

Recreation for Soldiers in Civil War

From a paper written by John H. VandeVate of Woodberry Forest School, this is a glimpse of recreational time of Civil War soldiers in the Orange County area:

Recreation

“Not all of camp life was fighting, drilling, and marching. Civil War soldiers had many hours of idle time which they filled in a number of ways--some common, some peculiar. Among the more common were such games as chess; checkers; dominoes; cards; backgammon; cribbage; quotes, a game like horse shoes, and pushpin, a form of bowling. During the warmer months, when the weather was fair, the soldiers organized such events as foot races, boxing and wrestling matches, weight lifting contests, tug o’wars, and even camp wide free-for-alls. Baseball became a popular sport. Similar to softball, Civil War baseball was played with a soft bouncy ball instead of the present day hard ball--in such games, scores shot as high as fifty-eight to nineteen--unheard of today.

“The more outdoorsy type--if four years of camping in mud and snow was not enough for him--would swim, fish, boat or hunt. The hunters caught opossums, coons, squirrels, quail, and rabbits, this supplementing their meals. Often gangs of men would get together and chase rabbits, cornering and catching them. This was certainly a bewildering experience for the rabbit, but the soldiers truly enjoyed it. Such sport ended all too soon for the area would be denuded of game by the overwhelming numbers of hunters in such close proximity.

“In winter, when spirits were low as the mercury in the thermometer, some regiment commanders got up organized snowball fights to build morale and keep their men active. One such battle occurred outside **Fredericksburg** during the winter of 1863 between the twenty-sixth New Jersey regiment and a Vermont regiment. Charges, courter assaults, retreats, and diversions, the men were tired and worn, a few were slightly injured but the lift in spirits made it all worthwhile...Snowballing was not the only form of outdoor entertainment available during the winter months. Many men enjoyed snow sculpture--melting their officers in effigy. Henry Berkely recorded this incident in this diary:

*We remained at **Mount Pisgah Church**¹. All quiet. Weather cold. Ice three or four inches thick on a mill pond near camp. Boys play bandy on the frozen pond. At least a hundred on the ice frequently at once.²*

“Not all recreation was quite so physically oriented, even the army had its scholars. Dramatic societies, debates, orations and even camp newspapers were organized. One local example of

¹Mount Pisgah Church is about five miles from the town of Orange, just west of Woodberry Forest school.

²John H. VandeVate, *Camp Life and the Civil War Around Woodberry Forest*, published privately, date unknown, p.16. A copy is on file at the Orange County Historical Society.

a more scholarly oriented organization is found in Flavius Bellamy's letter, written in **Culpeper** on February 11, 1864:

*We have built a hall that will hold about one-hundred-twenty-five men and organized...the Forest Lyceum; order of exercises--Declamations, Essays, Orations, Debate, Anonymous Communications etc. It is well attended and we have an excellent time. If you can find Poe's 'Raven', a piece I used to declaim and copy it and send it to me immediately. I will be greatly obliged to you.*³

"Reading, anything, became a chief past time of the Civil War soldier. Everything from Latin Classics to worthless dime novels like Dick Turpin, Pirates Son, Flying Artillerist, Red Rover, Iron Cross... became unbelievably popular. In their hunger to read, soldiers read religious tracts and even kept their old letters to read over and over. ⁴

"...Reading and writing became so popular in some companies that they began publishing camp newspapers. These papers, published...erratically...were very popular among the soldiers. To print these papers, company editors would rush to the local press as soon as a town was captured. When the First Minnesota occupied **Berryville, Virginia** in 1862 they let the rebel paper continue and printed their own on the back. Other companies shut down the local press completely and took over operations themselves.

"Rain or shine, winter or summer, the soldiers favorite time was just before taps. Sitting around the campfire, recalling the past, telling tales, making jokes, smoking, singing, and swapping lies. This was the time when the soldiers could relax, get to know the men who fought beside them, get to know themselves....Anecdotes and stories were also very popular around the evening campfire. Everyone would be smoking or whittling a pipe, writing a letter home or reading a book, when one of their more humorous companions would begin telling an anecdote.⁵

"On other evenings, usually after a nip of whiskey, the soldiers would get together to sing and compose songs. Those songs, in the army tradition, mocked the war, the enemy, the authors, or the army. Northern soldiers sang such songs as 'Home Sweet Home', 'John Brown's Body', and 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'. Among the more popular songs were parodies and other songs peculiar to a particular regiment or company. This parody of the Lord's Prayer, for example, was popular among the Northern soldiers;

'Our father who art in Washington,
Uncle Abraham be thy name,
Thy will be done at the South as at the North,
Give us this day our daily rations,
Of crackers salthorse and pork.
(For)give us our shortcomings,

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

As we forgive our Quarter Master,
For thine is the power,
The soldiers and the fighters
For the space of two years.
Amen.⁶

“Lampoons were often made on the notorious army food--the army bean became a favorite theme of such songs (sung to the tune of *The Sweet By and By*)

‘The Army Bean

There’s a spot that the soldiers all love,
The mess tent’s the place that we mean,
And the dish we best like to see there
Is the old-fashioned, white Army Bean.

Chorus: ‘Tis the bean that we mean
And we’ll eat as we ne’er ate before;
The Army Bean, nice and clean,
We’ll stick to our beans evermore.

Now the bean, in its primitive state,
Is a plant we have all often met;
And when cooked in the old Army style
It has charms we can never forget.--Chorus

The German is fond of Sauer Kraut,
The potato is loved by the Mick,
But the soldiers have long since found out
That through life to our beans we should stick.--Chorus’

“Songs also reflected morale and self-confidence, the spirit of this corps can be easily assessed from this song (sung to the tune of *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*)

‘We are the boys of Potomac’s ranks,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
We are the boys of Potomac’s ranks,
We ran with McDowell, retreated with Banks,
And we’ll all drink stone blind--
Johnny, fill up the bowl.

We fought with McClellan, the Rebs, shakes, and fever,

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Hurrah! Hurrah!
Then we fought with McClellan, the Rebs, shakes, and fever,
But Mac joined the Navy on reaching the James River
And we'll all drink stone blind--
Johnny, fill up the bowl.

Then they gave us John Pope our patience to tax
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Then they gave us John Poppe our patience to tax,
Who said that out west he'd seen naught but gray backs.

He said his Headquarters were in the saddle,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
He said his Headquarters were in the saddle,
But Stonewall Jackson made him skedaddle.

Then Mac was recalled, but after Antietam,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Then Mac was recalled, but after Antietam
Abe gave him a rest, he was too slow to beat 'em.

Oh, Burnside then he tried his luck,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Oh, Burnside then he tried his luck
But in the mud so fast got stuck.

Then Hooker was taken to fill the bill,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Then Hooker was taken to fill the bill,
But he got a black eye at Chancellorsville.

Next came General Meade, as slow as a plug,
Hurrah! Hurrah!
Next came General Meade, as slow as a plug,
For he let them away at Gettysburg.'⁷

"Southern soldiers sang songs like 'Dixie', 'The Girl I Left Behind Me', 'Bonnie Blue Flag', 'My Maryland', and 'Annie Laurie'....⁸

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

“On November 14, 1862 Robert E. Lee’s Assistant Adjutant-General issued the following order:

‘The general commanding is pained to learn the vice of gambling exists, and is becoming common in this army. The regulations expressly prohibit one class of officers from indulging in this evil practice, and it was not supposed that a habit so pernicious and demoralizing would be found among men engaged in a cause, of all others, demanding the highest virtue and purest morality in its supporters. He regards it as wholly inconsistent with the character of a Southern soldier and subversive of good order and discipline in the army. All officers are earnestly enjoined to use ever effort to suppress this vice, and the assistance of every soldier having the true interests of the army and of the country at heart is invoked to put an end to a practice which cannot fail to produce those deplorable results which have attended its indulgence in any society.’⁹

“Despite this attitude toward gambling, men of both armies continued to play such games as Poker, Euchre, Twenty-one, and Keno....

“Gambling was not limited to small games between tent mates, in fact Field Marshal Viscount Wolseley remarked, ‘I may recall the well known fact that the men in gray and the men in blue...fraternized in the closing months of the great struggle. A Confederate officer, aghast at finding the trenches on his front deserted, discovered his men were all over in the Federal trenches, playing cards. The rank and file had made a truce until a certain hour!’ “¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰*Ibid.*