

Corn Meal

Few foods are as typical of American life before and during the Civil War as corn meal and various breads made from it. In this article we will examine the availability and utilization of corn meal by civilians and soldiers before and during the war.

Corn meal, often referred to then as Indian meal, was common simply because corn was so prevalent in early American agriculture. As one scholar has noted, among American farmers in the colonial and antebellum period,

... probably more than ninety percent of these depended heavily upon corn for their survival ... The only major crop grown in every colony and state, corn was the great common denominator of agriculture.... [1]

Corn was preferred because it was one of the most reliable of crops. As *Prairie Farming*, a prewar agricultural handbook, simply put it, "... it never fails...." Corn also was remarkably productive. Gentleman planter John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia argued:

The highest product of Indian corn in the United States is one hundred bushels to the acre, whereas the highest product of wheat is sixty bushels per acre. Fifty bushels of corn to the acre is invariably produced by land well manured, and well cultivated; whereas half that crop of wheat is extremely rare, and in districts where the average crop of wheat is five bushels, that of corn is fifteen bushels to the acre.

As a result, the United States produced almost five times as much corn per capita as wheat. Even allowing for the amount of corn fed to livestock, this generated significant quantities for human consumption. [2]

Corn meal was especially prevalent in the South. For residents in the southwestern states prior to the war, cornbread was an almost daily occurrence. A New Yorker, traveling west to Texas in 1853, recalled later his first encounter with cornbread at a Kentucky inn:

At this dinner I made the first practical acquaintance with ... corn-bread and bacon ... without a thought that for the next six months I should actually see *nothing else*. [3]

Some years later another traveler, the famous British Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Fremantle, made the same observation, remarking that on a journey from Huntsville, Texas towards the Mississippi in early 1863, "The food we get on the road is sufficient, and good enough to sustain life; it consists of pork or bacon, [and] bread made from Indian corn, ..." [4]

White or Yellow?

Much has been written in enactor publications about the color of corn meal eaten at the time of the war. Many writers

assert, for instance, that only white corn meal was considered fit for human consumption in the antebellum period. In fact, this view appears to reflect a misunderstanding of regional differences.

The opinions of the sections certainly differed on the proper type of corn to grind into meal. Mary Terhune, the southern-born author of a cookbook that enjoyed a national sale, declared:

There is a marked difference between the corn-meal ground in the south and that which is sent out from Northern mills ... The Southern meal is certainly coarser and the bread made from it is less compact. Moreover, there is a partiality at the North for yellow meal, which the Southerners regard as only fit for chicken and cattlefeed. The yellow may be the sweeter, but I have never succeeded in making really nice bread from it.

Her remarks must have raised a laugh from the publicist at New York's Atlantic Dock Mills Company ("the largest establishment in the world devoted exclusively to the manufacture of Indian corn") who stated confidently "Yellow Corn contains far more nutriment than white Corn, and is used in preference by a large majority of American consumers." [5]

The regional difference no doubt stemmed from a peculiarity of pre-war corn culture. More than forty varieties of corn were commonly grown in the United States at that time, producing yellow, white, copper, brown, red, blue and speckled kernels. However, the preferred types for the southern climate included such varieties as the White Horse-tooth (a dent variety often called simply the Southern White), and the Long White Flint, common in the upper south. Another preference was the White Gourd-seed, which a southern farmer declared, "... under the long warm seasons of the Southern States ... is grown in great perfection and yields abundantly." By contrast, popular northern varieties included New England's copper-colored King Phillip and its red and yellow derivatives, or the Dutton of Maryland and Sioux Flint of Pennsylvania, which were yellow varieties. In fairness, though, this difference should not be overstated, as both botanical guides and agricultural reports of the period make clear that, despite regional prejudices, both yellow and white corns were grown to some degree in all sections. [6]

Corn Meal in Army Rations.

Civil War armies, North and South, provided for the issuance of a variety of breadstuffs in their official tables of rations. Included in the regulations were defined daily quantities of bread, flour, hard bread or corn meal, which according to the law could be issued interchangeably. Although northern commissaries purchased and issued corn meal during the war, it does not seem to have been as common as in the Confederacy. Indeed, it quickly became so prominent a part of southern army life that veterans after the war sometimes jokingly referred to themselves as the "Corn-feds." [7]

Wheat flour first seems to have become scarce in the

Confederacy's eastern army during the winter of 1862-63, though hardtack reappeared during the summer campaign of 1863. When flour or wheat breads were unavailable, corn meal was issued at the rate of 1.25 pounds per ration. Indeed, for many months after January 1864 only corn meal was issued to the Army of Northern Virginia, and the ration declined during the summer of 1864 to a pound a day. An effort was made in the fall of 1864 to increase the corn meal ration and to provide forty percent of the bread rations as flour. Though the commissary succeeded in making some flour available even as late as the evacuation of Richmond, the last recorded issues to the army in Virginia were in many cases the familiar Indian corn meal. [8]

With rations increasingly hard to come by, there is evidence that the Southerners were willing to compromise on the regional prejudice against yellow meal. The testimony comes from an eyewitness account of the First Corps' forced march to save Lee's army at the Wilderness. According to that soldier, as Longstreet's leading units ran towards the battle line, "... Every man stripped himself for the fight and I have never seen so much yellow corn meal thrown away in my life." [9]

Corn Meal and Water.

Let us turn now to an examination of how soldiers dealt with corn meal in the field. The simplest dishes were made of only corn meal and water. These drew on a long tradition of cooking both at home and in the field.

The most basic food made from corn meal during the war was *mush* or *gruel*. Housewives were advised by popular cookbooks to make mush in this fashion:

Have ready on the fire a pot of boiling water. Stir into it by degrees (a handful at a time) sufficient Indian meal to make it very thick and then add a small portion of salt ... between every handful, stir very hard ... After it is sufficiently thick, keep it boiling for an hour longer, stirring it occasionally. Then cover the pot, and hang it higher up the chimney, so as to simmer slowly or keep hot another hour.... It is not too long to have it altogether three or four hours over the fire ... [10]

Soldiers may have employed such deliberate procedures in camp, where, according to the testimony of Frank Foote of the Third Corps, Army of Northern Virginia, mush was a common dish in the latter part of the war. But palatable mush can also be cooked in the field by boiling water in a tin cup, stirring in a handful of meal and giving it a final minute or two of boiling. This is no doubt closer to the process used the evening of April 8, 1865, when Lee's Texan remnants, under fire from hidden Union sharpshooters, were witnessed by an officer "...digging little holes in the ground and building fires of twigs in them, over which to cook their corn-meal gruel..." [11]

A soldier who dined on mush before turning in after a long march could take advantage of the cooled remainder the following morning. As Union General August Kautz noted in his wartime soldiers' manual, "... What is left over may be cut

in slices and fried in bacon or pork fat, and makes a good dish..." [12]

Corn meal and water could also be turned into a bread, known by a variety of names. A Union publication, *The Military Hand Book and Soldier's Manual*, gives the basic recipe:

Hoe-Cake—Mix a stiff dough of Indian meal, a little salt, and water (scalding water is best); flatten it on a board, and tilt it up before the campfire until brown on one side; turn and brown the other.... It can also be baked in hot ashes, or with hot stones, *Southern* fashion.

Note that scalding water is just under the boiling point. Little bubbles should form around the edge of the pan, but there should be no rolling boil. [13]

Other writers confirm both the simplicity of the recipe and the variety of cooking methods. Kautz wrote that, in the field, "... With a frying-pan, *thin cakes* can be rapidly baked, and are an excellent diet...." Better-equipped troops might follow the recommendation of a popular cookbook that the same dough be baked "... in a Dutch oven on tin sheets ..." to produce *corn dodgers*. A young lady in Independence, Washington County, Texas, writing to a Texas newspaper in 1862, recommended that the cook "... wrap [the dough] up in corn shucks or a collard leaf, and bake it in hot ashes ..." producing a dish she called *ash corn cake*. When even the collard leaf was lacking, soldiers baked their *ashcakes* or *pone* simply by dropping the dough into the ashes. As one veteran remarked after using this method at Chickamauga, "... Of course, it came out of the fire half done, but we ate it ravenously, and it tasted good..." [14]

When a griddle was available, the cook was advised to turn the same dough into *Indian water cakes* with this cooking method:

Heat your griddle hot, clean and grease it well, and place it over a bed of clear coals; then put on *pone* cakes, make them small, thin and smooth, bake them hastily, turn them over as soon as the crust is a light brown, and when they are done through, which will take but a very short time, split and butter them, and send them to the table immediately. [15]

Corn Meal and Shortening.

A variety of recipes describe similar breads made with corn meal and some form of shortening. In the army, this shortening could be either bacon grease or lard, saved from the ration pork and beef.

The young lady from Independence described one such dish in her recipe for *corn crisp*:

Take one pint of meal, one tablespoon of lard, a little salt and water, spread it on a board thin, and bake it before the fire; turn it with a string or knife. [16]

In making this dish, I like to use scalding water, and have the

shortening melted rather than cutting it in with a fork. Public visitors in living history settings are always fascinated by the process of making bread from corn meal and bacon grease, using only a tin cup for mixing and a small, sheet iron frying pan as a baking tool.

According to *The Kentucky Housewife* of 1839, *Johnny cakes* were made in a similar fashion, though a strict adherence to the recipe requires cream that would have been scarce in the field. This recipe also gives a good idea of the baking procedure:

Take a thin dough of sifted Indian meal and lukewarm water or sweet milk, adding a teaspoonful of salt, and a large spoonful of butter to each quart of meal. Work it well, as Indian meal, in whatever way it is prepared, should be worked thoroughly. Having ready a piece of board planed smooth, wet it with water, and put on a cake of the dough about three quarters of an inch thick, make it smooth and even around the edges, brush it over with sweet cream, and brown it lightly before a clear fire, propping it on one edge by setting something behind it, to support it. Then run the blade of a knife or a sewing thread between the bread and the board, to loose it, turn it over, brown the other side in the same manner, first moistening it with sweet cream, and then cut it across in small cakes, split them, lay a piece of firm butter on one half of each piece, put them together again, and send them immediately to the table. [17]

Corn Meal and Molasses.

Molasses was frequently available to the troops via foraging or civilian purchase. Late in the war molasses or sorghum even became a part of the Confederate official ration, where it was substituted for increasingly scarce meat at the rate of three gills to the pound! [18] Combined with issue corn meal, this would have provided the materials for a dish known as *Indian cake* or *bannock*.

The American Frugal Housewife, the most popular early American cookbook, has a recipe for bannock in its 1833 edition:

Indian cake, or bannock, is sweet and cheap food. One quart of sifted meal, two great spoonfuls of molasses, two teaspoonfuls of salt, a bit of shortening half as big as hen's egg, stirred together; make it pretty moist with scalding water, put it in a well-greased pan, smooth over the surface with a spoon, and bake it brown on both sides, before a quick fire. A little stewed pumpkin, scalded with the meal, improves the cake. Bannock split and dipped in butter makes a very nice toast. [19]

Another cookbook, *The Kentucky Housewife* of 1839 offered a very similar approach:

Sift a quart of fine Indian meal, mix it with a salt-spoonful of salt, two large spoonfuls of butter and a gill of molasses; make it into a common dough with scalding water, or hot sweet milk, mixing it well with a spoon; put it in a well-buttered skillet, make it smooth, and

bake it rather briskly. When it is done, cut it in thin smooth slices, toast them lightly, butter them, stack them, and eat them warm. [20]

To make this recipe, you need to know that a salt-spoon was about the size of a modern eighth-teaspoon, and that a gill is four fluid ounces. The skillet referred to was a cast iron, lidded oven, akin to a modern Dutch oven. [21]

Corn Meal, Milk and Eggs.

When successful foraging had turned up some eggs and milk, a particular delicacy would have been possible. This was a bread associated with the state of Virginia, though known throughout the South.

An 1847 cookbook, *The [South] Carolina Housewife*, gave the following directions for *Virginia egg bread*:

A quart of meal, half pint of wheat flour, a pint and a half of milk, two eggs, and a tablespoonful of butter or lard; mix all well together, and bake either in cups or a tin pan. [22]

The young lady of Independence, Texas, knew this as *Virginia corn bread* and made it thus:

Dissolve one tablespoonful of butter in 3 ½ pints of boiling milk; into this scald one quart of corn meal; when cold, add a half pint of wheat flour, a little sugar, a teaspoonful of salt, and two eggs well beaten, mix well together, and bake in two cakes; tins well greased or buttered. [23]

If you choose to experiment with this first in a modern oven before taking it into the field, bake it for twenty-five minutes at four hundred degrees (F), or until a fork thrust in the center comes out clean.

Corn Meal and Meat.

As a haversack ration, corn meal was decidedly inferior to hardtack. As veteran Frank Foote explained,

... When cooked into *pones* [yet another name for a bread of meal and water], it readily mildewed and soured; besides, it was bulky ... Even if soured, we, perforce, had to use it the best we may.

A soldier in Kershaw's Division explained the process from that point on:

... Chip up bacon in fine particles, place in an oven [skillet or spider] and fry to a crisp. Fill the oven one-third or one-half full of branch water, then take the stale corn bread ... rub it into fine crumbs, mix and bring the whole to a boil, gently stirring with a forked stick. When cold, eat with fingers ...

The resulting mixture was one of many versions of the classic

Confederate meat-bread stew known as *cush*. [24]

Corn Meal as Coffee.

How can you be sure you have truly left the 21st century behind? Try corn meal coffee! Frank Foote tells us that:

... Coffee and sugar were luxuries, and what little we had was gotten from some victorious field. This we eked out with parched corn meal and sweetened it sometimes with "long sweetening," i.e., sorghum molasses. [25]

Move over, Starbucks!

Enacting Applications.

The dishes described here are all practical reenacting food. They can be prepared at home as haversack rations or can be cooked in camp in period cookware. It should be noted that these preparations in general do not take great skill—especially if one is seeking to recreate the early war period! Virginian John Worsham wrote thus of his first attempt to cook the army rations:

We ... made up our bread of meal ... sliced our fat meat, and commenced to cook. In about two minutes both meat and bread were burned black on one side! We took them off the fire, cooled them, tried again, and finally succeeded very well in burning the other side.... [26]

If the old fellows went through this kind of learning experience in the field, surely we owe it to them as reenactors to emulate the process. Any bad results can of course be explained as a faithful recreation of Worsham's documented period dining experience!

Mr. Rainey

NOTES:

- [1] Nicholas P. Hardeman, *Shuck, Shocks, and Hominy Blocks: Corn as a Way of Life in Pioneer America* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1981), 3-4.
- [2] James Caird, *Prairie Farming in America* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1859), 83; Edward Enfield, *Indian Corn: Its Value, Culture and Uses* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 25, 29, 43, 45; Jesse Buel, *The Farmer's Companion* (Boston: Marsh, 1839), 23; *The Texas Almanac for 1871* (Galveston: Richardson & Co., 1870), 114-5, 138, 156-58; J. B. Killebrew, *Tennessee: Its Agricultural and Mineral Wealth* (Nashville: Tavel, Eastman & Howell, 1876), 21-22; Porter A. Browne, *An Essay on Indian Corn* (Phila: J. Thompson, 1837), 20-21, 27-28.
- [3] F. L. Olmstead, *A Journey Through Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978; originally published 1857), 15.
- [4] A. J. L. Fremantle, *Three Months in the Southern States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; originally published 1864), 79.
- [5] Marion Harland (pseud. for Mary Hawes Terhune), *Common Sense in the Household* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1871), 294-5; Atlantic Dock Mills Co., *Remarks on Indian Corn: Its Preservation and Manufacture, with Receipts for Cooking, &c.* (New York: William Van Norden, 1850), 11.
- [6] Fearing Burr, Jr., *Garden Vegetables and How to Cultivate Them* (Boston: J. E. Tilton & Co., 1866), 170-76; Fearing Burr, Jr., *The Field and Garden Vegetables of America* (Boston: J. E. Tilton & Co., 1865), 591-597; Browne, 21-23; William D. Emerson, *History and Incidents of Indian Corn and Its Culture* (Cincinnati: Wrightson & Co., 1878), 17; Killebrew, 95; J. D. B. De Bow, *The Industrial Resources, etc. of the Southern and Western States* (New Orleans: De Bow's Review, 1853), 391-2.
- [7] Confederate States, War Department, *Regulations for the Army of the*

- Confederate States 1863* (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1863), 191; United States, War Department, *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States 1861* (Philadelphia: J. G. L. Brown, 1861), 243; United States, War Department, Subsistence Department, *Annual Report for 1867* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1868), 8-9. Though the postwar Union Subsistence Department report confirms the Union issue of corn meal during the war, the revised scale of Union rations authorized "during the rebellion in the Southern States" made no mention of corn meal. General August Kautz, who wrote extensively on the Union ration, seemed to regret that corn meal was not more widely used in the field. Cf. August V. Kautz, *Customs of Service for Non-Commissioned Officers and Soldiers* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1864), 258-59.
- [8] Richard D. Goff, *Confederate Supply* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1969), 78-80, 152, 155, 197-9; John C. West, *A Texan in Search of a Fight* (Waco: Texian Press 1969; originally published 1901), 120; A. V. Winkler, *The Confederate Capital and Hood's Texas Brigade* (Austin: Von Boeckmann, 1894), 147; J. B. Polley, *Hood's Texas Brigade* (Dayton, OH: Morningside Bookshop, 1976; originally published 1910), 113, 214, 237, 246-9, 275-6; Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978), 91; Jno. W. Stevens, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Hillsboro, TX: Hillsboro Mirror, 1902), 99; Mary Lasswell, ed., *Rags and Hope: The Memoirs of Val C. Giles* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1961), 184; Harold B. Simpson, *Hood's Texas Brigade: Lee's Grenadier Guard* (Waco, TX: Texian Press, 1970), 191, 195.; J. Tracy Power, *Lee's Miserables* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina, 1998), 73; Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1961), 773; United States, War Department, *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, series IV, vol. 3, 777, 930-31 (hereafter cited as *ORWR*).
- [9] Quoted in Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 297.
- [10] Eliza Leslie, *Miss Leslie's Complete Cookery: Directions for Cookery* (Philadelphia: Henry C. Baird, 1851, reprinted as *Miss Leslie's Directions for Cookery*, [Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 1999]), 301-02. A recipe published in the *Austin, Texas State Gazette*, 17 Sept. 1862, reprinted in Vicki Betts, "First You Start with Corn Meal ...," *The Citizens Companion* 3 (Aug.-Sept., 1996), 28, calls for a more reasonable 15 minutes of final boiling.
- [11] Frank H. Foote, "Recollections of Army Life with General Lee," *Southern Historical Society Papers* (SHSP) 31 (1903), 241; Polley, 276-77.
- [12] Kautz, 263.
- [13] Louis Le Grand, *The Military Hand Book and Soldier's Manual* (New York: Beadle & Co., 1861), 76; Robert S. Hill, *The Cooking of History*, vol. 2 (Hayward, MN: Redcoat Pub. Co., 1993), 16. For a mention of the board baking method in use in the field, see Foote, 241.
- [14] Kautz, 258-9; 13; Betts, 28; Sarah Rutledge, *The Carolina Housewife* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1979; originally published 1824), 25-26; Carlton McCarthy, "Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life," *SHSP* 7 (Apr. 1877), 177; John Cox, "Chickamauga," *Confederate Veteran* 30 (August 1922), 2-3; D. Augustus Dickert, *History of Kershaw's Brigade* (Newberry, SC: E. H. Allen Co., 1899), 291-2.
- [15] Lettice Bryan, *The Kentucky Housewife* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991, originally published 1839), 315.
- [16] Betts, 28.
- [17] Bryan, 315.
- [18] West, 133; Foote, 240; *ORWR*, series 4, vol. 3, 777.
- [19] Mrs. Child, *The American Frugal Housewife* (Boston: Carter, Hendee & C., 1833), 75.
- [20] Bryan, 313.
- [21] Mary Randolph, *The Virginia Housewife* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984, originally published 1824), 298. See the discussion of period cookware in Lee Rainey's, "Dining Out In Wartime Virginia," *The Watchdog* (9.1, WINTER 2001), 13-14.
- [22] Rutledge, 23.
- [23] Betts, 28.
- [24] Foote, 241; Dickert, 291-2. For other recipes for *cush* or *coosh*, see Foote, 241; Carlton McCarthy, *Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life in the Army of Northern Virginia, 1861-1865* (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1993), 59; James I. Robertson, Jr., *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 68; Wiley, 104.
- [25] Foote, 240-41. During the war, this was not just a field expedient. Fremantle mentions drinking corn meal coffee at civilian hostelrys in Texas, 79.
- [26] John H. Worsham, *One of Jackson's Foot Cavalry* (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Pub. Co., 1987), 5.