, but soldiers hated the taste, and it soon fell out of favor.

From Enemies to Friends

Rebel thirst for coffee and Yankee desire for tobacco were strong enough to quiet a firing line

On July 17, 1864, Major Levin Miller of the 33rd Indiana Infantry took advantage of a lull in the Atlanta Campaign to write a report of his regiment's recent activities. For the previous 11 days, his Hoosiers had been camped on the Chattahoochee River's west bank. “During this time there was but little firing on our picket-line,” wrote Miller, “...and the men of the enemy and our own carried on quite a trade and traffic in tobacco and coffee, &c., and the truce was faithfully observed and maintained by all.”





United States Colored Troops wait for their kettle of coffee to boil outside their Petersburg, Va., bombproof in August 1864.

being completely jaded by a night march,—and this was an experience common to thousands,—have I had a wash, if there was water to be had, made and drunk my pint or so of coffee and felt as fresh and invigorated as if just arisen from a night's sound sleep!"

As much as coffee was admired, its quality depended greatly on who was brewing it. One Irish soldier, according to Wiley, said the coffee prepared by company cooks in large pots was indistinguishable from the company soup. He despised it so much that he had no choice but to drink "Adam's Ale instead," referring to water, the only drink available to Adam in the Garden of Eden.

Coffee showed up regularly in diaries and letters home too. On May 19, 1862, as his unit marched through northern Virginia, Frank-

lin Eldredge of the 7th Ohio Infantry wrote about his routine: "Fine morning, started at eight...shaved, washed, and changed; we eat our 'Little John' ration of coffee and hard bread, when we are ordered to be ready to march immediately." A week later, according to his diary, a rainy day made it impossible for Eldredge and his comrades to get a fire going, so they were forced to "steep" their coffee instead of boiling it, "which tasted bully."

In his Civil War chronicle *Corporal Si Klegg and His Pard*, Wilbur H. Hinman, former lieutenant colonel of the 65th Ohio Infantry, wrote that "it is safe to say that if forced to strike one [item] from the bill of fare, not one in a hundred would have marked out coffee. If hardtack or bacon ran short, it could

IF HARDTACK OR BACON RAN SHORT, IT COULD BE EKED OUT WITH ODDS AND ENDS PICKED UP BY FORAGING, BUT THERE WAS NOTHING TO TAKE THE PLACE OF COFFEE

be eked out with odds and ends picked up by foraging, but there was nothing to take the place of coffee."

Even if there was no real

substitute for coffee, Confederates made the attempt anyway. When the Union blockade was in effect, the coffee trade in the South virtually dried up, forcing Southern soldiers and civilians to drink coffee substitutes that were weak approximations at best. Ernestine Weiss Faudie, a German immigrant who resided in Texas and whose two brothers fought for the Confederacy, said in an oral history that her family made a coffee substitute out of sweet potatoes. "We cut them up and dried them and boiled them," she said, "and drank this for coffee." Others brewed tepid concoctions out of peanuts, peas, dried fruit, acorns, corn, rye or chicory. One recipe called for cutting the roots of dandelions into small pieces, roasting them until crisp, and grinding them up. If they were lucky, Southerners could mix these impostors with real coffee grounds, stretching their supply.

In 1861 one R.J. Dawson wrote out a "receipt" (recipe) for beet coffee and sent it to the *Chronicle & Sentinel* of Augusta, Ga.: "Take the common garden beet, wash it clean, cut it up into small pieces, twice the size of a grain of coffee; put into the coffee toaster or oven, and roast as you do your coffee—perfectly brown...When sufficiently dry and hard, grind it in a clean mill, and take half a common sized coffee cup of the grounds, and boil with one gallon water. Then settle with an egg, and send to the table, hot. Sweeten with very little sugar, and add good cream or milk."

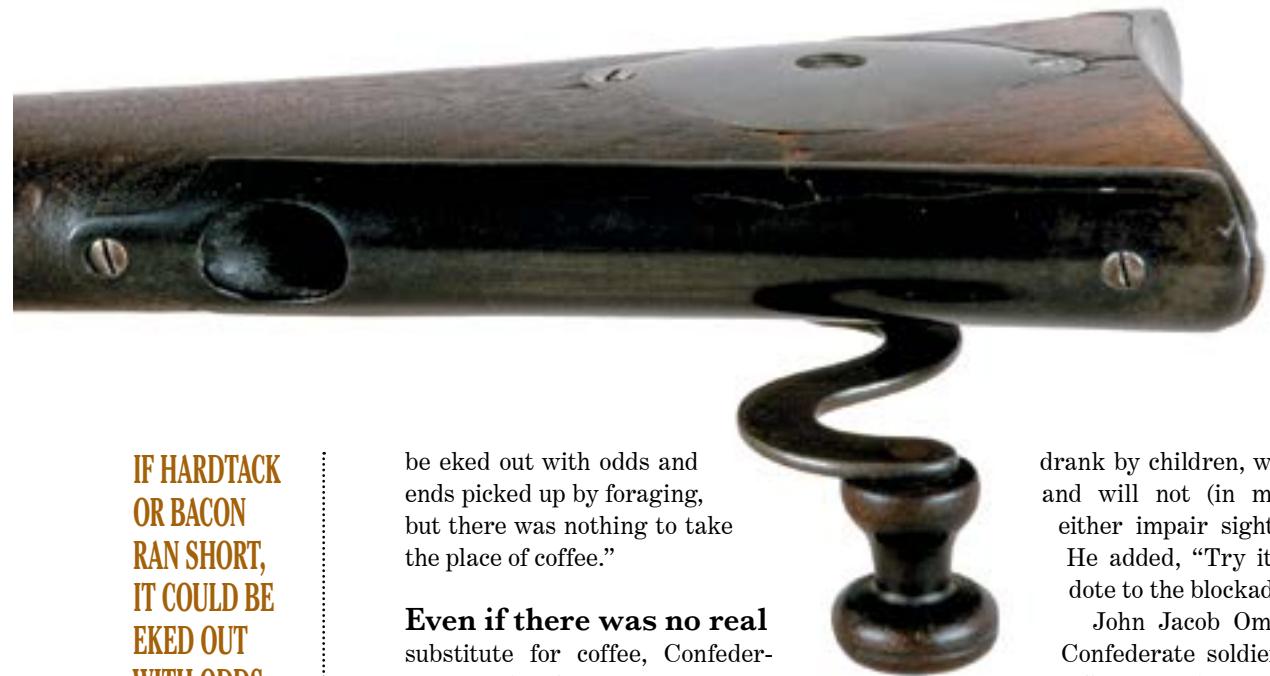
Dawson added that the coffee "can be

drank by children, with impunity, and will not (in my judgment) either impair sight or nerves." He added, "Try it, as an antidote to the blockade."

John Jacob Omenhausser, a Confederate soldier imprisoned at Camp Lookout, Md., between June 1864 and June 1865, produced a variety of often humorous watercolors of prison life. One of these, called *Coffee Grounds Collector*, depicts one Rebel soldier asking another, "Mr has any one spoke for your coffee grounds?" When the other soldier graciously offers them up, the man says in relief: "Thank the lord I'm in luck once more." As much luck as an imprisoned soldier could have, at least.

Whether it was drunk by the common soldier or a U.S. president, coffee was widely consumed through the end of the war. Years later, in 1887, Robert Todd Lincoln received a surprising gift from Captain D.W. Taylor in the form of a coffee cup. Taylor said that a White House servant had seen President Lincoln place the cup on a windowsill on the evening of April 14, 1865, before leaving for Ford's Theatre, and the servant saved it as a souvenir (the cup itself now belongs to the Smithsonian). There is some small comfort in knowing that coffee—so simple and yet so welcome—may have been the last thing the president ever drank. ■

Kim O'Connell, who prefers her coffee black and strong, writes about history for various publications. She especially wishes to thank Wally Owen and Brian Briones, assistant curator and museum technician, respectively, at Fort Ward in Alexandria, Va., for the delicious cup of Civil War-style coffee they recently brewed for her over an open flame.



The Sharps firearm company produced a breachloading rifle with a detachable-handle coffee grinder built into its stock.