Mess Furniture

By Robert Braun

Paragraph #122 of the Army-*Regulations for 1861 states that

...the only mess furniture of the soldier will be one tin plate, one tin cup, one knife, fork and spoon to each man, to be carried by himself on the march. (1)

These important items were issued early in the formation of a regiment, usually before the unit left the state. Volunteer George H. Blair recorded that the 1st Wisconsin Regiment received a "tin plate and cup, spoon, knife and fork" while at Camp Scott, Milwaukee, on May 15, 1861.(2) The 2d Wisconsin Regiment was issued "deep tin plates with iron spoons, forks and knives...[and] quart tin cups" in early May, 1861 at Camp Randall, Madison.(3) Similarly, records of issue from a "Statement of Issues of Clothing, Camp, and Garrison Equipage from July 10th to December 31st, 1862, from the New York Military Storehouse, New York" listed the following for the 124th New York State Volunteers:

1015 Knives, 1015 Forks, 1015 Spoons, 1015 Plates, 1015 Cups.

This statement illustrated that enough mess furniture was requisitioned to supply 993 privates, NCO and NCO Staff, plus twenty-one musicians and one hospital steward. There was no state issue of these items to the officers of the regiment.(4)

A soldier's "table furniture" were remembered fondly in many journals, letters, and reminiscences of the period. Arthur J. Robinson, a private in Company E, 33rd Wisconsin's recalled using "a tin plate, cup, bayonet, and ramrod of our gun, which we need to broil our bacon and hold our coffee over the fire."(5) John D. Billings stated that "a soldier's table furnishings were his tin dipper, tin plate, knife, fork and spoon."(6) Officers, too, recorded their recollections, such as First Lieutenant Stephen Pierson, 33rd New Jersey, who stated, "A canteen carried water or coffee, which a man boiled for himself in a tin cup or an old tomato can. A tin plate served as frying pan and serving dish."(7) Finally, Captain John W. Deforest, Co. I, 12th Connecticut, penned a note to his wife from Thibodeaux, Louisiana, in early 1863 to relate that "When mealtime comes I seize my tin cup, tin plate, knife and fork; I walk down to the cooking fire at the bottom of the company street; I seat myself on a log, or a pumpkin, and devour the richness of the land".(8)

"Dippers" and "Boilers"— The Tin Cup

The drinking cups of the Civil War era varied in size (and capacity), construction, handle style and attachment. Dozens of varieties attributed to Civil War use or lineage are displayed in the holdings of many museums and private collections. Many more such cups are pictured in the "posing with eatables" images that were so popular during the war. These images and artifact cups give us a good cross section of what was typically a) available, and more importantly, b) actually in use at the time.

The name "tin cup" appears to be a generic period term; many cups of the period were made of tinned iron, while others were of true tinplate. Cups were made by cutting out patterned pieces from metal stock and formed by hammering. The rim of the cup was finished with a wired edge (for looks and strength) or simply a hemmed edge. The body of the cup was gently hammered with a mallet around a cylinder of wood of desired diameter called a "mandrel." Once the desired diameter was achieved, the body was closed with a grooved seam. The bottom of the cup was "turned down" by hammer strokes on the edge of a mandrel until a uniform "lip" of about 1/8 to/4 inch was formed. The body of the cup was inserted inside the lip of the bottom and soldered. Additional solder was usually added to the outside of the grooved seam. Every original cup examined showed the handle placed over this side seam. Handles could be elaborate affairs with wired edges which attached to the rim of the cup and finished with tinner's rivets, or simple hemmed edges hammered into a "C" or half-teardrop shape and attached with solder, without rivets. Some cups had ridges pressed into the sides of the cup, presumably to add strength. In all, a tin cup involved about twenty separate steps in its construction.

Some cups of the era were half-spheres of tinned iron, flattened on the bottom, and finished wired rims and soldered or riveted handles. Current thought on these cups is that these were limited purchase items available through channels other than government issues.

The vast majority of tin cups attributed to the Civil War era have similar features: flat bottoms with a lipped portion of 1/8 to 1/4 inch soldered to the body of the cup, hemmed or wired rims, and hemmed or wired handles attached with solder and/or rivets and/or wire. Without being overly dogmatic, the evidence strongly suggests that cups with a "crimped" bottom closure (similar to today's modern tin cans and inexpensive reproduction tin cups) suggest *post-war* manufacture. Even common tin cans and other containers excavated from Civil War sites bear the lipped end closure typical of the period. (9)

The lowly tin cup was frequently mentioned in letters, diaries, and journals. Such cups, unadulterated by bails, lids, spouts, and the like were known as "dippers.' Dippers thus improved as indicated became known as "boilers."

The variety of dippers *available for issue and issued* was not as varied as one might first conclude. An examination of dippers in both collections and in images suggests two major styles: a large size averaging about 4 1/2 inches high by 4 1/2 inches in diameter (known in collector's jargon as "four by fours") and a smaller cup ranging from 2 1/8 inches high by 3 inches in diameter (a capacity of about a gill) to 3 inches high by 4 inches in diameter (holding about 16 ounces). From the images, one gets the "feel" that the latter cup was prevalent earlier in the war, with the larger cup evident afterwards. Make no mistake— *either* cup would be correct for a mid to late war impression. Every tin cup examined by this author was made from a moderate gauge tinplate or tinned iron, which "gave" slightly under pressure from one hand. The quest for durability has caused several odd makers of period reproduction cups to use a gauge of tinplate that is *markedly* heavier than that seen in the originals. Another departure from artifact cups is the tendency to form the handles in the shape of a "u-bolt" (or worse, a half-square) rather than the graceful half-teardrop or "C" shape. It is suggested that cups with crimped bottom attachment be avoided.

"Boilers" described a large category of dippers modified or improved either in the field or at the time of manufacture to accommodate cooking. One common adaptation was to punch two small holes on either side of the cup, insert the ends of a length of wire from the outside of the vessel into the cup, then bend the ends up to form loops, forming a bail. Bail tabs riveted to the cup were a common improvement; the Peter Keck cup seen in Lord's Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, p. 167 serves as an example. Further improvements such as domed lids were also seen. The most prevalent type seems to be the domed lid without a lift ring, as evidenced by the Daniel Heydan cup in Lord's, Vol. 1, p. 168. A very popular cup in hobby today is the full rig with bail tabs, wire bail, and domed lid with lift ring. Known as a "billie", there is disagreement as to *Civil War usage* of this cup. They are not seen in the published images of camp scenes, likely due to the fact that it was a non-issue item. One possible example appears in an image of William Wyatt of the 117th Illinois printed in Bell Wiley's They Who Fought Here, p. 14, where what looks like a covered boiler hangs from his haversack. Upon close examination, the vessel appears to lack a bail and might actually have a spout attachment. The lid may be tied closed with some string.

Other boilers, such as coffee pots and mess kettles, were often pictured or sketched, but a treatment of these items must wait for another article. One piece of army expedient that Shouldn't be overlooked was the simple "old tomato can" remembered by Lieut. Pierson of the 33rd New Jersey.(10) These quiet, unglamorous boilers frequently found their way into soldier accounts. During the Antietam campaign, Lieut. Matthew J. Graham of the 9th New York appeased his hunger "with a conglomeration of stuff, the chief ingredient of which was green corn- a tomato can nearly full of it..." (11) Private Elisha Stockwell of the 14th Wisconsin stated that "when on the march, each man had his coffee and a little pail made from an oyster can with a wire bail of our own make..." (12) And Lieut. Seymour Thompson of the Third Iowa recorded the habits of "the old soldier on the march" by observing that "outside his haversack hangs all that is left of some merry oyster supper- a small tin can with a wire bail coffee pot." (13) These accounts strongly suggest that less custommade, private purchase boilers, and *far more* tin cans with wire bails should be represented among authentically minded re-enactors. Those condensed milk cans with correct lipped (not crimped) end closures are as scarce as hen's teeth in supermarkets these days, but occasionally one or two surface. Some purveyors of reproduction tinware also include a limited selection of tin "cans" of about the right size.

Now don't throw away your dipper if you've decided to make a tin can boiler! The boys poured off, or "strained" their coffee into their dippers, leaving the grounds (most of them, anyway!) behind in the cans. (14) Certainly, you can continue boiling your coffee directly in your plain dipper, until it is of such sable hue as to perhaps earn the scorn of civilians, like one "Quaker dressed gray haired matron" who, with her two daughters, was handing out water to thirsty New York soldiers out of "wonderfully bright, clean pails." One soldier darted towards them and "was in the act of dipping a cup of water from one of the pails; when the old lady with a horrified scream, sprang forward and caught hold of his arm, saying... "Lizzie! Lizzie! Don't let that man spoil your pail of nice clean water with that horrid, nasty black cup!" (15)

"Tin Dishes"

The tinned iron plate of the period was seen in many different styles. Often made of stock that was only sightly heavier than dippers, they ranged in size from about 8 1/2 to 9 1/2 inches in diameter, with an average of about nine inches on original specimens. Those fine old plates were gracefully "dished out" in the manner of colonial pewter plates, with a wide border and a carefully hemmed edge. Many were deep enough to contain stews and soups (hence the "plate of soup" spilled by the "Jonah" in Billing's Hardtack and Coffee.

Good quality tin plates typical of the era are not easily found today. Plates were utilitarian and ditdn't have the charm one might associate with a cup. This sentiment has been translated into the reproduction market, where poor quality materials, incorrect styles, and bad workmanship is abundant.

A variant of the plate was the "deep tin plates" mentioned previously. These were common in the first two years of the war. They were basin-like affairs of moderate size and featured a 2 inch side that angle sightly outward from the bottom of the plate. A good representation of this style of plate can be found in a photograph of men of the 22d N.Y.S.M. at Harper's Ferry on page 55 of Wiley's They Who Fought Here (also pictured are three variants of short dippers). It is possible that this style of military plate was borrowed from the British service, as several have been excavated at posts in Canada occupied from around 1835 through the Civil War. Dishes of this type are rarely reproduced today.

Certainly, the flatter variety of tin plate were widely available and used— even as frypans. Lieutenant Pierson wrote that "a tin plate served as frying pan and serving dish." This practice was coupled with the use of the canteen-half, as remembered by Elisha Stockwell, who used " a half canteen for a frying pan." Such easily procured (and replaced) expedients served the soldiers well during their "three years."

" Knife, Fork, and Spoon"

Knives used by our Civil War ancestors were identical to many common styles used at civilian tables. The blades were mostly steel, anywhere from 4 7/8 to 6 inches long, about 7/8 inch wide, and of a straight, spatula shape that was rounded at the end opposite the handle. The wide, slightly curved steel blades seen earlier in the century had become straight and slightly narrower by the 1860's. The shape and width of the blade is significant, as the practice of eating with one's knife was a strong American tradition a generation prior to the Civil War. The custom was initially introduced to the New World from Europe, but Americans persisted in conveying food to their mouths with knives long after Europeans took to using forks. Although the practice of eating with one's knife was waning by the time of the Civil War, the table cutlery of the era still reflected past convention.

Knife handles were made from a variety of materials, the most common being wood, bone, or metal. Examples of ebony, gutta percha, hard rubber, ivory, and so forth were known, but less common. Knives (and forks) with handles inlaid with lead in a variety of geometric and floral designs are frequently found in antique shops, auctions and estate sales. There is currently a mini debate over whether or not such inlaid flatware actually post-dates the Civil War, supported mainly by the very rare establishment of such utensils with acceptable Civil War provenance. Only *one* such piece was found thus far, pictured as a four-tined fork in Lord's Collector's Encyclopedia..., Volume 1, page 154. The provenance of this item is not established in the text. Until more research is done, it is recommended that knives of established Civil War "lineage" be sought, and purchases be made of items that typify the features seen in the original specimens.

Forks evolved parallel to knives, but much slower. They were known prior to the American Revolution, but generally available to the well to do. Forks are a rare find in archaeological digs at colonial sites, knives and spoons are more common. The fork in America apparently evolved from the two-tine varieties to three tines, and finally the familiar four tines of today. Three-tine forks are regarded as "more correct" in re-enacting circles. While there is reasonable evidence to support this assertion, two and four-tine varieties were known, available, and used. Forks were "handled" similarly to knives, frequently as sets. Like the knives, inlaid fork handles are a source of moderate controversy. C & D Jarnagin now offers reproduction knives and three-tine forks bearing a simple inlay design of pewter. After viewing a sample, the materials and workmanship make these items a reasonable substitute for original utensils. The price of the reproductions is comparable to current prices for the originals.

Spoons and their use date back to at least 600 AD and came about as a result of Roman influence. The popular "fiddle pattern" seen on spoons from the Civil War era dates to their use on American tables during the 1780's. Two types of "fiddle" were known: a style that flared suddenly from the thinner handle, with obvious "shoulders", was an Old English pattern; the other flaring smoothly from the handle without "shoulders" and finished slightly longer and less wide than the other, is of Scottish derivation (with some French influence.) Spoons of the 1860's were made of pressed steel or tinned iron, along with fashionable nickel or sterling silver.

The antique market offers a wide variety of spoons of steel, tin, or tinned iron that will enhance you impression. There are also several good reproduction spoons available, unfortunately at a higher cost than you will find in an antique store. Avoid pewter spoons (either reproduction or original) as much for the reason of safety as for the fact that they were not commonly used. The most common size used appears to be what we term "tablespoon" today.

A few notes on variants and combination sets. Although most original or reproduction flatware are "sepa-

rates" with knives and forks handled in wood or bone, there was flatware issued of plain steel without additional wood or bone pieces attached for handles. Many examples are extant in public and private collections, and one set is pictured in the Time-Life Civil War series volume Tenting Tonight, page 74. These steel flatware sets reflect war-time production of a basic item of issue after current stocks were depleted. Such sets were known and issued to the 124th and 151st New York Infantry regiments, and no doubt to many others as well. Regrettably, such sets are scarce today, and are not currently available as a reproduction.

The variety of so-called "combination sets" could constitute an article by themselves. Although not generally regarded as an "issue item", such sets were definitely available for purchase, or provided through the goodwill of cutlery manufacturers of the period. They seemed to be immensely popular early in the war, and are less seen in period images and infrequently mentioned (if at all) in letters and diaries. Original sets are available from time to time, and command a high price. Only one such set has been successfully reproduced. This is a combination steel fork-and-spoon and separate knife set that fit together by interlocking flanges. This set, known as the "Richards Patent", was *possibly* patented on July 23, 1862 (there are conflicting sources regarding the patent year) by William H. Richards of Newton, Massachusetts. Happily, an excellent reproduction of the "Richards Patent" is available from G. Gedney Godwin, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

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